

The Primal Hunter

- Chapter 870: Nevermore: Independence Achieved...

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The Twinhead Emperor's answer to that was apparently just a "yes," as he always had more to show off. From what Jake and the others had gathered, the Twinhead Emperor primarily had the warrior move the body while the shaman stood for magic and energy control. This also proved true, even as death magic was unleashed, except the shaman head wasn't even fully awake. Instead, the soul was wholly focused on controlling the magic, truly functioning as a second extremely powerful Virtual Mind.

As for the magic itself... it was rather basic, if extremely powerful in scope. Clearly, the Twinhead Emperor had absorbed a shitload of death and curse energy into the blade from all the different battlefields and was now unleashing it upon their group. Usually, this wouldn't be that huge of a problem, as a bunch of undead filled with curse energy would just attack everything indiscriminately... except for one minor detail.

Jake and company had been the cause of many of their deaths and clearly the target of their resentment.

From where the ogre had stabbed down his sword, a deep pitch-black pit opened up, and within seconds, Jake heard screams coming from beyond the grave. Spirits began to pour up from the hole all around the ogre, screeching with anguish and anger as the boss opened up what looked like a portal to the underworld.

Gritting his teeth, Jake quickly pulled out his bow and shot an Arcane Powershot at the Twinhead Emperor, who was protected by the beam of death surrounding him. The arrow pierced through the death energy but was severely weakened by the time it hit the boss. Not letting up, Jake kept shooting, landing several on the boss, who focused on protecting his heads while doing the summoning magic.

He continued loosing arrows until he was forced to stop as the summoned spirits began to close in on him. Checking them out, he saw their levels weren't super impressive, pretty much mirroring the soldiers they had killed on the battlefields.

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 302]

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 306]

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 311]

Each of these spirits was a mix of black and white ethereal energies in a humanoid shape. Their eyes were hollow, and while they did look like the many different enlightened races they had slain, many of them looked very disturbing. Especially the beastfolk, who did not have a single trace of hair on their ghostly bodies, looked off.

Retreating, Jake focused on getting some distance. Jake counted around a hundred total ghosts already summoned, with a few still exiting the abyss every second or so, but it was clear the boss was running out of ghosts to summon. Every ghost wasn't really a single dead individual, but more the gathering of energy from several. Most of the energy had also been absorbed by the bone spheres, and this felt more like the leftovers.

All of these ghosts were coming straight for Jake, seemingly ignoring his entire party. Something that proved pretty damn unwise as soon it started to rain. Jake responded by empowering the small stable arcane barrier covering his body to not get infected by the rainfall as he knew what the Sword Saint was doing. At the same time, he also stopped retreating, as he instead circled around and began taking potshots at the boss.

By now, the Twinhead Emperor was finished with his summoning and stood back up and used his blade to block Jake's attacks. However, he didn't move as he instead seemed to be focused on controlling his legion of ghosts. The boss naturally also felt the rain infused with time magic as he commanded his ghosts to spread out and head toward the rest of his party - something that would prove more difficult than he liked.

A few ghosts were flying away but were suddenly rebuffed and sent flying back toward the boss. A powerful wind swept through as a tornado formed around this entire section of the battle. Far up in the sky, Sylphie was flying in circles, making the tornado even stronger and effectively creating a barrier, forcing all the ghosts to stay within the somehow unaffected rainfall.

Turning to look at Jake, the Twinhead Emperor flashed a smile. **“Abandoned, huh? Or do they believe you are enough on your own? Very well, you can die first, then.”**

Remember what Jake said about the ogre not moving because he was too busy controlling the ghosts? Yeah, that was out the window as the Twinhead Emperor charged with his army of ghosts rapidly surrounding Jake. Wings sprung on his back as Jake tried to dodge as best as he could, but even he had his limits.

The ghosts were relatively limited in their methods of attack, but they were far from harmless. Every ghost could summon tangible long white claws to try and cut him, release blasts of pure death energy, and even just charge straight through his body, dealing significant damage in the process.

In order to make some space for himself, Jake repeatedly made arcane explosions around himself, making the ghosts, at the very least, hesitate to charge through him. Still, Jake was not in a good spot as several ghosts managed to land blows, with the Twinhead Emperor getting too close for comfort quite a few times. At least he was only capable of swinging his sword while also controlling the ghosts, but that was still a lot considering the vast difference in stats between the ogre and Jake.

As things were starting to get a bit too hairy, Jake finally got the message he had been waiting for.

“Now.”

Without hesitation, Jake’s wings began to glow with energy as his entire body turned dark green, and in the blink of an eye, he disappeared. Only for half a second, everything warped, as Jake appeared a good fifty kilometers away, his wings burning away from using his escape skill, just in time to see the old man stand at a small hole in the tornado and execute his move.

“Rain of Time: Reversal.”

The entire terrain was torn up, and the tornado began to unravel. All the ghosts were ripped up, some of them scattering from the attack alone, as even the Twinhead Emperor was caught in the mythical skill. Only a dozen or so ghosts died from the initial activation of the skill, but the Sword Saint quickly did the follow-up.

“Rain of Time: Thousand Blades Descent.”

Blades of rain collected in the sky above before rapidly descending toward the ogre and the many ghosts. There still weren’t quite a thousand blades... but the old man had gotten closer this time around.

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Nearly a thousand blades fell, each aimed toward the ghosts and the Twinhead Emperor himself. Dozens more undead were slain as they were stabbed through, but a bit over a third still remained even after the mythical skill had been used. Partly because the Sword Saint had focused more than half of the falling blades on the big boss himself.

The Twinhead Emperor had hunkered down as all the blades came, trying to defend himself. Even so, he was still stabbed more than a hundred times, leaving his back even more damaged than before. He didn’t really seem to bleed in his grey semi-undead form, and while the ogre did begin to heal once more, it was clear he was starting to not have as much energy left in the tank.

Things got even worse, as Sylphie wasn't done doing her part either. The tornado had far from fully scattered, and now Sylphie regathered all of the wind as she made it close around the many ghosts with the Twinhead Emperor still in the middle, creating a massive cutting windgrinder.

Even more ghosts were torn apart as the boss finally roared. A torrent of death energy erupted from him, the boss standing back up with a furious look on his face. Swinging, he sent out a wave of pure death, creating a hole in the tornado that he quickly passed through, followed by the twenty or so surviving ghosts. Two did end up getting caught as the tornado reclosed, but he still had eighteen left.

The Sword Saint was the closest, as the ogre quickly locked in on him. The old man was breathing heavily from using his mythical skill after already using Glimpse of Spring and being heavily injured early on. Both he and the Fallen King were in pretty shitty states, to put it lightly.

Charging forward, with ghosts flying alongside him, the Sword Saint was far from ready to meet the ogre in combat as the boss roared. **"If you thought I would fall this easily, you are-"**

He didn't get further as his eyes opened wide. Jake smiled to himself as he saw Dina had decided it was her turn to show off a bit. A green aura exploded out from where the dryad was standing as her entire body began to transform. Her antlers grew, her dress changed, and she even grew a bit taller. It was naturally her ultimate boosting skill, showing Dina was done messing around.

The still-charging ogre suddenly found himself surrounded by thick bark-covered vines as the ground erupted. At the same time, Dina's aura washed over both the boss and the many ghosts, the dryad purposefully controlling and amplifying it.

Slamming her staff into the ground, a massive tree formed from all the aura, seemingly taking root right on top of the boss. The ethereal summoned tree stood nearly ten kilometers tall, as its thick trunk covered the Twinhead Ogre, Sword Saint, and all the undead.

While the Sword Saint's injuries began to heal at a rapid pace, the experience was not the same for the undead. It turned out that infusing death with life resulted in a rather... explosive outcome.

All of the remaining ghosts screeched as they blew up one by one, the grey body of the Twinhead Ogre also beginning to rapidly break down. His skin cracked open as life mixed with death, Dina not letting up as her entire form began glowing more brightly as the tree became more and more tangible.

More roots also began to shoot up and stab at the ogre, tearing apart his skin further. The boss tried to resist but was quickly forced down on one knee as a vine wrapped around the neck of the sleeping head, thorns growing on it.

Without any hesitation, the Twinhead Emperor raised his sword as a look of sorrow flashed on his face. Without any further warning, Jake's vision temporarily turned black as the world was covered in darkness. Only a second later did he feel the shockwave and heard the sound of an explosion. Powerful energy of death flew past him, forcing him to raise his arms and summon an arcane barrier to defend himself as he stared at the devastation.

In the distance, he saw the giant ethereal tree rot from within as its leaves scattered like ash. Quickly looking over, he saw Dina down on the ground, propping herself up by her elbows as her transformation had been undone, blood flowing from every orifice due to the backlash of having her transformation forcibly undone. Jake saw the worry in her eyes as he understood what she was afraid of.

Shifting his gaze, Jake spotted the Sword Saint getting dragged away from the epicenter of the explosion by the Fallen King. One of the Unique Lifeform's arms was missing, and Jake saw what looked like black metal fragments sticking out of his frontal armor. The Sword Saint had a few black veins covering his body, but he was still alive and conscious. Jake only now fully realized what the boss had done as he saw those black metal fragments.

Fucker blew up his sword.

As the thick miasma of death began to finally fade, the true destruction was revealed. A large crater had formed where the Twinhead Ogre had blown up the sword, all life more than a kilometer around him entirely wiped out. Not a single trace of anything Dina had done remained save for a few black leaves here and there.

In the middle of this crater was the Twinhead Emperor, standing tall. Yet his aura was different compared to before, showing that his last attack had truly taken a lot out of him. His skin no longer carried the aura of death either, as whatever boosting skill he had used was clearly over.

Jake was already flying over in case the boss attacked again so he could assist his party. All of them besides himself and Sylphie were in pretty rough shape, and while Dina had taken some damage, she wasn't that bad off and could easily still take up a supporting role. It wasn't as if Jake and Sylphie were uninjured, either. Sylphie was doing the best of all of them, most of her attacks made from range as she had pulled off every role she had been given. Jake had taken a good beating when he was buying time earlier, but he was still more than fit for a fight.

Something Jake really hoped the Twinhead Emperor wasn't... but seeing how many damn tricks the ogre had already pulled out his ass thus far, Jake wouldn't count on him being down for the count. At least he didn't have to wait long to be proven right.

Just as he arrived at his party, a few seconds after the miasma from the explosion had fully subsided, the boss spoke once more, saying some unexpected words.

"I... am sorry..." the Twinhead Emperor said... no... only the warrior head was speaking. He was not speaking to anyone in Jake's party either. Except, he looked over at the second head that began to open his eyes and wake up.

"I... failed... was too weak," the warrior said with a melancholic smile. **"I didn't think any of us would want it to end this way... but... you were always the stronger one of us... so let it be you."**

Now fully awake, the shaman head looked at his second half. The shaman closed his eyes for a second before nodding in understanding. **"Thank you."**

Jake was confused about what was going on as suddenly the head of the warrior fell down, limp. Dead. That is when Jake understood, and the boss made everything absolutely clear mere moments later.

An ear-piercing roar sounded out from the ogre as his entire body exploded with power that made the ground below him crack. A staff appeared in his hand and his voice echoed throughout the whole area as his aura soared to a level it had never been at before.

"My second half... killed... I wanted solitude... independence... but not like this." the Twinhead Emperor, who had now been reduced to only one head, said. His energy kept surging as Jake felt the pressure on him intensify. **"But luckily, I shall not be alone for much longer..."**

"The second soul... merged fully into the first one. It's unsustainable. Won't last for more than a minute or two... but during that time..." the Fallen King warned, a clear sense of trepidation in his voice.

Jake and the others all understood... during this time, the Twinhead Emperor was in an even more empowered state. However, once it was over, so would the fight end, as the sheer backlash of burning away half of your soul couldn't be healthy.

Quickly, Jake responded as he reached out, his hand glowing dark green, not wanting the ogre to make the first move even if he was empowered. While the other head had been alive, his death energy had helped to suppress much of Jake's poison. This had led to much of the death-affinity poison going dormant, but now that the warrior was gone, Jake could truly let it all lose.

It spread throughout the body of the ogre, and Jake felt it do significant damage... but the boss didn't seem to care in the slightest.

“You think your poison matters? I... am already half-dead and have no plans on lasting much longer. Soon, it all will be over. But fret not,” the Twinhead Emperor said as he slammed his staff into the ground, and runes lit up all over his body, more intensely than ever before. **“You shall join my other half in the grave before my time is up.”**

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Chapter 871: Nevermore: Wind

Jake and his party were faced with a choice... run away and drag things out until the Twinhead Emperor's empowered state ended, or try and fight back while buying time. Directly confronting the boss was definitely not advised, something they were all in agreement with. Jake usually wasn't a fan of just running away, but if his party decided to do just that, he wouldn't object.

“We should retreat for now. Fighting directly is too risky,” the Sword Saint quickly said as he received some emergency healing from Dina. She couldn't restore his resources and fatigue, but she could get him back in temporary fighting condition... or at least well enough to launch one more good attack.

“I concur,” the Fallen King instantly agreed.

“Me too-“ Dina tried to say but was cut off by the boss.

“You wish to flee? To drag things out? You all seem to thoroughly misunderstand something,” the Twinhead Emperor said as his staff began to light up. Jake felt the entire environment shift as the mana all around took on the aura of the ogre. **“It's already far too late to run.”**

Then, Jake felt the pressure as his body felt far heavier. The ground all around them cracked as everything buckled, even the mana in the air itself getting pushed down. It wasn't suppression of aura or anything like that, but something far more tangible. *Gravity magic...*

A fucking complicated school of magic that was, needless to say, pretty damn strong. What's more, the shaman clearly wasn't done as he pointed his staff toward Jake and

the three others around him. A massive flamethrower flew out, unaffected by the increased gravity that weighed everything else down.

Reacting quickly, four barriers appeared. One golden, one green, one of water, and one of stable arcane mana. The flames washed over the four attempts to block the attack, as each was burned through in moments before finally the flame shattered the final one and sent all four of them scattering in four different directions to dodge the attack.

The Twinhead Emperor wanted to follow up, but just then, a blast of wind descended from above, making the staff's head smash into the ground, resulting in an explosion that sent the boss stumbling back. It was naturally Sylphie who went on the offensive.

Several more bullets of wind shot down, the boss raising a hand to block them with his own barrier of wind – only to then have an arrow strike him in the shoulder, as Jake took the chance to launch an attack of his own.

A long, thin blade of water also struck the boss mere moments later, followed by a blast of force that pushed Jake's arrow further into the ogre's shoulder. These attacks were not done with the intent to try and deal damage to the Twinhead Emperor but to try and limit his mobility and disrupt his attacks at least a little bit. Plus, dealing damage should help hasten his demise still.

Sadly, their attacks proved to have little effect as the ogre stomped down, making the ground erupt as ten large boulders flew up, and with a hand motion, each condensed into small stones. Pointing his staff once more, the stones all began to glow molten as cracks formed all over them before he sent them flying toward the four non-birds in Sylphie's party.

Jake quickly reacted as he shot down three of the approaching boulders that were aimed for the Sword Saint and Fallen King. When he hit them, all three exploded, sending sharp obsidian shards flying everywhere. This gave them some early warning as to the nature of the attack, so when the remaining seven arrived, everyone was ready as they erected barriers and made good distance.

Even so, the Sword Saint failed to deflect every obsidian shard, as one tore straight through his stomach and another through his thigh, while the Fallen King had over a dozen join the black metal shards already sticking out of him.

Bobo, Dina's living armor, managed to block every single one of them while Jake dodged and prepared to continue his own counterattacks. He shot several arrows that were all sent flying by a blast of wind as the ogre swept his free hand upwards.

A large plate of earth was lifted and flipped over right on top of Jake and his party, but before it could crush them, a tree sprouted from the ground smashed into it, and tore it in two. Dina was back for a bit of action as she channeled mana into the otherwise dead ground, making it explode with life as hundreds of vines shot up.

However, the boss easily responded with a scoff as the gravity around him increased, crushing all the vines back into the ground. Raising his staff toward the sky, the shaman mumbled something silently as a single bolt of lightning shot upwards.

Once it got high enough, it exploded into a massive black thundercloud that instantly began rumbling. During this magic, Jake managed to land a single arrow, as he found himself struggling with the increased gravity, but luckily, Unblemished Arrows made things easier as it made his arrows less affected. The Sword Saint and Fallen King also shot their ranged attack, but all to little effect.

Someone who was luckily not struggling at all was the lightest and smallest person in their party of five. A barrage of wind blades fell upon the shaman, making him groan in pain as he tried to use his staff to block. Using his staff, he shot several large blasts of fire toward the hawk, trying to hit her, but Sylphie simply transformed her body into wind time and time again to avoid taking any noticeable damage.

Having realized her plants couldn't do much, Dina had also shifted her attention to helping Jake and Sylphie with buffs and defensive barriers whenever necessary. She was also still helping the two oldies recover, allowing the Fallen King to not be entirely out of commission as he soon landed a barrage of golden beams and blasts of force, making the ogre stumble and for Sylphie to land another good attack, sending blood flying.

The problem was that the Twinhead Emperor didn't care about taking damage, simply tanking everything. He was fully on the offensive, as he quickly stopped bothering to deal with Sylphie and went after the slowest people in their party.

Dina was prepared, but she could only do so much. Fireballs began raining toward her, the ogre lifting a hand as cold energy began to condense. A massive spear of ice was summoned and thrown, Dina barely managing to make a tree shoot up and block in time. Meanwhile, Sylphie and Jake continued trying to attack the boss, but all they could do was slightly delay his casting at times.

Things were getting bad... and Dina knew it.

"Jake and Sylphie..."

"I got it," Jake assured her, giving her the go-ahead.

"Ree!" Sylphie also agreed.

Without further hesitation, Dina did her thing. Pushing herself, she once more entered her empowered form as trees began shooting up all around her, each of them bending and surrounding herself and the Sword Saint and Fallen King. Just before the entire thing fully closed, the two of them sent out a final goodbye.

A large golden beam shot out toward the boss, hitting the ogre before he could react. For a moment, he stopped, and using Mark, Jake saw the Soulshape of the Twin Emperor temporarily look as if it was wrapped in golden chains. Not for long, but enough for the next attack to arrive, as the Sword Saint exhausted the final energy he had.

“Glimpse of Spring: Erosion.”

His second use of a Glimpse of Spring instantly made him cough up blood, but his attack was not weakened. The stream of water soared toward the head of the Twinhead Emperor, and Jake decided to also lend a hand as he tried to use Gaze.

Sadly, even if the boss was frozen for a moment, the gravity magic in his immediate surroundings proved too strong, and their ability to stop the ogre too weak. He managed to move right before he was struck as he jumped. Combined with the gravity, the ogre managed to dodge a potentially fatal blow, but he couldn't avoid the attack entirely.

The beam of water struck him in the right knee, blasting off the entire leg beneath it. Landing on the ground again, the shaman used earth magic to form a new temporary leg quickly before turning toward his attackers.

With an enraged gaze, the boss looked toward Dina and the two with her but found a dense dome of wood had formed to protect them. Taking out his anger, he pointed his staff as a torrent of lighting descended upon it, along with a flamethrower from the staff. Taking advantage, Jake released a Powershot, striking the Twin Emperor in the arm, making him nearly drop his staff, as Sylphie did a quick fly-by and left a deep cut on his shoulder, the ogre barely avoiding getting a nasty neck wound.

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The shaman's attacks had all washed over the wooden dome, but once the smoke cleared, the Twinhead Emperor grimaced as he saw a burnt wooden dome that was rapidly mending itself.

Unfortunately for the boss, even in his empowered state, he couldn't pierce Dina's powerful defensive technique. At least not within a few seconds only, and while he could likely get through it within a minute, he couldn't do much with Jake and Sylphie actively attacking him. The problem with this technique was that Dina couldn't do anything else when using it, nor let anyone out. Something the shaman quickly realized as he didn't bother attacking the dome again. Instead, he turned his attention to the two people remaining outside still with him.

“And then there were two...”the Twinhead Emperor said as he regarded Sylphie, who had returned to the sky, and Jake standing a few hundred meters away, an arrow already nocked. The ogre wasn't wrong either that it was only the two of them left...

because Jake felt that the Sword Saint was practically unconscious, while the Fallen King could barely maintain himself with all the damage he had taken. Once the dome expired or was destroyed, and if the boss still lived, things wouldn't be good, and unless the Sword Saint wanted to take the massive risk of using his full Transcendence in his current state, the three of them had little other choice than using the escape tokens they still had saved from Minaga's Labyrinth... so things were up to Jake and Sylphie now.

"Well, you're down to just one. Heads, that is. At least ones that aren't just for decoration at this point," Jake taunted the boss, trying to get an emotional reaction and drag out time with banter while charging his Arcane Powershot further.

The Twin Emperor didn't respond with words but shot a flamethrower toward him instead, making Jake release the string of his bow. The Arcane Powershot pierced through the flames before finally getting deflected by the staff. The ogre had not attacked with explosive anger but more a seething hatred as he proceeded to launch several more attacks.

Sylphie dove down and mimicked him, attacking plenty on her own. Erecting an ice barrier, the boss blocked the wind attacks while continuing to launch spells toward a quite frankly struggling Jake. Under normal circumstances, he would be able to dodge something like this... but the gravity magic was really fucking with his movements, making everything he did slower and more cumbersome.

Small cuts, frost burns, and seared flesh soon began to cover his body, but nothing lethal ever landed. Jake's senses were focused like never before as he kept track of every single shift of mana in the atmosphere, moving before the magic even manifested. As his read on the ogre got better, he even began to launch a few counterattacks here and there, especially when he chose to use Eternal Shadow to also dodge a big blow.

Throughout, Sylphie also kept attacking the Twinhead Emperor, avoiding all the lightning strikes he tried using to keep her in check. Her assistance was one of the reasons Jake could still manage dealing with the constant assault.

Seconds ticked by, and Jake saw the shaman's Soulshape seem to almost shrink in density. It was odd to describe, but Jake felt as if he could effectively see the soul slowly fall apart. With the poison and accumulated damage, the ogre would die soon no matter what happened... so all the hunter and the bird had to do was hold on.

Also, realizing he wasn't going to achieve his goal of revenge in time if things continued like this, the Twinhead Emperor seemingly made a decision.

Without any warning, the ogre suddenly flew over toward Jake, seemingly wanting to get in melee combat now. Jake naturally retreated as an answer, making sure not to get caught by any attack... which was when the shaman did something entirely unexpected.

With a flick of his wrist, the staff he had been holding flew toward Jake, who dodged away, only for it to suddenly slam into the ground just beside him.

As it slammed down, the ground dented, and Jake felt the pressure instantly as he smashed straight into the ground from the gravity field suddenly increasing in power several times over. The ogre was still holding out a hand as it glowed with magic, holding down Jake and the staff.

“Killing you in time... does not seem feasible,” the ogre said while blood poured out his mouth as he turned his head and raised his other hand toward Sylphie in the sky. **“But the odd elemental... I have experience killing elementals.”**

“Ree!” Sylphie responded by pushing down a dense wave of wind. The Twin Emperor looked at it as his hand began to glow with power. At the same time, his entire body began to shine as every single set of runes enveloped him in light. His body practically burned as his soul was set aflame, blood dripping from his eyes.

“Wind, bend before my will!”

Jake felt the sudden rush of power as the atmosphere changed. The blast of wind Sylphie had shot down toward the boss was somehow caught in his hand as if Sylphie had lost control of it. At the same time, the thunderclouds above suddenly became hyperactive, as all the lighting was shot down within mere moments, Sylphie dodging by spreading out her body into wind as she normally did.

Seeing the smile on the shaman’s face, Jake got a bad feeling.

The raised hand of the ogre began to slowly clench into a fist as the sky above moved. Wind began to gather as a giant spinning sphere of dense wind magic condensed. The stormcloud was already gone, scattered by the wind, as the sphere began to grow smaller.

Sylphie, who was caught within the sphere still in her pure wind form, began to shoot out wind blades to cut it open, but all her magic was simply absorbed by the wind sphere. Jake saw her try to control the wind around her, but it looked as if it no longer responded to her.

The sphere kept growing smaller and smaller as it condensed the air further and further. Sylphie struggled, and Jake tried to stand as he looked up, and his eyes opened wide. Somehow, the wind was getting so condensed that Sylphie began to forcibly reenter her beast form. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY [novel•fire•net](#)

Jake saw her struggle, the ogre grinning as his hand closed tighter and tighter. Sylphie was soon entirely forced back into her physical hawk form as Jake saw something he never thought he would. The wind began to cut her, slicing through her feathers.

Flashes of red began to appear as blood was drawn, Sylphie having no way to escape or avoid the attacks.

Trying to help, Jake used Touch of the Malefic Viper to intensify the poison, exploded his Mark to try and deal some more damage, and even used Gaze... but all it did was make the boss pause for a fraction of a second, barely giving Sylphie any respite.

Everyone in their party knew what was going on, and Jake's mind temporarily blanked as he heard Dina say something through her Golden Mark. He heard her mention his name, but he could only stare as the small hawk struggled in vain, slowly getting sliced apart as the sphere of wind was still getting smaller and smaller, crushing her... killing her.

She... she did have the Phoenix Feather gifted to her, but it was risky to use... maybe... no, he shouldn't tell her to, but... Jake didn't want to know what could happen if she didn't get out. He finally stopped doubting what had to be done as he yelled through the Golden Mark. *"Sylphie, use your escape token!"*

He yelled... but nothing happened. *"Sylphie! Now!"*

Jake tried again, as did the others, but all they got in return was a rush of feelings from her. Fear... indignation... confusion...

Gritting his teeth, Jake resolved himself. He didn't have much after Valdemar, but Jake had regenerated some of that special energy over the last many years, and even if it wasn't his life in danger, he would-

Sylphie's desperate mix of emotions suddenly stopped... paused... and an overwhelming sense of fury rushed through the Golden Mark, washing away everything else, as an ear-piercing screech echoed out... sounding almost scolding in nature.

As Sylphie found herself surrounded by the wind, forced into her physical form, and unable to fight back... she didn't understand what she had done wrong or why this was happening.

Sylphie fought well, at least, she thought she did. She had done everything Uncle and the others had told her to do. Sylphie was really good at doing that! Maybe Sylphie was even the best at doing what she was told to do because Sylphie knew how important it was to listen.

She had learned that back when Uncle had to save herself, Mom, and Dad from the bad sun bird. Learned to listen to what her parents told her. When she left on adventure with him, her parents had told her to always listen to Uncle, because even if Uncle could be very dumb, he was still pretty smart sometimes.

So, she did what she was told. Even if Sylphie was her own hawk, she did what her Uncle and her parents told her to do. That's just how things were and how they should be.

But... in the fight with the two-headed big bad ogre, things weren't as they should be. It was a super hard fight, but Sylphie had been in many super hard fights before, so it wasn't that. No, it was that something acted like it shouldn't. Things were wrong.

In the same vein as how Sylphie did as Uncle or her parents told her, the wind always did what Sylphie told it to do. That's how things were and how they should be. But now, against the big bad ogre... the wind stopped listening to her.

It ignored her, no matter how much Sylphie tried to tell it what to do.

The wind... *her* wind attacked her from all sides. Trapped her, cut her, injured her. It closed in on her as she struggled but couldn't do anything.

Why wasn't the wind listening to her? Why did it do as the big bad ogre said? Why was what he wanted more important than what Sylphie asked?

That was just... wrong. Not how the world worked. The wind was supposed to listen to her. It was hers and not anyone else's.

For the wind to act like this, refusing to do anything she said, and even attacking her just because someone else told it to was just... just...

So rude!

Sylphie had always been nice and always asked the wind to help, and it had always listened... but now, it seemed like that wasn't enough anymore. It was rebelling, so she did as her Mom had done when Sylphie acted up.

She got angry and channeled that anger toward the indignant wind, acting up like a rebellious child. If it didn't want to play nice, fine. No more niceties at all, and definitely no more asking politely if this was how the stupid wind was going to act!

From now on, Sylphie was going to make it very clear how the world was supposed to work and who was in charge here. Make it clear this was a world where the wind did exactly what Sylphie told it to do, without any complaint or talking back. To put it nicely, she was no longer making a request as she opened her beak, and with the wind attacking her from all sides, the injuries rapidly accumulating, Sylphie focused on nothing else as she screeched out her first direct command, leaving no room for disagreement.

"REE!"

And as her order came, the wind responded as it rightfully should when the Sylphian Hawk exerted her authority.

***Skill Upgraded*: [Sylph Wind Whispering (Legendary)] --> [Sylphian Authority (Mythical)]**

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 872: Nevermore: Winds of Change

Jake stared toward the sky as the spinning sphere of wind had stopped in its tracks. The ogre's eyes opened wide as his clenching hand began to glow even brighter than before, but he couldn't close it any more, no matter how hard he tried. Instead, the opposite happened.

The Twinhead Emperor's fingers were forced apart as the shift happened. The sphere of wind scattered as Jake felt the atmosphere change entirely, and he saw the sky almost vibrate as the wind began to gather from all around. Jake also felt the pressure from the ogre lessen as he saw the clear look of shock on the Twin Emperor's face.

Clouds were torn apart far up in the sky and in the horizon as more and more wind blew toward Sylphie from all over the Vast Plateau. Every single iota of environmental wind mana no longer felt as if it was just that: environmental. Instead, it had the clear aura of the hawk in the sky, who was gathering more power than Jake had ever seen her control before.

Then, everything suddenly stopped.

The wind was still, and Jake saw the Twinhead Emperor stare as Sylphie beat her wings a single time, making it move once more.

A soft wind swept down, making Jake's clothes flap a bit as he saw the attack descend. There were no fancy colors and no real sound, as all that arrived was a stream of wind headed straight for the boss with speed rivaling Jake's fastest arrows.

Right before it hit, Jake saw the expression of confusion and hint of fear on the Twinhead Emperor's face.

“Authority... how can-“

Jake didn't hear the final words as the attack arrived. A pillar of wind descended upon the Twinhead Emperor as Jake was pushed backward from the wind that spilled over from the sides of the constant stream of wind.

While sliding back, Jake observed as the ogre got hit. Immediately, the skin of his face was cut, and he was forced to close his eyes and raise his arms to defend himself. The ogre's arms were cut up next, skin and flesh tearing off from the sheer pressure and cutting nature of the wind. The boss tried to use some magic to summon a barrier of stone, but the mana didn't have the slightest chance to gather before it was blown away by the constant wind.

It was like a small localized jetstream of pressured and intense air, smashing down on the boss and the boss alone. What's more, it wasn't stopping but rather only seemed to grow stronger. Moreover was the impressive effect on the surroundings. The wind blew harmlessly past everything, not even cutting into the ground, with the only one feeling the pressure being the ogre, whose leg and stump were already halfway forced into the ground, and the parts of his body that were hit directly by the wind stream weren't doing good.

Bones were showing on the Twinhead Emperor's arms, and barely any skin remained. It was death by a million cuts, as the jetstream somehow only seemed to intensify with every passing second, shearing off more and more flesh as the ogre roared.

"I... will... not... fall... alone!"the Twinhead Emperor roared loudly as his body exploded with a second wind of energy as he attempted to-

"REE!" Sylphie screeched with anger as the rising energy was smashed right back down; the stream of wind further empowered as it took on a light green glow from being infused further with Sylphie's sylphian concepts.

With a new desperate roar, the boss tried to reach out toward his staff, only to find Jake holding onto it with a vice grip and a few chains of stable arcane mana. For a moment, Jake saw the Twinhead Ogre open an eye and glare toward him in anger before the eye was hit by the wind, the pupil and eyeball cut apart.

The ogre's arms fell limply to his side soon after, no longer protecting him as the wind bore down fully on his face and body; his entire face getting sheared off as his torso began to suffer the same treatment, the second head that had belonged to the warrior already unrecognizable.

It didn't come as a surprise when Jake heard the system messages a second later as the seemingly impossible to finally put down boss finally succumbed to his countless injuries.

****You have slain [Twinhead Emperor – lvl 335] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 288 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 289 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 275 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Even after the boss died, the wind didn't stop as the Twinhead Emperor's energy left his body, leaving it defenseless as the wind had a field day. Only a few seconds later did Sylphie stop as the jet stream subsided, and Jake felt the atmospheric wind return to normal, as the little hawk no longer exerted control.

All that was left of the Twinhead Emperor was a ruined corpse, with half of its flesh sheared right off the bones, with even these bones covered in thousands of small cuts. A dozen or so meters off to the side, Jake saw a door had popped into existence, the one leading to the next city floor, making it clear the floor was now complete.

Looking up, Jake saw Sylphie descend, just gliding on the wind slowly. Without any hesitation, Jake flew up to her as he felt just how exhausted she was. It was not as if Jake was in peak condition himself, but from the looks of it, Sylphie was in an even worse state.

Once he reached her, he let the small hawk glide into his arms as he caught her. Sylphie was covered in wounds all over and even missed a lot of her feathers, making Jake's heart hurt as he gave her a light squeeze.

"Ree?" Sylphie let out a low screech as she looked up at him.

Jake shook his head in response. "No, just relieved you're okay."

Floating down, Jake went toward the wooden dome. On the way, he saw the sheer devastation their battle had wrought, as it looked like a natural disaster had hit the Vast Plateau. It wasn't unexpected, considering it was a fight between powerful C-grades, but Jake still felt this one had been particularly rough... and it had definitely been a close call toward the end.

As Jake and Sylphie approached the wooden dome, it soon began to unravel. Once it did, Jake laid eyes on the Sword Saint leaning against a rock while the Fallen King sat on the ground, not able to stand easily due to the lack of an arm and a leg. Dina was the one who looked the best, but Jake knew her resources were quite spent. Who knew that healing wounds inflicted by intense death energy would be difficult?

Well, Jake did. That's why he liked to use it in his poisons. But Dina definitely also knew.

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“Good job, team,” Jake said as he saw them, flashing a smile. “You all look like shit.”

“All the hair on the left side of your head is burnt off,” the Sword Saint shot back, having recovered quite a lot from Dina’s healing while in the dome, though it was clear the old man wasn’t going to be fighting any time soon, as he looked barely able to lift a sword.

“I never argued I am not also in the category of people currently looking like shit,” Jake grinned as he sat down with Sylphie, all of them taking a rest as no one talked for a moment. He reflected on the fight as he scratched Sylphie somewhere she wasn’t injured, the bird happy using the space between his legs as a nest.

There were definitely things that could have gone better, and they had probably not prepared enough or spent enough time learning about the skills of the Twinhead Emperor before they chose to fight him. If they had had a small bout with each of the Twin Emperors individually, they would have learned quite a lot, Jake reckoned. But they hadn’t. Partly because they were pressured for time and partly because they had overestimated themselves a bit.

In many areas, they also got lucky, and Jake estimated there had been a good chance one of them would have had to use their escape tokens if just one small thing had gone wrong. Luckily, it hadn’t, and when things did look like they were about to take a turn for the worse, Sylphie had come through as she had done... something. Jake still didn’t know exactly what that something was, and he wasn’t going to begin interrogating her here and now.

“I would set up a restoration circle, but...” Dina muttered as she frowned.

“Relax, dryad. There is no rush, so simply relax and recover,” the Fallen King said.

“Yeah,” Jake said with a reassuring smile. “Everyone, just chug a potion when you can, I still got plenty.”

The others nodded as they all relaxed for the next hour, barely any words being exchanged during this time as most meditated. Everyone had consumed a potion at some point during the fight, Jake himself taking his after the solo fight to buy time when the warrior head had taken full control.

As they rested, Jake also decided to finally check out the system messages he had received upon completing the floor... and things were a lot better than expected.

Eightieth floor completed. 16,000 Nevermore Points earned.

Bonus Objective Completed: Do not allow a single party member to be slain during the battle. 30,000 Nevermore Points Earned.

Grand Achievement earned: Slay the Twinhead Emperor after fully allowing the two Twin Emperors to merge in an exemplary manner, thus ending the conflict of the Vast Plateau for good. 100,000 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

First of all, that was a lot of Nevermore Points. Secondly, getting another 10% multiplier had not at all been expected. The only other event boss they had gotten a percentage bonus for was when they beat Minaga, and that had been a 25% multiplier. Jake did kind of feel like the Minaga reward had been a bit too much, but then again, that fight had been a lot harder overall.

Checking his Nevermore Points, Jake saw he had finally broken the two million mark and then some.

Current Nevermore Points: 2,120,950

Besides the Nevermore Points that he and the others had just gotten, the rest of the floor had only rewarded 21,000 more, coming from a few bonus objectives and achievements. This was a lot less than on other floors, but that was to be expected. It had been very similar on floor seventy-five and the event boss there. All of the achievements and objectives more or less got boiled into doing the event, resulting in just getting a whole bunch of points from that alone.

Time passed, and with potions and Dina eventually setting up a restoration circle, they all quickly began to recover. The backlashes from boosting skills and overusing certain skills – such as the Sword Saint's Transcendence – would take a while longer to shake off, but after only a few hours, they could all move about just fine. Jake even had all his hair back.

The door leading to the city floor was not far away, but they weren't going to enter it yet... because while it would be nice to head there right away to relax on the city floor, they all knew there wouldn't actually be any relaxation going on, at least not mentally.

While the fighting was most certainly finished, there was still a bit of politics left to go and some important decisions to be made. One of which was to figure out the order of who they believed would end up with the most Nevermore Points, so they could have those with less fully finish Nevermore first.

This was all for the Leaderboards... because during this time in the World Wonder, they had confirmed how the rewards worked, and Jake did think parts of it were a bit dumb. But, to make a quick summary, it mattered a lot *when* someone got on the Leaderboards... because just holding a spot for a mere moment would reward one the

same as if they held it for thousands of years. There were potential rewards if one held a spot for the rest of the era, but all of that was way too far off for Jake to even think about.

Anyway, this all meant that their plan was to finish Nevermore one after another, having each person finish faster using time dilation... with Jake naturally being the last to go because, to the surprise of no one, he would definitely end up with the highest final evaluation. At least from their group... though Jake hoped he would just be the highest. Period.

But he had a feeling there were quite a few people who wouldn't like that much.

Ell'Hakan nodded, satisfied that they had managed to accomplish their goal, and just in time, too. The large beast lay dead before them, with the others now scattered, having lost their will to fight after their leader had died, ending the life of the final of the Mad Beast Kings.

A door appeared not far away as he turned to his party members while skimming the floor completion notice.

Eighty-second floor completed. 16,400 Nevermore Points earned. New novel chapters are published on [movel](#).

Completing these two last floors had been done quickly, with little regard to bonus objectives or achievements, but the Nevermore Points gained had still been more than worth it. It was a bit sad they did not encounter more opportunities for Grand Achievements because the one from floor eighty had most certainly been a welcome addition.

Grand Achievement earned: Make the Twin Emperors fully merge once more and bring harmony to their Path as the Twinhead Emperor, ending the conflict of the Vast Plateau for good. 80,000 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

It had taken quite a bit of... Bloodline Therapy to get the two halves of one whole to agree on things and merge once more, but it hadn't been something he couldn't handle. Ell'hakan just felt fortunate he didn't have to fight that monster, as he doubted they could have beaten the Twinhead Emperor without having to resort to things he would prefer to avoid, and even then, it wasn't an assured victory.

In fact, he doubted many could beat that boss... but he did see the party of the Malefic's Chosen doing it. They had a lot of trump cards to throw in, and Ell'hakan knew not to underestimate the hidden cards of someone who had managed to not only fight but defeat the absolute monster that had been Valdemar's image in the Colosseum of Mortals.

“We must hurry and finish before too many others have a chance to do so before us,” the Saintess of the Holy Church reminded him as she stood with his two remaining party members, one of their comrades sadly having fallen during this final floor.

Ell'Hakan regarded the Saintess before nodding and walking the door with her. She had been far more helpful than he had ever expected, truly earning her recognition as one of the ten most talented C-grades of this generation in the Holy Church. He most certainly did not regret the deal he had struck to get her and the Church as a whole on board to support him.

To allow the Holy Church to obtain his Bloodline was but a small price to pay for their cooperation. Ah, but nothing would happen with the Saintess; Ell'Hakan wouldn't want too much to do with her after Nevermore if he could avoid it. He liked people he could influence, and absolute fanatics were quite difficult to sway in any way. He was also fully aware she had no positive feelings toward him and had her own Path to walk.

Anyway, his decision to enter talks with the Holy Church had been quite a good decision if he said so himself, especially when one considered the further implications of their deal... because to obtain his Bloodline, he naturally had to be alive, and for the best results, they wanted him to get as strong as possible before he would pass on the Bloodline.

This naturally meant they had a vested interest in keeping him alive, earning him quite a good ally... and a backup plan in case the winds of change did not favor his current Patron and Yip of Yore failed his grand plan.

Pushing down these thoughts and focusing on the present, he walked through the door to the city floor, Ell'Hakan refocusing and straightening his back. Soon, it would be time for his final score and placement on the Leaderboards to be revealed, and needless to say, he was more than confident in his placement... and not just on the two publicly known Leaderboards, but the third hidden one.

The All-Star Leaderboards.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 873: Nevermore: The Final Stretch

To a C-grade, while fifty years wasn't considered a very long time, it was definitely still a significant part of their lives, especially for those from the new universe, who were all

very young by multiversal standards. For many, it was even a majority of their lives, truly highlighting the pure momentum of the natives in a new universe.

For another group who had also been heavily involved in Nevermore, fifty years was but the blink of an eye. The gods who kept an eye on everything that was happening – both from inside of Nevermore and those outside using messengers they sent in – a fifty-year period was barely ever of any consequence. At least not usually... but when a new universe was integrated, things always got exciting.

The Records were flowing freely, as the system was more active than ever, throwing events and special happenings around everywhere, not just for those in the new universe, even if the majority were for the newly integrated.

To the gods, this was a prime opportunity to grasp power for themselves and to expand their factions... Nevermore being a huge aspect in this. The Leaderboards were perhaps the best advertisement, not just for the groups with powerful people on it, but for the geniuses of the new era who had yet to fully integrate themselves with a faction.

Few would dare aim to recruit those who were in the top spots, and most of them were already in big factions anyway... but the ones who would have ranked in the top thousands were still more than worth it to recruit. For these geniuses who were close to the pinnacle, the best thing they could do personally was to get closer to the peak while also aligning themselves with the factions capable of nurturing these other peak C-grades who did top the Leaderboards.

Perhaps the luckiest of all wasn't the newly integrated mortals or the gods who could now finally progress once more but the young talents who had been born in other universes before the new integration and could now partake in the festivities. They had the advantage of growth before the integration and tended to be older with far more stable foundations than the newly integrated Nevermore Attendees... yet no one expected any of them to actually take the top spot, at least not right away.

History had proven that it was always newly integrated people who disproportionately dominated the Era Leaderboards, at least in the beginning. Each era was a few billion years at least, so many records would be broken during that time, but it did happen on occasion that a record set in the initial stages held strong for an entire era. Yip of Yore was one such happening.

When he had done Nevermore back in the day, he had taken the top spot, with his rival at the time, Altius, taking the second spot. Over time, Altius was pushed down to number four – still showing he had been an absolute pinnacle talent – but Yip had managed to maintain his rank, even as all the geniuses of an entire era competed with him, truly proving himself the pinnacle talent of the ninety-second era. He had been alive during the integration and set an unbeatable record... and now the question was if that feat would repeat itself as the next generation began to appear on the Leaderboards.

“Any spoilers?” Minaga asked the Wyrmgod, who was sitting silently and watching a myriad of lifestreams and timers with the other gods.

“No,” the Primordial shook his head. “But I do believe most can infer some things.”

“Alright, alright... thoughts from the room how their factions did?” Minaga asked loudly, even calling out to the large gathering of gods observing from the back.

Yet it was the Blightfather who spoke up first. “Can’t say I’m particularly disappointed or overjoyed. There were some pleasant surprises and some who underperformed, but that is all to be expected. Overall, while Nevermore is certainly an important step in the Paths of C-grades and an excellent recruitment tool to find worthwhile talents, it isn’t that important in the grand scheme of things.”

“While I will not disagree with your main point, we shouldn’t downplay the most well-known World Wonder of the multiverse either, now should we? Also, let us not pretend this iteration hasn’t been a bit out of the ordinary... our very presences in this room here is proof of that,” the Holy Mother countered.

Vilastromoz just sat back, once more seeing no reason to get involved when the two of them got into it. He also knew that the reason the Holy Mother wanted to put more emphasis on Nevermore was due to how well the Holy Church always did. They were a faction focused on working together and the single-largest faction in the multiverse, after all, so for them to be displayed prominently on the Leaderboards was only to be expected.

Overall, they were definitely the ones doing the best simply due to their sheer numbers, but if one looked at the factions with the highest average placement, they were far behind. This space was instead dominated by the most elite factions, such as the Order of the Malefic Viper and Court of Shadows. Ones that didn’t solely care about making a big organization, but that every member part of it had to be worthy.

Of course, there was one faction that dominated here more than any other when one still looked at major factions... one that was focused nearly solely on combat: Valhal.

Valdemar also did seem pretty happy with how things had gone. Even if their average placements were high, they tended to not have anyone at the top either. It did happen from time to time, but their members tended not to really focus enough on their professions or crafting in general to place that high.

As for the factions that did the absolute best, it was the incredibly small ones that had very strict requirements. Organizations such as the Crimson Flame, led by Gwyndyr. Even that archer from Earth affiliated with him had done pretty well for herself. Not to the level of beating any of the true top contenders, but a respectable performance, a bit like Jake’s brother from the Court of Shadows. Pretty good but not outstanding.

The discussion of how each faction would do had quickly filled the hall as the gods talked openly, some even making subtle bets here and there. This was a rare chance for many of these representative gods to talk to a Primordial, something they were both open to in this forum. Didn't hurt that it was primarily just them being rained with praise while bragging, but that was neither here nor there.

Talks continued for a while until quickly, the topic moved toward what most of them ultimately cared about. The most interesting part of this period in Nevermore. It was a time where, more likely than not, the top spots of the Leaderboards would be switched out several times a day as more and more pinnacle geniuses finished until finally, the dust would settle, and only one name would remain atop as the Era's Pinnacle.

And while there was much discussion about who could take the top ten and even top five slots in the end, there was no doubt only two people were truly in contention for the top two:

One of the most spoken of Chosen of this generation, primarily because of the stuff one of them had pulled off recently and because these two had gods on open conflict:

Ell'hakan, Chosen of Yip, the former Era's Pinnacle and top genius of the last era.

And naturally the absolutely most spoken up, the Harbinger of Primeval Origins, and Villy's own drinking buddy, Jake.

They would soon know who would take the top spot as both were about to finish the World Wonder, and it was certain one of them would finish before the other, potentially blocking the other from holding the Era's Pinnacle title for even a moment.

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"We should quickly sort our order and get going," the Sword Saint suggested after they had been talking for a while. "Also to put additional pressure on other factions who may be dallying too much."

"It isn't like we will finish immediately either way," the Fallen King also added. "It will take some time, even with our respective time chambers. Does the Order of the Malefic Viper have some prepared already?"

The final part was naturally to Jake, who confidently shrugged. "I have no idea."

"No cause for concern in that area," the Sword Saint shook his head. "Someone affiliated with my Patron shall be there and have everything ready."

"That's convenient," Jake tilted his head. "Did Aeon contact you or something?"

“No, this was planned before I even entered Nevermore in the first place. Also, let me be clear, this isn’t something specifically prepared for us. Others are also very much interested in the services of the best time mage one can find in C-grade,” the old man explained.

“Makes sense, I guess,” Jake nodded.

“Ree?” Sylphie also asked.

“No, it’s definitely faster to stay inside of Nevermore to take advantage of the compounding time dilation,” the Sword Saint answered.

Sylphie had asked if it wouldn’t be faster to go to Nevermore City – the entrance of Nevermore – and have someone above C-grade set up a time chamber there. One had to remember that even if they left Nevermore and the time expired out there, it would still count. But, as the Sword Saint said, it was better to stay in Nevermore to double-dip on the time dilation.

Even if the C-grade in Nevermore could only do a, let’s say, ten-to-one dilation inside of Nevermore, coupled with the natural dilation of Nevermore, one easily hit a 100x multiplier in Realtime. Or, well, the opposite of a multiplier, as more time would pass inside the chamber than outside.

“Now, let us proceed to decide our order... and as much as it annoys me, I reckon the bird and I are first, considering our performances in the Challenge Dungeons,” the Fallen King said.

“We still need to decide the exact order,” the Sword Saint said. “As in... how many points do each of you have exactly?”

Jake perked up at hearing that. Each of them naturally had a lot of points, but if Sylphie somehow ended up with more, it would be hilarious.

Spoiler.

It was hilarious.

“A measly, not even two thousand points is...” the King said, trying to make excuses.

“Ree.”

“The sheer incompetence in design behind that ridiculous labyrinth...” the Fallen King shifted the blame.

“Ree.”

“No, it was by far the worst of the Challenge Dungeons, of that there is no doubt,” the Unique Lifeform said, now moved onto anger, before finally... acceptance. “Let us not waste time on what has happened. Additionally, the hawk has gained more levels, which will add even more points at the end. So, move on to decide the winner between the dryad and swordsman.”

“Ree,” Sylphie courtesly agreed as they moved on indeed.

Jake had kind of forgotten the extra points one would also get from levels and wondered how that worked. It was one of the reasons it was advised to be as close to level 200 as one could when one entered, even if one could compete on the Leaderboards as long as one was below 210. Anyway, he would definitely find out soon.

“There is no need to compare us,” Dina shook her head. “I think it’s best he finishes first. With a 70% multiplier from the Challenge Dungeons, neither of us are getting on the top 10 Leaderboards for the era, but the Sword Saint does have a very good shot at the top ten on the ninety-third universe Leaderboards.”

“We should still decide,” the Sword Saint smiled. “Even if we don’t get top ten, reaching top 100 or top 250 is bound to also have certain rewards, and I want no enmity born from one of us blocking the other.”

“I wouldn’t-“

“1,952,976.”

Dina was silent for a bit before muttering. “Fifty-eight thousand...”

“So, you got me beat,” the old man smiled.

“No... no, you got more levels than me,” Dina shook her head. “While I’m not sure about the details, I am sure that will add even more at the end, making you overtake me.”

The two of them ended up agreeing on the old man going first after a bit more back and forth, which just left Jake.

“Anyone wanna know how many points I got?” he asked with a bright smile.

“I will assume so many that it would be shameful if you failed to reach the top spot of the Era and Universe Leaderboards,” the Fallen King shot back.

“I wouldn’t say shameful... but enough so that I would be disappointed if I didn’t top at least one of them,” Jake shrugged. “And I say that knowing full well that there is a good chance a certain orange fuck is already topping one if not both of them already. Anyway, we’re all good, right? Let’s get moving and finally get done with Nevermore.”

There were no complaints as everyone finally got up, and Dina dispelled the recovery circle. They all at least looked representable now as they moved toward the door and the final city floor. On the way, Dina threw Jake a few glances before finally asking.

“Would... would you really be disappointed if you didn’t get the top spot? Do you expect to get it?” she asked a bit cautiously. “My grandfather said that to take the top spot isn’t easy, and even if getting it doesn’t necessarily mean one is the strongest of a generation... it won’t be far off.”

“I think I would be, yeah,” Jake muttered. “I did my best here in Nevermore, and as you said, the spot is often reserved for the top of a generation, right?”

“Yes,” Dina nodded.

“Well, then I belong there,” Jake shrugged as he grinned. “My goal has always been to be the very best like no one ever was.”

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, still held by Jake as she was still very tired. Or, at the very least, pretended to still be very tired to get carried.

“No, no, you’re in the generation after mine, so you can be the very best of that one,” Jake shook his head while scratching her.

“Does that mean I am from the generation before you?” the Sword Saint asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not,” Jake said, sounding almost offended. “You’re at least three generations before me, if not more.”

“That... isn’t how generations work in the multiverse,” Dina said. “While a generation isn’t a set time, in most instances, especially when talking about C-grades, one considers a single generation at least a few hundred years...”

“That sounds like something I will definitely ignore ever learning,” Jake grinned as the five of them finally entered the door and went to the final city floor they would ever see.

It was... pretty basic and very empty if Jake said so himself. Especially compared to City Floor Fourteen, the one where all the top teams were doing Challenge Dungeons. Still, the ones that were present were either those not competing on the Leaderboards – in other words, those who had entered while already above 210 – or the absolute top teams. And most of those teams wouldn’t be found just wandering about as they were doing exactly what Jake and company were about to do.

Ignoring the system message welcoming them to the city floor, the five of them made their way toward somewhere the Sword Saint felt powerful time energy gathered. Jake also felt it, and using Pulse, he spotted the place the old man was talking about.

Reaching the area, they saw a large set of buildings that looked a bit like one of those motels where the doors opened directly from the outside into the rooms, except the doors, in this case, were heavy enchanted gates, and the rooms were lined up boxes of metal.

“This the place?” Jake asked the Sword Saint as he read the sign above the fence surrounding the weird, motel-looking place... and it did not inspire confidence.

Time Chambers For Rent! Best Rates, Best Service, Best Performance!

“It is indeed,” the old man nodded, Jake choosing to believe him as they walked inside. They had barely managed to get in before Jake spotted an approaching figure who raised a hand and waved.

“You’re finally here! Damn, I was getting scared you fucked up and got stuck on floor seventy-five or something, as you didn’t go to the city floor,” the newcomer said. “A fellow follower of the glorious God of Time, too!”

Jake observed the man and used Identify, quickly being told what he already knew... this guy was strong.

[Hobgoblin – lvl 349 – Divine Blessing of Aeon Clok]

“Greetings,” the Sword Saint bowed. “I do not believe I need to say why we’re here?”

“Of course not,” the hobgoblin shook his head. “Seeing as you’re a follower of our god, I can even throw in a three percent discount! No, wait, with the Malefic’s Chosen also here, I believe I can make it three-point-five percent! The true VIP treatment!”

“How generous...” Jake muttered.

“I know, right?” the hobgoblin said, still smiling. “Now, let’s get you all settled, alright? I will naturally need payment up front as you’ll all just pop right back to Nevermore City when the timer expires.”

“Can I ask, has the Chosen of Yip of Yore also arrived here?” Jake asked.

“Yep, he already got here over a full day ago and will pop out soonish, I reckon,” the peak C-grade explained.

“I see...” Jake muttered. “Say... would it be possible to pay a bit extra to maybe do it so his time dilation isn’t as effective as it maybe should be, allowing a certain other Chosen to finish first?”

The hobgoblin looked at Jake for a moment as his smile faded entirely. “Are you asking me to divert from my own Path by maliciously breaking my business practices?”

"I would never ask that and simply made a tasteless hypothetical," Jake quickly backtracked quickly as he smiled. "Anyway, five rooms, please."

"Oh, of course, you would never truly ask something preposterous like that," the hobgoblin said with a serious look before he went right back to smiling. "Now, follow me, and I'll show you to your rooms." For original chapters go to ***novel***

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Chapter 874: Nevermore: The Calm Before the Leaderboards

One by one, Jake and his party members entered their respective time chambers. They went in the order they had decided, so the Fallen King would finish first, then Sylphie, the Sword Saint, Dina, and finally, Jake would be the last one to appear back in Nevermore City as his fifty years expired.

When Jake was the only one left, standing right in front of his own chamber, the hobgoblin threw him a glance. "So... you gonna win?"

"What?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"Are you gonna beat Yip's Chosen on the Leaderboards? In my mind, it's pretty much down to you two for the top spot as far as I know. There are a few others too who may have a slight chance, but eh... not really," the time mage said.

"Why do you care?" Jake questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"I am a gossip; what can I say? I just like those juicy-"

"There's bets on, huh?" Jake interrupted him.

"Really?" the hobgoblin said, as he tried to look surprised. "I would have never thought that! But say there truly is live betting going on regarding the finishing positions of all the different well-known Nevermore Attendees competing on the Leaderboards, then surely there would be a lot to be gained on betting for the top spot. Ah, by the way, I am talking about the Era Leaderboards here."

Jake, not really in that much of a hurry to start his own time chamber, just got a thought. "Whose the top seed right now?"

"El'Hakan, and pretty convincingly, too, so if you beat him on the Era Leaderboards; you should also top the universe one," the time mage said. "Followed by a demon prince, a young princess from the Regalflight, an elemental of some kind, and, of course, you. A few others in there, too, but I have my personal doubts about these individuals, and I tend to be pretty good at judging situations like these. The thing is, we don't know your Challenge Dungeon score, and while it can be assumed that it's good, seeing as you are also an alchemist and should do well even in those focused on crafting, there's still a lot of question marks. Especially after you didn't publish your results. Left many to believe you maybe actually did horribly and was embarrassed."

"That Chosen of Yip is really rated that highly, huh?" Jake muttered, ignoring the last part of what the time mage said. He did know he had gotten a good score from the Challenge Dungeons, but...

"He passed floor eighty-two and did pretty damn well throughout the World Wonder. Only one other group did eighty-two floors, with even the majority of the top groups not managing to complete floor eighty, and even if they did, it wasn't exactly with flying colors," the hobgoblin kept readily sharing. "Also, is it surprising for the Chosen of Yip to be rated highly? Based on what I saw when he came here, he is quite an unsettling entity... not that I wouldn't say the same about you."

"I see," Jake nodded, thinking to himself.

"So...?"

"What?" Jake asked, confused.

"You gonna beat him or not? If you tell me, and you're right, I'll waive the fee for using the time chambers entirely for your entire party," the hobgoblin offered.

"Didn't you make a big deal about offering a discount before...?" Discover more novels at *novel***

"Alright, I'll even throw in... what do you want?" the time mage asked, seemingly not sure what to offer a Chosen.

Jake thought for a second, and for a second, he considered what he would do after Nevermore and what would be of use then... and one thing instantly popped up.

"Something for a time banana musa... eh a Celerita Musa, ancient rarity," Jake said.

"Musa? I thought bananas grew on trees?"

"A lot of people do," Jake answered, having a very important conversation before it was time to have a multiversal competition on a few Leaderboards. "They're actually not trees, but a type of flowering plant that is often confused for one due to their size and large stem."

"Huh, you learn something new every day," the hobgoblin nodded, sounding genuinely interested. "You really are an alchemist. Either way, I got something I'm sure will be of use to your banana plant... so what'll it be? You gotta take the top spot?"

"If I was the one betting, that is sure where I would place my money... because I wouldn't say Ell'Hakan's Challenge Dungeon run struck me as particularly impressive," Jake smirked and gave a knowing look.

The hobgoblin looked surprised for a moment before he smirked in kind. "I'll trust ya on this one. Cya around, I'll send someone with the stuff for your plant if you make me a rich goblin. Alright, an even richer goblin."

With those words, he shut the door to Jake's time chamber. Seconds later, Jake felt the magic circles activate as time distorted. While time would be warped, he would still need to sit there for at least a few days, giving him plenty of time to have fun as he pulled out his Puzzle Box of the Seeker, an item he had dearly missed playing with.

Before he immersed himself in the puzzles, he briefly reflected on recent happenings and what he had just learned. Jake had surprised himself a bit when he asked the hobgoblin about potentially messing with Ell'Hakan's time chamber to fuck him over on the Leaderboards, as that honestly wasn't like him. He had just wanted to fuck with the other Chosen, and title-blocking him seemed like a fun way to do that.

But.. letting Ell'Hakan emerge on his throne for a small while before smashing him down would also be satisfying. Jake also had to admit one other thing... for a moment, he had considered the possibility he would *need* to finish first. That he wasn't the one with the top score. Jake knew he was strong, people kept telling him that, but it was still hard to imagine he would be the one to take the absolute top spot on the Leaderboards.

If Nevermore had been pure fighting, he would have been more confident. But it was so many other things, and Jake knew there were a myriad of different creatures and people in the multiverse who had their own unique advantages. In many ways, the words of the hobgoblin before he entered the chamber had calmed him. Hearing two groups had beaten two floors more than him wasn't nice, but it told him there wasn't some mega-outlier who had somehow managed to do ninety floors through having five Transcendences or some shit like that.

Again, Jake knew he was strong, but he had seen stronger C-grades. The face of the First Sage flashed in his mind as Jake realized a big part of his reason was due to him. Who is to say someone like that absolute outlier couldn't have appeared again? The chances were really fucking low, but...

Shaking his head, Jake decided to dispel all thoughts about it and began to play with his Puzzle Box to pass the time. All there was left for him to do was wait for the final results to be published. Something he had hated after an exam back in school and sure as hell didn't like more now.

Stolen story; please report.

Jake, immersed in his box to distract his mind, failed to realize the irony of his thoughts... something he would only come to realize later. Because while he was afraid of some mega-outlier coming in and swooping the competition...

He didn't realize that in the eyes of others, he was that mega-outlier.

Nevermore City was busier than ever, even exceeding the time everyone went to enter the World Wonder. The massive city was housing guests from every faction, their many strongholds, and compounds filled with influential figures from all over the multiverse. Within many, even gods sat, covertly keeping an eye on everything that was happening.

Within the compound belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, Viridia was kneeling before another familiar-looking woman who stood beside two nearly identical copies of herself. It was one of the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon, sidelined by projections of her two sisters.

"The Malefic One informed us his Chosen soon exits Nevermore," the sister there with a physical avatar said. "There are also some others to keep an eye on, like the Malefic Dragonkin, but sadly for them, they are overshadowed by the presence of the Chosen."

"Will we proceed according to the Order's regular procedures?" Viridia asked, a bit unsure. This wasn't her first time going to Nevermore because some highly talented member of the Order was doing the World Wonder, but as an S-grade, it was naturally her first time seeing a true Leaderboards competition like this. In preparations, she had read up on old procedures of the Order... but those had all been written during the Malefic One's absence. So, they very much emphasized not rocking the boat too much.

"I read those, and they are pathetic," the Verdant Witch spat out her words. "Viridia, who are we? We are the Order of the Malefic Viper, loyal servants of the Malefic One. We are subservient or apprehensive toward no one but the Malefic One, and this is our chance to truly show the multiverse we are not afraid."

"Then..."

"Walk forward with pride. Stand alongside the other representatives with a straight back. You represent the Malefic Viper, a Primordial. Do not embarrass him, us, the Chosen, or yourself," one of the other sisters said in a stern tone. "Your job is not to prove you are worthy of that pride. Leave that up to the Malefic One and his Chosen and simply bask in the glory of their shadow."

Viridia listened intently before bowing deeper. "The will of the Malefic One shall be done."

"Good. Now go and show those uptight posers the Order of the Malefic Viper is not to be looked down upon or forgotten."

Standing up, Viridia nodded as she turned, determination in her eyes. As she walked through the compound, she gathered those who would walk alongside her. Among them were a few branch leaders and other S-grades, including Fairleigh, the patriarch of the Nalkar vampires. Something that usually wouldn't be possible.

There were a few reasons for this. The first one was that vampires still didn't have a good reputation in the wider multiverse and were often antagonized simply for existing. Among the influential factions, pretty much only the Order had any vampires, with the rest being solo or with smaller groups. Due to this, the Order usually didn't have vampires with them whenever they participated in any social happenings like this, as that would just be inviting trouble from those who still sought the extermination of the vampire race as a whole.

With the return of the Viper, this would change. No longer did they carry the same fear of making others angry by bringing one. The mere fact they dared bring a vampire was also a way to tell the rest of the multiverse that the Order would do whatever they wanted from now on, with the other factions not able to pressure or tell them what they could and couldn't do. A show of force, if one will, and a declaration that the Order was openly supporting the vampires.

Finally... Fairleigh had wanted to come. He had been incredibly embarrassed that he had been the one to welcome the Chosen and speak to him for a prolonged period when the Chosen was selling off items from the Treasure Hunt system event, all without the Nalkar Patriarch noticing who he was truly dealing with. He just thought Jake was some new recruit with a Blessing. The primary reason Fairleigh had even wanted to speak to the Chosen personally was due to his own personal interest in old vampire memorabilia. Now, he wanted to at least show his respect by showing up like this and being there to observe how the Chosen did in Nevermore.

"Are you nervous?" Viridia asked Fairleigh as they exited the compound and began making their way toward the central square. They were a group of twelve total, most of them old and loyal members of the Order, while some were newer recruits brought along. Calling S-grades new recruits was a bit weird, but many had wanted a closer relationship with the Order and even joined after the Primordial's return.

"What worry could I possibly have, Hall Master?" the vampire patriarch asked with a relaxed smile. "This is the domain of the Wyrmgod, and none would dare insult two Primordials by making a move. I am just happy to finally walk in the light and not be hidden away like should I be ashamed of my heritage."

Viridia slowly nodded. Fairleigh was older than herself, but as the Hall Master, she had seniority. Still, it felt odd that the vampire she remembered first seeing as a C-grade herself spoke so formally. "There truly is no need for shame. You are recognized by the

Malefic One, and his recognition is worth more than that of every other faction combined. I know his Chosen also has no negative emotions toward your race, and from what I heard, there are even vampires living on his home planet.”

Fairleigh smiled as they kept walking in silence for a while longer before the central square entered sight. Compared to when the Chosen and others had entered, things were slightly different now. The entire square had expanded, and not just by a little either. Some serious space magic had been used, so perfect it defied belief, quite literally stretching reality itself to make everything bigger.

This was all done to make space for the many stands and podiums reserved for the different factions who had proven themselves worthy of one. Behind these were even large buildings that were placed in a large ring around the central square, all with a view of the two Leaderboards from large terraces atop their roofs. These were reserved for the top factions only, with the Order of the Malefic Viper naturally having one of these reserved.

The Leaderboards themselves were currently hidden as they both appeared entirely blank. This had been done when the Era Leaderboards unlocked, primarily to build up excitement about who would take the top spot. There was no doubt this was more than just a mere competition among young talents, but a large social happening involving pretty much all of the major factions of the multiverse.

Viridia led her group into the building belonging to them as they soon stood on the rooftop. Quite a few curious gazes had landed on them, especially when they saw the vampire among them. The Risen were only a few rows away, and their representative was throwing some nasty looks, while the Holy Church was luckily on the other side of the square, placed as far away from the Risen as possible.

Looking over at the Risen, Viridia just smiled and nodded in greeting. The other representative clearly wasn't happy but still returned her greeting in kind, professional enough to know that being impolite would gain them nothing.

There were a few dozen of these buildings for top factions, with most of them having already arrived by now. Viridia had been to other social gatherings and was used to mostly being ignored... which was why she was surprised when, soon, they were visited by many guests who wanted to give their greetings. And not just by small factions.

A few of the Dragonflights, the United Tribes, Altmar Empire, demon factions, powerful warbands... factions Viridia usually felt looked down on the Order came to pay their respects and wish them a good performance for their Chosen.

One of the reasons why the larger factions had entire buildings was due to the length of this event. It would take weeks, at the very least, for all of the top performers of this first generation to be revealed. Probably even a few months. So this was also very much a

time for political meanings, something the buildings could be used for, as Viridia took this chance to meet with representatives left and right.

It also had to be noted that only mortals participated in this. Mixing gods with mortals simply wasn't feasible, and Viridia didn't doubt some gods didn't also have their own dealings, but the majority of the diplomatic work was left to the mortals.

Days turned to weeks, as they had naturally come in good time, and the Leaderboards had yet to be revealed. Finally, they got a warning one day, as a message was projected into the sky above Nevermore City:

Leaderboards Reveal: 23:59:57

Viridia had gone to their rooftop in preparation as the timer slowly expired. As it reached zero... the sky and square filled with lights, and Viridia heard something she hadn't expected. Music began to blare out from who-knows-where as a being appeared in the sky, hands spread out as she felt the presence of a demi-god.

It was a figure she had read up on and whom she knew was associated with Nevermore. A powerful being that many feared as much as even the Primordials, not necessarily because of power, but the sheer damage this being could cause if pushed. Truly, a creature worthy of respect, as Viridia and all the other mortals knelt before the demi-god they, in truth, knew had already stepped into divinity. Perhaps the only god capable of showing up as a mortal:

The All-God Legion.

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Chapter 875: Nevermore: Leaderboards

Lights danced in the sky as the music kept playing while the All-God Legion, better known as Minaga, walked down a pair of invisible stairs right above the two blank Leaderboards. He easily got the attention of everyone, and Viridia had to admit he was perhaps the best creature in the multiverse to do something like this... he was both a mortal, making his aura not overwhelming, and a divine being that could stand alongside the pinnacle all on his own. This offered him the possibility of absolute confidence.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome! What a great day for all of you to show up and all just to come and see little me!?” Minaga’s voice was projected all throughout Nevermore City, reaching not just the square.

“Oh wait, I read that wrong... you’re here for the Leaderboards, eh?” the Unique Lifeform joked around, not a single person present letting out the slightest laugh.

“Alright, alright, tough crowd, everyone’s so freaking serious, so let’s just stop messing around and get right to it! The great Leaderboards reveal! Okay, I lied; we won’t get right to it. One small intermission first, and I need to make a few clarifications, and as a preamble, I will share some stats!” Minaga said as he summoned a floating screen above himself. **“Firstly, I can happily announce the death rate for this year’s Leaderboards-competition groups was 10.3% below the expected amount! That means only about 9.4 out of every 100 Nevermore Attendees competing on the Leaderboards ended up dying, compared to 10.1 out of every 100 last era.”**

Viridia looked up at the screen and saw the stats that represented millions of dead at the very least. But it also meant that more than ten times the number of dead had come out of Nevermore, now more powerful than before and with a brighter future ahead of them. She also knew that the members of the Order tended to survive far more than the average due to their far higher average power level.

“The Nevermore Points achieved by the average group is also 3.6% higher than the last era, sitting at a whopping 42.214! Pretty good if I say so myself, and you can all be proud for fostering another great generation... especially now that we’re getting to the juicy part.”

Minaga smiled even more brightly as he dispelled the prior screen and showed a new one. It was just a single number, but Viridia instantly understood what it meant. *That’s... impressive.*

“10.5%. That’s how many more Nevermore Points the average in the top 1 percentile gained this time around compared to the last era. To clarify, this is the second biggest jump between two eras ever seen, and compared to last time, there is no explanation besides one simple fact: even the average talent of this era vastly surpasses any we’ve ever seen prior.”

For the first time, there was an actual crowd reaction as claps were heard. Viridia also joined in, along with the other S-grades around her. It was an applause for the next generation and what she believed was an outstanding performance. A generation the Chosen of the Order was a representative member of.

“Now, at the very tippidy top we will soon see on the Leaderboards, the disparity is a bit harder to find, showing that those at the Pinnacle Tier, even in prior eras, are still not to be taken lightly. But, fret not, the young talents are a little bit better, but within the margin

of error,” Minaga continued once the applause had fully died down, as Viridia heard some low discussion all around.

To see the average rise was a good sign.. but to see the top shift wasn't, especially not after the last era. Yip of Yore had been an outlier who had been praised for surpassing all prior eras, and what he had grown into could only be described as a problem for many divine factions. The many factions had also long learned that many top geniuses would be very difficult to control unless they had an existing connection to a top faction.

Those from the new universe naturally didn't have any pre-existing connections, making them far more unpredictable. So, while seeing the average grow was good, many hoped to not see the top spot once more be taken by someone from the new universe... something that would be difficult to achieve, seeing as quite a few of the top seeds were from the new universe.

“The following clarification is mainly for those who haven't really been paying attention to how the Leaderboards work... but the Leaderboards have naturally been open for quite a while; we just decided not to show them. In fact, they've been open for about a year, but we have naturally kept them hidden, as honestly, quite a few of you are utterly insufferable when it comes to wanting to show off. You are so desperate to have names from your factions shown on a list that is shifting every hour that it's honestly kind of sad. Seriously, how many people have been forced to cut their Nevermore journeys short halfway through for some insecure Holy Church, Risen Altmar Empire, or whatever, to use their lost futures as a brief marketing stunt? Anyway, so, yeah, to stop this pathetic display, we chose to hide the Leaderboards till now, when the rankings are at least semi-stable, and I am certain no one has anything against that, right? We allow people to at least see the Universe Leaderboard a bit in the beginning for you bastards to do your scouting or whatever, and even that's too much, in my opinion...”

Viridia stood and stared blankly as the entire square was silent after the Unique Lifeform's rant. She couldn't help but look over, and she saw a Cardinal from the Holy Church clench his staff tight, holding in his anger after the All-God Legion effectively insulted the entire Holy Church and even the Holy Mother herself. It wouldn't be an understatement to say Minaga had just insulted half of the peak factions with a single rant... and Viridia knew that out of nearly anyone in the multiverse, Minaga was perhaps the only one who could do just that without ever suffering any repercussions. For original chapters go to [novel*fire*net](#)

“Ah, I really needed to get that off my chest, now to get back into it. So, as I said, the Leaderboards have been open for a while, and the listing has sure shifted a lot. For the Era Leaderboard alone, the top 100 has had a total of 351 names on it, quite a few more than usual. As for the top 10, we have had a total of 21 names there. Again, this is for the Era Leaderboard... but we naturally aren't going to address that first. Instead, let's keep it a bit more local and discuss the far more volatile Universe Leaderboard.”

Having changed the topic away from insulting peak factions, Minaga shared some more stats. Waving his hand one more time, another screen appeared.

“I call this Leaderboard more volatile because it’s been quite the shuffle! People getting high spots only to be bonked down from the top 50 to below the top 100 within a day happened more than once! The higher average has resulted in far more than usual reaching the minimum Nevermore Points required for Pinnacle Tier to qualify them to even appear on the top 100. This has resulted in a whole new record of the most names ever appearing in not only the top 100 but even the top 10 of the Universe Leaderboards! An all-time record, too!”

The screen floating above Minaga began to be filled with the stats of the Universe Leaderboard. Stats that made Viridia and many others raise an eyebrow.

“1084 have had their name appear in the top 100, with a whopping 76 in the top 10 at some point! That’s a lot of people getting some sweet, sweet titles! However... there have only ever been three names at the very top. Two of which now still dominate the Leaderboards. Yes, Leaderboards, plural.”

This was the first real hint about the actual people on the Leaderboards. No hints as to who they were, just that they were from the ninety-third universe, which instantly made Viridia think that the Chosen of the Malefic One had to be among these two. He had to be.

“Now, for some more interesting miscellaneous stats regarding the Challenge Dungeons and the thought process behind their designs...” Minaga began before smirking and stopping himself. **“Relax, I’m just messing with you all. I guess it’s time to get to the real meat of this entire thing.”**

With a snap, the screen with stats disappeared as Minaga paced back and forth up in the air.

“Some of you keen-eyed ones may have realized by now I am just dragging time out because I am waiting for something to happen. Or maybe you didn’t realize anything and just assumed I like to ramble on, something you would be entirely correct on, but in this instance, I am also dragging out time purposefully, as we quite frankly started this entire thing at least a few minutes too early. You see, for suspense, we have delayed some arrivals of those who had already finished Nevermore, and we had to make sure everyone was done for maximum dramatic effect to put on a good show and all that. Also, relax; their order of completion is still intact; we just delayed them teleporting to Nevermore City. With all that said... may the young talents descend!”

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With these words, space began to move as Viridia felt the energy of the Wyrmgod himself at play. All around the huge central square, figures began to appear in rapid succession, either on the stands or on top of the many buildings belonging to top factions.

Viridia quickly looked around, and on one of the buildings, she saw the swordsman who had entered with the Viper's Chosen appear, standing among followers of Aeon Clok. On another platform with followers of Stormild, she saw the hawk, and on a third belonging to the Pantheon of Life, the dryad. Finally, on their very own platform, a figure appeared, and Viridia was ready to bow as she saw it was not the Chosen but instead the Unique Lifeform who appeared.

She didn't have time to say anything to this Unique life form before Minaga spoke once more.

“And now for the grand reveal... of one of the Leaderboards!”

Finally, the time had come. Space itself warped around the Universe Leaderboard as words began to appear on it line-by-line before soon showing the top ten. At the same time, beams of white light descended from above, highlighting ten figures who were all standing spread around the square. It didn't take long to realize who was highlighted... it was naturally the ten top performers... and Viridia saw a real smug Cardinal over at the Holy Church building as two beams had descended on top of them. This light began to change up in the air as projections of these ten figures appeared, allowing all to see them.

Ignoring everything else, Viridia finally gazed upon the Universe Leaderboard... and it didn't look right. It didn't look right at all.

“Two did better than anyone else... please join me in applauding the performances of our runner-up, Wintermaul, along with our top dog: Ell'Hakan, Yip of Yore's Chosen!”

Viridia just stared at the Leaderboard... as things truly didn't make sense. *Where is he?*

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 93rd Universe.

1. Ell'Hakan – Pinnacle Tier.
2. Wintermaul – Pinnacle Tier
3. Lopas – Pinnacle Tier
4. Holy Dawn Paladin – Pinnacle Tier
5. Arnold – Pinnacle Tier

6. Eastbound Monk – Pinnacle Tier
7. Disciple of Lucenti – Pinnacle Tier
8. Sword Saint – Pinnacle Tier
9. Immortal Faith – Pinnacle Tier
10. High Templar – Pinnacle Tier

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Silence filled the entire square as everyone looked as two of the large projections in the air were highlighted more than the others. It was the two atop the Leaderboard, and soon, celebration erupted from several places, and nearly everyone did as Minaga said and gave a round of applause... except for those from the Order.

Viridia looked up and saw the figure of Yip's Chosen projected. He had a light smile on his face, not exactly looking smug, but not like his performance had come as a surprise either. He looked like someone who had just been told something he found rather obvious as he bowed a few times. Yet Viridia also saw something else... doubt and a bit of confusion that seemed to mirror her own.

The other highlighted figure was the one called Wintermaul. It was an ice elemental of some form, looking a bit like a mix between a yeti and a bear, but made entirely of ice. To see an elemental do so well was rare... which had to mean this particular elemental was truly outstanding.

Still... things were wrong, and as everyone else was celebrating and Minaga gave them time and space to do so, Viridia turned to the Unique Lifeform that had been part of the Chosen's party, throwing him a questioning gaze. One he instantly understood.

"I must say, I am pleasantly surprised to at least find myself in the top 100... and to see the small planet I now call home have not just one, but for multiple individuals to be in the top ten..." the Fallen King said. *"To see the mechanic with relations to the void outperforming the swordsman does surprise me a smidgen, though. Alas, I can only say it's his fortune."*

Frowning, Viridia looked at the Unique Lifeform. "What happened in there? The Chosen..."

"Allow me to make a prediction... my fellow Unique Lifeform by the name of Minaga has been putting on an entire show, which was part of the reason I was held in a white void for a few minutes before I was teleported here."

"The All-God Legion is in charge of this Leaderboards reveal," Viridia nodded.

“Then it makes sense. From all I have learned about Minaga, he is a performer who enjoys making drama and putting on a show more than anything. So do not worry quite yet, and just enjoy the show as the suspense builds, and we await the grand reveal,” the Fallen King said.

Viridia instantly realized what the Unique Lifeform was trying to say as she breathed a sigh of relief, and did as he said as they waited for Minaga to continue. A few minutes passed as the celebrations died down, and the congratulations of the top ten came to an end. Until the factions would host larger celebrations at a later time, that is.

“Once more, I want to congratulate all those who placed in the top 10 from the ninety-third universe. You all have done pretty well for yourselves, considering you’ve only been part of the multiverse for just a short amount of time... but what’s perhaps even more impressive is that we still find four names from the Universe Leaderboard also present on the era one! Behold, our top ten of this Era... and the Era’s Pinnacle!”

Space once more moved as the second Leaderboard was revealed, and ten figures were highlighted again as projects appeared; four of these highlights repeated. Along with the highlight of the Era’s Pinnacle... which had gone to the one most people had expected to see there and the top seed according to all the gambling houses.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 93rd Era.

1. Ell’Hakan – Era’s Pinnacle.
2. Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell – Pinnacle Tier
3. Wintermaul – Pinnacle Tier
4. Aishalstromoz Regalflight – Pinnacle Tier
5. Ghost King Azal – Pinnacle Tier
6. Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord – Pinnacle Tier
7. Lopas – Pinnacle Tier
8. Grimclaw Noxmane – Pinnacle Tier
9. Holy Dawn Paladin – Pinnacle Tier
10. Saintess of the Holy Church – Pinnacle Tier

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Two beams once more highlighted the smug Holy Church, showing that they had impressively maintained two spots in the top ten. Only one of them was a repeat, as someone Viridia recognized as the Saintess who had been part of Ell'Hakan's group was also highlighted.

The newcomers were a demon prince who had made some waves recently, currently shown standing with an arrogant sneer as he gazed toward where Ell'Hakan was standing. Next up was a princess of the Regalflight – the golden dragons – who nearly always had members toward the top due to the extremely high average power of those who managed to become golden dragons. She was standing with a neutral look in her humanoid form, but no matter what, she couldn't hide her innate pride.

Azal, the Ghost King, was also an expected figure to see. The same was true for the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, who was a young girl looking no older than someone who had barely entered adulthood. Then there was Grimclaw Noxmane, a wolf from the United Tribes, who looked like a, well, large wolf.

The creature known as Lopas did strike Viridia as an odd one. This Lopas had appeared on both the Universe Leaderboard and the seventh spot of the Era Leaderboard, gaining the creature quite a bit of attention... which was why it was surprising to see the sleeping sloth-like creature's projection clearly sleeping in mid-air.

All of these top performers got a lot of praise, and even if the Church had two in the top 10, there was no doubt who had the most attention of everyone. Ell'Hakan had repeated the feat of his Patron and claimed the very top spot, proving himself the Era's Pinnacle. Viridia clenched her fists as she threw a glance toward the Fallen King, who looked unbothered, just waiting.

“Truly an impressive display by everyone, and I will say... even if you do not find your name on the top 10, do not be discouraged. Top 100, or even top 1000, is also a feat to celebrate. Even if you don't find yourselves on any Leaderboards, do not for a second believe this is an evaluation of your entire Path and your potential. To many of you, this will be but a slight blip in your existence and hopefully just a pleasant memory that may or may not have rewarded a sweet title. This is also a warning to the ones who did place well on the Leaderboards to not relax simply because you did well in one World Wonder. This is just a single step on your journey.”

The words of the Unique Lifeform were sobering and encouraging. It was likely something many of those who had either done better or worse than expected needed to hear. Putting too much stock in Nevermore wasn't wise, after all. Viridia herself hadn't done that well back in Nevermore, partly because of her Path as a witch not being the best for the World Wonder, yet out of her entire party, she was the only one who ever even reached A-grade.

After Minaga allowed the words to sink in a bit, he spoke once more.

“Just one more thing before we all go our different ways... I’m going to tell you all a bit about a personal grievance of mine. Trust me, It’ll be relevant,” Minaga said as he once more began to pace back and forth. **“I’ve been working with the Wyrmgod for quite a few eras now, working on floors, consulting on different projects, working on Challenge Dungeons... with my mainstay creation naturally being my labyrinth. Both the floors and the Challenge Dungeon.”**

The ramble seemed entirely irrelevant to everything else that was going on, yet as the All-God Legion began to talk, Viridia saw the Fallen King slump and let out an audible sigh as he let her know his thoughts.

“Here we go again...”

“I worked hard on this, and I try to make them pretty fair so people can’t cheat, yet every single era, there are some individuals who find new ways to “break” stuff, if you will. This is fine. It gives me data to fix the error for the next iteration. Except this time around, this bastard appeared who exploited the hell out of both my labyrinths without a single trace of shame, doing so in a fashion that I can’t even fix for the next era. He even went as far as to set an all-time record in my Challenge Dungeon, and not even by a little, but by so much I felt like he did it only out of spite.”

Viridia frowned as the Unique Lifeform gave her a small nod. A nod that made her smile as the Unique Lifeform continued.

“And wouldn’t you know it... that very same bastard is just about to come out of our precious World Wonder in... three... two... one...”

A beam of light descended right beside Viridia as she felt space warp... and a masked figure appeared as the Leaderboards all shifted in real-time.

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Chapter 876: Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore

Nobody liked being interrupted while having a good time, and Jake was no different. He had just been chilling with his Puzzle Box when suddenly he felt the space around him shift, and he was thrown out of the space inside the box. For a brief moment, he saw his surroundings before the entire time chamber disappeared, and Jake found himself standing within an entirely white void reminiscent of those he had been tossed into after doing the Challenge Dungeons.

Just as he appeared, so did a screen pop up in front of him.

Nevermore Leaderboards Challenge successfully completed. Initiating final calculations.

Jake read the message and nodded. *Bloody finally.*

He waited for more text to appear for a few seconds, but nothing was happening, making him impatiently tap his fingers as he crossed his arms.

“I swear if this messes up any of our timing for finishing...”

“It won’t,” a voice suddenly said as a figure appeared behind him. “While in this space, time is paused, courtesy of the system.”

Turning his head, Jake saw a familiar figure as he smiled. “Didn’t expect the big boss herself to handle these evaluations too.”

“Usually, she doesn’t,” Nevermore answered. “But in some rare cases, I do. Primarily for those who performed well enough for it to be warranted.”

“I guess that’s a way of telling me I did well,” Jake smiled.

“You already know you did well,” Nevermore said. “Now you just need to find out exactly how well.”

The Bound God waved her hand as a screen appeared off to the side, making Jake look over.

“Are you nervous?” Nevermore asked, clearly already knowing the results of everything.

“I feel like I shouldn’t be, but a little bit of nervousness did manage to sneak in. Overall, I wouldn’t say I was, though,” Jake shrugged, pretty sure that was normal.

“Perhaps not for this... but I will give you a courtesy warning that once we are done here, you will be teleported into the Nevermore City square, surrounded by nearly every peak faction of the multiverse, with all eyes on you as Minaga is in charge of announcing the Leaderboards results, making me relatively certain he won’t just allow you to appear without at least a few comments,” she shared kindly.

“... okay, now I might be a little nervous...”

“Good. Now for the part you don’t need to be as nervous about,” the Bound God said as the screen began to be filled with lines of text.

Nevermore Points Leaderboard Calculation:

71 levels gained (204 --> 275). Calculating rewards.

You've earned 7100 (100 per level gained) Nevermore Points.

Jake had to jump in here, as 100 points per level just seemed way too low and almost insulting until he remembered how few points the lower floors gave, and with that in mind, maybe this wasn't so bad. Yeah, he also had to consider he had probably gained way fewer levels than some others, so the extra points per level being shit was-

You will receive an additional 35.5% (0.5% per level gained) multiplier of all Nevermore Points.

Alright, never mind. Levels were still pretty damn fucking important, even for those with a lot of points. An extra multiplier per level gained had not been something Jake expected, that's for sure. He knew levels would give something, but a percentage multiplier seemed like a bit much. Not that he was going to say no to it, as it would help make his final number even bigger.

And looking at the next three lines, his number did end up being pretty darn big... with even quite the impressive multiplier.

Current Nevermore Points: 2,128,050

Nevermore Points Multiplier: 185.5%

Total Nevermore Points Earned: 6,075,583

"Six million... that feels like a lot of points," Jake commented as he looked at Nevermore. "Is it a lot of points? Relatively speaking, I mean. I was definitely more confident before I was aware of the multiplier from levels gained. Why is that even so large?"

"Let me start with your final question. The multiplier is as such to even the odds a bit for monsters who are less favored in several of the Challenge Dungeons. Since they tend to gain more levels than the enlightened, this stage benefits them the most, more often than not," the Bound God answered.

"Makes sense, I guess. Say, since we are done... who got the most levels of everyone?" Jake asked curiously, not at all expecting to actually get an answer.

"The record is 149 levels gained by a monster doing the entirety of C-grade in one go," she answered.

Jake's eyes opened wide. "How in the hell..."

“Through means that also result in this very same creature not ever being able to evolve to B-grade. Gaining a lot of levels through ways that destroy one’s foundation is not particularly difficult. Or at least so I’ve been told,” the Bound God, who had been born with near omnipotent powers within the World Wonder, answered. “Also, no, this monster is not on any of the Leaderboards.”

“Alright, who was the one who gained the most levels while also being on the Leaderboards?” Jake changed his question, surprised Nevermore was even sharing this much, which made it even more surprising when she answered this question, too.

“Someone you at the very least heard of. Ghost King Azal managed to gain a total of 112 levels during Nevermore, with more than a third of that earned during the final month,” Nevermore said with a sigh. “Only slightly beating out someone from the Holy Church who earned 108 through a similar trick.”

“... that was an option?” Jake asked. “How the hell did they do it?”

“Treasures bound to them they brought in from the outside. A final resort to try and bring honor to their organizations by sacrificing much of their foundations,” Nevermore shook her head in disappointment.

“Damn,” Jake muttered. “I guess this brings me back to my first question... is six million Nevermore Points a lot?”

Nevermore smiled at him for a moment before a second screen appeared above the first. One with a number on it.

5,991,906

Jake took a second as he pointed. “That’s lower than mine.”

“Brilliant observational skills, truly putting all your Perception to use,” Nevermore shook her head. “This is the current record.”

Hearing this, Jake grinned. “Fuck yeah... totally knew I had him beat.”

No matter how much Jake had tried to distract himself, he had been afraid that somehow, Ell’Hakan still had a higher score. Especially after that whole thing with levels also awarding points and multipliers... though then again, you needed 10 race levels just to get 5% more, so maybe it wasn’t that extreme.

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Feeling happy, Jake looked at Nevermore as the Bound God shook her head and waved her hand again as a third screen appeared, with yet another number on it.

5,705,821

Jake looked at it for a bit before scratching the back of his head. “Not sure what you’re trying to tell me with that... is it the number 10 on the top ten Leaderboards or something?” Follow current novels on [novel●fire●met](#)

“That’s the score of Ell’Hakan, the one now holding the second place on the Leaderboards in this era.”

“... what?” Jake exclaimed, looking confused as he pointed to the first number that was more than a quarter of a million bigger. “Then that is...?”

“The score set by Yip of Yore last era... the man now holding the second place on the All-Time Leaderboard.”

Jake didn’t have time to say more as a giant slab dropped down from out of nowhere, smashing into the white floor, showing that Nevermore also had a flair for dramatics whenever she wanted. Words began to appear on the slab, as ten names were revealed from the bottom to the top. When Jake saw the full list, he did have to do a double-take, despite Nevermore having already confirmed what was going on.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-Grade): All-Time

1. Jake Thayne
2. Yip of Yore
3. Monk
4. The Holy Son
5. Anonymous
6. Gwyndyr of the Crimson Flame
7. Anonymous
8. Aurustromoz, Dragon of Gold.
9. Ell’Hakan
10. Ninth Hell Devil

--

He kept staring at it for a few more seconds as he let it sink fully in. His goal had been to beat Ell'Hakan... and, well, he had definitely done that. An impressive feat in its own right, seeing as he had managed to snag the number 8 – now 9 – spot on the All-Time Leaderboard. One thing did strike him as weird, though, as he looked at the Leaderboard.

"I recognize Gwyndyr, the Holy Son, and I also read about Aurustromoz, the Patriarch of the Regalflight... is everyone on this Leaderboard still alive? Did every person with a top placement in prior eras really all become gods?" Jake asked with confusion.

"Yes," Nevermore answered. "But you got things a bit mixed up. They are on this particular Leaderboard because they are still alive. You lose your spot if you die, and another may rise and take your place. It happens more than you think, and the two who have been on the list the longest are the Holy Son and the Monk."

"Who is this Monk?"

"Someone that wished to be anonymous. You can choose your own name on the Leaderboards, not just this one, but also the two outside. Which is something we should address right away... what do you want to be shown as? Do know there are some limits, and the name has to be associated with your Path and Records to be accepted," the Bound God explained. "Also, if you wish to change your name at any point, you can return to Nevermore and request it."

Jake looked at the name currently displayed for a bit. He had gone by many things throughout the times... Chosen of the Malefic Viper is probably at the top of that list. Recently, he had been called the Harbinger of Primeval Origins quite a bit, and then there was, of course, the final option: . All of these were possible choices, and he kind of wanted to go with the final one... but not yet. For now, he would simply let it be.

"Jake Thayne is fine," he said, shaking his head. Others also tended to use their names based on what he saw, and no need to break that pattern.

"As you will," Nevermore agreed with a nod. "In that case, allow me to be the first to formally congratulate you for your performance within the World Wonder. It has been a pleasure to have you visit."

Smiling, Jake nodded and acknowledgment. "It's been a long but pleasant stay. For the most part, anyway... you could do away with the water levels."

"I'll be sure to pass on your feedback. But before you go, two more things. Let's first get the easy one out of the way," Nevermore said, and with a single wave of her hand, Jake felt as if power rushed through his body. Everything tingled for a moment, Jake nearly feeling like he was using his boosting skill. Except he didn't, and quickly, everything returned to normal.

Jake raised a hand as he opened it and closed it into a fist a few times. He realized what had happened and quickly checked his system messages as he grinned.

Titled gained: Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore

Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore – Throughout the ages, few have stood at the true pinnacle of an Era. Even fewer have stood above even this at the true apex, dominating all eras prior. Attain first place on the All-Time Nevermore Leaderboards, proving yourself a Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore. Only one Nevermore Performance title can be held at a time. As a Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore, you are a master of dungeons, increasing stats gained from Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles by 50%. +15% All Stats.

15% to all stats was... a lot. Coupled with the title he had gained from the Challenge Dungeons, he was up to a 20% bonus to all stats from Nevermore total. He also noted the part about only being able to have one Nevermore Performance title at a time, which was apparently different from the Nevermore Dungeon titles.

Then there was the other effect of getting more stats from his Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles. This effect was, currently, honestly kind of shit. Jake only got 65 stats from his Dungeoneer XV title in the first place, and even with a 50% boost, that only became 97. However, it was the kind of title that would keep getting better the further Jake progressed. Maybe it sucked now, but if he managed to also max out his Dungeon Pioneer, it would give a respectable amount. In later grades, it would also keep adding more and more. Plus, with Jake's quite frankly ridiculous percentage amplifiers to stats, any raw base stats held immense value.

"That's a nice title right there," Jake grinned and looked at Nevermore. "Thanks."

"Do not thank me; you earned it through your own merit," the Bound God answered, returning his smile. "Now, the final thing before we say our farewells... there are no item rewards, as everything was put into the title and the items rewarded from the Challenge Dungeons. Usually, those who perform really well do not really need any equipment either, just leading to lost work for crafters if we gave out such things. But there is still an extra exclusive reward I will offer you, granted by the system due to... unique circumstances."

Without any pre-cursor, a small bottle appeared, floating just within reach of Jake. Confused, Jake used Identify on it.

[Bottle of Restoration (Unique)] – Restores Primal Origin Energy. Must be consumed before fully leaving Nevermore.

Jake took a bit to realize what this item was... and he felt almost disappointed. Had the system just decided to officially name his Jake Juice?

“To clarify something, the description you see may not reflect any true names,” Nevermore clarified.

“Oh, good,” Jake sighed with relief. “Then there is still hope for it to be called Jake Juice.”

“You know, that isn’t even impossible. If that is the name the energy gets known by, and it becomes cemented in its Records, that will be of the official name any who sees it will see.”

“... on second thought, maybe I shouldn’t call it Jake Juice, though that would be extremely hilarious,” Jake smiled as he took the bottle. He had to drink it now, so... “Bottom’s up.”

Drinking the liquid inside, Jake didn’t really feel anything. It also just tasted like plain water, having no real taste. However, when he sought deep within himself, he felt it. The hidden “pool” of energy had just gotten a huge infusion, and even if it had gotten pretty damn big already after he had gained so many levels over the last decade, he now had more than even before his fight with Valdemar. A lot more, in fact.

“With this, I believe your journey through Nevermore has fully come to an end... at least for now. Though I have the feeling your next visit will be a bit more relaxed with none of the time pressure of competition,” the Bound God said with a final smile.

“See you again,” Jake nodded.

“Perhaps,” Nevermore said. “Now, prepare yourself as Minaga has prepared quite the stage for your arrival. Oh, and one more thing, would you be fine with your number one All-Time placement being shared?”

“Sure,” Jake shrugged, not seeing the harm. He was already the top of the era, no need to avoid sharing he was the top of every era.

“Very well, I’m sure that will create some wonderful political turmoil.”

Jake tried to say more, but before he could, the world warped around him as he was tossed out of Nevermore.

There was quite a lot to take in as Jake appeared in the central square. Instinctively, he quickly shot out a Pulse of Perception, only to get overwhelmed by how much information he had to sort through. There were so many goddamn people, many of which he knew. Then, there were well over a hundred gods hidden all around, mixed with the crowd.

Jake stood atop the building belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, with Viridia right in front and the Fallen King right beside him. Looking up, he saw Minaga dramatically float in the air, gazing down at Jake with a grin.

“Well, I guess we should redo a few things, seeing as things have... shuffled a bit,” Minaga smiled. Out of the corner of his eye, Jake spotted a fading beam of light that had been upon a building belonging to the Holy Church, and he saw the Saintess who had been in a party with Ell’Hakan glare daggers at him. It wasn’t hard to notice who he had bumped down from the top 10.

“Join me in welcoming my personal bane, the one who ruined much of my confidence in dungeon design, and our new top dog of Nevermore! Jake Thayne!” Minaga announced loudly as music began playing.

Jake just stood there and stared, happy as hell he was wearing his mask, as everyone began clapping while staring at the giant projection of his visage in the sky.

“Oh, wait, I nearly forgot!” Minaga suddenly cut the music. **“I guess I failed to clarify what I meant by top dog... because I’m not just talking about this era. It’s with pleasure I can announce that for the second era in a row, the All-Time record has been broken!”**

Viridia stared at Jake as the Fallen King looked unsurprised. Minaga started back up the music, louder than ever, as even more attention fell on Jake, now also from a shitload of gods...

Maybe I should also have just gone with Anonymous...

At least Jake thought so for a moment... until he saw him from across the square. A single orange humanoid stared at Jake with a look of genuine shock, at least for a second, before Ell’Hakan managed to hide it. So, yeah, maybe this level of flexing hadn’t been that bad of a call, as he could at least smack down the ego of that orange fuck with his own even larger, superior ego.

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Chapter 877: Something Worth Celebrating

Vilastromoz just leaned back and smiled, still within the streaming room that was now just showing the Nevermore City square and all of Minaga’s antics. Well, one of Minaga’s clones anyway, as the god was also still in the room with a god clone.

"Man, ain't that host the most handsome Unique Lifeform you've ever seen? His presentation skills are also just through the roof!" Minaga praised himself loudly. They were all waiting for the grand reveal... and soon it did when his clone announced the dramatic twist of one more person appearing.

To many of the mortals in the square, it was perhaps a surprise... but to the gods in the living room, they had just waited for this to happen. They had watched Jake and his party for the last many years, and they knew how well he had done. For him to not even have been on the top 10 made it clear to everyone that he would appear at some point for a grand announcement.

Something he did... making Vilastromoz grin even more. The Wyrmgod and Minaga's clone both looked at him as Jake appeared and his performance was revealed.

"Congratulations," the Wyrmgod said with a slow nod. "A joyous occasion."

"Found a good one, huh?" the Blightfather said, acknowledging Jake's achievement.

"A fortunate and earned victory," the Holy Mother said, also showing her respects.

"Glad to see he did well," the Nature's Attendant added happily. "For little Dina to have been in the same party as the new champion of the All-time Leaderboards... it was a good decision to have her join him. Thank you, Vilas."

The Viper just smiled back at the second-in-command of the Pantheon of Life. "She pulled her weight; you have nothing to thank me for."

"But I do," his father-in-law insisted. "I expected him to do well, but this still exceeds it. The impact on her future will be felt for certain, and she has been granted a great boon. She was even on the top 100 of the Era's Leaderboards, doing far better than I thought possible."

"Well, in either case, you shouldn't be thanking me, but Jake," the Viper shook his head.

"I will make sure to," the god nodded as he turned to Artemis. "What say you, shouldn't we have him visit the Pantheon of Life once he is available? I am certain Ygg will also want to see him. We should probably wait a little, though... let things calm down a bit."

"My image already effectively extended an invitation within the Colosseum of Mortals, and I'm sure the Malefic One's Chosen is more than aware he has an open invitation standing," the archer god responded, sounding a bit more confident than before, having gotten quite used to being in the presence of so many far more powerful gods over the last nearly two decades. This update is available on *novel-fire-net*

"Well, he strikes me as the sort to easily forget things, so perhaps we should remind him," Nature's Attendant commented.

"I'll do it for you, no problem," Vilastromoz waved it off as he looked at Artemis and smiled. "I have a feeling he wants to visit anyway. I heard something about archery lessons."

Artemis averted her gaze as the Viper just grinned. This was fun, and he was feeling pretty damn good right now about how everything was going.

"Ya done talking? Finally! Anyway, bloody well knew he would do it," Valdemar grinned as he waved his hand. "And if it ain't a feat that calls for a proper celebration. Drinks are on me!"

A large keg appeared, and the god held it up and yelled toward all the observing gods. "Hey! Get over here already; grab a mug!"

Receiving a direct invitation from a Primordial was not something any of the many observing gods would ever refuse. Quite the opposite, as they reveled in the opportunity. Many gods went by and offered their congratulations to the Viper for how well his Chosen had done, which Vilastromoz gladly accepted.

Everyone got their mugs of ale one after another, and the Viper saw no reason not to accept as he joined in on the festivities and grabbed a mug. Raising up a mug of his own, Valdemar spoke loudly as he infused his voice with energy. **"To Jake Thayne and a new record!"**

With that, he downed the entire mug, joined by a few others, who only a second or two later stumbling back as the alcohol brewed to be strong enough for a Primordial to get drunk entered their system. Vilastromoz also had a taste, and he found the taste quite pleasant, even if it did carry too spicy of an aftertaste for the otherwise sweet initial impression.

For once, the Viper simply enjoyed the moment. There was cause for celebration, after all. Jake and the Viper both had things to celebrate... while a certain other pair of Chosen and Patron were probably feeling quite the opposite.

Jake defeating Ell'Hakan on the Leaderboards had most definitely been within their margin of error for the story the two were trying to spin. Either they would spin one story where Ell'Hakan beat Jake and would thus begin his comeback to either defeat or turn Jake to the "good side."

Or, the other possible path was for Jake to win, in which case Ell'Hakan would remain the underdog... the problem was that Jake hadn't just beaten Ell'Hakan. He had beaten both of them. The announcement Jake had also beaten Yip of Yore was a brilliant strategic move by Jake – certainly made entirely accidentally – as it helped undermine the god who sought to become the first slayer of a Primordial.

It was publicly known, at least among the gods, that Yip held the top spot before. That he was the greatest genius of the multiverse, and for the top genius, what were truly his limits? As an unrivaled genius, it was only natural he would keep improving, perhaps to one day even become strong enough to slay the Malefic Viper. To slay the Primordial who had kept hidden away for so long and was, in the eyes of many, the weakest of the twelve.

Now... now he was no longer the top genius. Jake had stolen that throne – that legend. Ell'Hakan was also troubled now, for he was no longer just the underdog fighting another Chosen genius; he was fighting the top genius. Was he even qualified anymore to challenge Jake? So much doubt had been sown with that one announcement.

And doubt was the biggest enemy of those two storytellers. They needed certainty and steadfast belief in the legend they tried to spin, not potential confusion and people questioning the validity and possibility of their claims.

All in all, Jake had performed damn well, and Vilastromoz definitely owed him a beer. Not just in regards to the stuff with Yip... the Viper also had to thank him for the personal rewards he got from having his Chosen be the new holder of the top spot on the All-Time Leaderboards.

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Ell'Hakan held a stoic expression as the Unique Lifeform known as Minaga announced the arrival of the Viper's Chosen. This was not an unexpected turn of events, as he and his Patron had already discussed the possibility of the Viper's Chosen doing extremely well within Nevermore.

On a personal note, he did find it disappointing that he lost to the human. Ell'Hakan had done his utmost within the World Wonder, even beating the other Chosen in regard to how many floors he had completed. What was perhaps even more infuriating was that Ell'Hakan had genuinely started to believe he would take the top spot.

When he announced his Challenge Dungeon's multiplier, none had surpassed, only tied him. This gave him the false belief there was a good chance the Viper's Chosen hadn't surpassed him either. If he had, why wouldn't he have revealed it? Getting a 100% multiplier would have led to much prestige in its own right, so even if he had failed to take the Era's Pinnacle spot, he would have won at least a minor victory.

Due to this lack of an announcement, Ell'Hakan proceeded with the assumption the other Chosen had equaled his score at best. This meant the next years after the Challenge Dungeons would be crucial. In order to get a leg up, he had even prepared a welcome party on the city floor after floor seventy-five to receive the Viper's Chosen and have him waste some time dealing with them while trying to sow discord within his

group. However, Ell'Hakan never even heard of him appearing on the city floor, his rival having just skipped right past it to proceed to the next floor.

Even so, Ell'Hakan just focused on himself and his own party. Sure, they ended up losing a member, but the one who died could only blame himself, and Ell'Hakan's Patron would handle any blowback from the god backing his fallen party member.

He had kept doing his utmost until the very end, where he at least had the foresight to make sure he would finish before the Viper's Chosen. There were only upsides to this; if he did ultimately win, finishing first would block the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Meanwhile, if he lost, he would at least still get the title. A title that was most certainly nothing to be scuffed at.

Era's Conquerer of Nevermore – You have done what few could ever hope to achieve: proven yourself the pinnacle of an entire Era. No matter how brief the achievement or how fleeting this position is, this accomplishment can never be taken away from you. Attain first place on the Era Nevermore Leaderboards, proving yourself an Era's Conqueror of Nevermore. Only one Nevermore Performance title can be held at a time. As an Era's Conquerer of Nevermore, you are a near-unrivaled expert of dungeons, increasing stats gained from Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles by 40%. +10% All Stats.

It was a truly great title that Ell'Hakan was more than pleased to have achieved. He was fully aware that if the Viper's Chosen and he did not share a generation, Ell'Hakan would truly have no equal... but then again, perhaps he was only as powerful as he was because of the Primordial's Chosen. It helped Ell'Hakan push himself further and truly seek to be the pinnacle of this generation... no, this entire era.

All in due time.

As the light beam descended upon the newly arrived Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and Minaga announced how he had won, Ell'Hakan saw the shift on the Leaderboards as his own position fell one. Clenching his fists, he maintained his composure, even if the situation didn't particularly-

"... I failed to clarify what I meant by top dog... because I'm not just talking about this era. It's with pleasure I can announce that for the second era in a row, the All-Time record has been broken!"

For a moment, Ell'Hakan let his expression drop as he stared toward the Chosen of the Malefic Viper in the distance, and for a moment, he met the eyes of the other Chosen before regaining his wits.

This... was not part of the plan, and Ell'Hakan cursed internally as he knew they would have to shift and adapt the narrative even more... potentially toward a direction Ell'Hakan was truly not a fan of.

Jake remained as composed as he could while the music blared, and all eyes were on him. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do or say. When he had done the Chosen Ceremony, he at least had a game plan and could prepare himself, but now he was just thrown onto what was effectively a stage. Should he say something? Smile and wave?

It didn't get better when people started to actually fucking clap, as Viridia stood right behind him with her head slightly bowed and an incredibly happy grin on her face. Jake also saw Farleigh, the vampire patriarch, making him want to say hi, but the situation didn't seem to allow it. The Fallen King noticed Jake's discomfort and sent him a quick mental message to assist.

"No need to act. Simply be. Remain stoic and reveal no emotion. Just maintain a straight back and forward-looking eyes to exude confidence. You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and someone recognized as the most talented genius of this generation, if not the entire era. To you, this result is naught but a meeting of your expectations."

Jake took the words to heart as best he could as he did just that. He simply stood there and let everyone observe him as they clapped. It felt unnatural to him, but seemingly no one else thought so. Seconds passed, and with every moment, Jake really hoped something would happen... maybe Valdemar could swoop down and kidnap him to try and force Jake to join Valhal? Yeah, that would definitely be preferable to his current situation.

Luckily, Minaga continued before things got too awkward.

"Alright, calm down people. It's just someone breaking a record that has existed for a few billion years and beating every single other living being who has ever competed on the Nevermore Leaderboards. No big deal," Minaga said in a lighthearted tone before he turned a bit more serious.

"All jokes aside, the overall performance surpassing that of previous eras should only bring us joy. It's representative of the growing base of Records supporting every faction and individual through the continued expansion of the system. Represents progress on a wider scale. Jake Thayne is simply the one standing atop a new generation that will be the first to lead us into the ninety-third era. These C-grades you see before you represent the future of every faction. They represent possibilities of Paths never seen before and even more new Records to populate this multiverse.

"Finally, to the ones who do not find their names on a Leaderboard despite hoping so, do not see this as a failure you should take to heart. You were beaten by the strongest generation ever, one you are still a part of. The Path to godhood is no sprint, and to try and reach ultimate power is an endless trek. You are still in the early stages of walking that Path. So, if you believe what you did was a failure, don't. Become a success to show the multiverse what you are capable of, as it's

your future that defines you... and if you ascend to godhood, no one will give a damn that you did horribly in Nevermore while still a C-grade."

Minaga was surprisingly wholesome as he spoke some words of encouragement to everyone, especially those who may be feeling dejected after realizing they hadn't qualified for the Leaderboards. Looking at the Fallen King, the Unique Lifeform sent him a quick answer. *"I got top 100 on the Universe Leaderboards and top 250 on the Era one."*

He didn't sound disappointed, so Jake just nodded as Minaga seemed to finally be ending his presentation.

"Anyway, time to wrap things up. Thank you all for coming to this little ceremony of ours to celebrate the next generation and the revelation of the Leaderboards. Quite an eventful one this time around, eh? I hope you all enjoyed the show and will continue to revel in all the amenities of Nevermore City during your stay. Goodbye for-"

Suddenly, Minaga stopped as his eyes went wide, and he yelled loudly.

"Wait! How is this even possible!? There was one more!?"

A beam of light descended from above, and Jake stared over along with many others as he saw the new arrival...

Which was a Minaga clone wearing a funny hat while holding a sign saying "made you look," with a dumb grin on his face

"Gets them every time," Minaga grinned as he bowed. "Toodle-oo!"

With that, Minaga disappeared along with all of the beams of light and projected figures. Jake also felt much of the attention on him begin to fade as he subtly breathed out a sigh of relief. Now that everything was finally done with, Jake was just looking for a way to get out of there... until the words of Viridia washed away all hope.

"Congratulations, truly. You have brought honor to the Malefic One and the Order of the Malefic Viper, and I cannot even hope to begin to express my gratitude," she sent. *"Now, are you ready to meet the others?"*

Jake looked at her and sent back. *"Meet the others?"*

"Ah, you perhaps weren't aware. It's customary for all of the top performers of the Leaderboards to have a get-together after the rankings have settled down a bit," she politely explained as Jake realized he was still not yet free, as he faced one of his most dreaded challenges: forced social interaction with strangers.

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Chapter 878: A Little Get-Together

If Jake was being perfectly honest, he had hoped to just quickly bail and get out of Nevermore City as soon as it was convenient. He would first want to visit the Order and check everything was good there before making his way back to Earth, where he was certain quite a few changes had also taken place. After his Chosen Ceremony and all that had happened surrounding that, this was pretty much a given, and he hoped Miranda hadn't been too overwhelmed.

However, it appeared that was not an option, and Jake ended up following Viridia and the Fallen King to a large conference hall of sorts. When Viridia had said this after-party was for the top performers on the Leaderboards, she didn't just mean those from the Era Leaderboard. In fact, those from the Universe one were far more interesting to have there due to their newness to the multiverse.

As Viridia explained it telepathically while they walked over there:

"It has long been known the most effective way to forge an alliance and recruit new members is through first creating a positive relation between a member of your faction and the one you want to recruit. While it may sound cynical, the objective is to effectively use friendship to convince someone to join a faction. This is especially true when it comes to those from the new universe, as they often have a difficult time relating to a large faction, while the bond between themselves and another individual is far from comprehensible."

"To be clear, you are not actually expecting me to do any recruitment or alliance-forging, right?" Jake wanted to clarify before he arrived at the conference hall.

"Not actively. Your mere performance will serve as a recruitment tool in its own right, and many factions and unaffiliated individuals are already showing much interest. This is a time when the Malefic Viper is making his comeback to the multiverse, and your performance in Nevermore will be their first impression of him. They will see that only a few years after his return, he already has a Chosen who has proved himself a talent at the pinnacle, which is about as good of a showing one can have."

"So... what am I even meant to do?" Jake asked, genuinely unsure. *"I don't see it doing the Order much good for me to be in a room with Ell'Hakan alone. While we can't fight due to being in Nevermore City and all, there is a good chance we will enter a battle of words... and as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think that's a fight I'm gonna win."*

Viridia was silent for a moment before answering. *"I cannot tell the Chosen what to do... but I would avoid getting into any squabbles needlessly. You have nothing to prove and only prestige to lose if you engage with the other Chosen. Let others handle Yip's Chosen, and simply try to learn about and maybe even get to know the other top performers, especially those from your universe. Information is scarce on them. It also won't hurt to get to know young talents from the other large factions, as there is a good chance you may reencounter many of them in the future during your adventures. The system has a tendency to push talents together, either directly through system events or in subtler ways none can truly understand."*

"In other words, you're telling me to try and make friends?" Jake asked, clarifyingly.

"You can view it like that. But more than that, you are there for them to try and make friends with you, as I am certain the majority will be more than happy to approach you. As the Order has not been in the best state for the last many eras, we have adopted a very neutral position in the multiverse, resulting in us having few enemies and allies. This lack of any strong relations means you become more approachable, as doing so won't lead to any political issues. So I believe it highly probable you will be sought out by most of the talents on the Era Leaderboard."

"That all sounds very logical and extremely annoying... but fine, I'll try to play nice," Jake finally relented.

At least he wouldn't be alone there. Using a Pulse, he spotted others also making their way toward the conference hall, including his Nevermore party members and quite a few familiar faces from Earth. Arnold was walking with his group of void-related life forms, and surprisingly, they were all headed toward the hall. He also saw Carmen heading there with some people from Valhal. So, yeah, he would have some pleasant company.

"Hey, who exactly will participate? You said people toward the top of the Leaderboards, but I see a lot heading there. Like, a lot," Jake asked.

"Top 250 on either Leaderboard. With the repeat of names between them, I expect no more than four hundred individuals to participate. Do also note that only you C-grades will take part. The rest of us will be busy in the interim, dealing with other political endeavors," the S-grade Hall Master patiently explained.

"Got it," Jake confirmed once more as soon they reached the hall. It was just a large building, with the inside further spatially expanded. Looking to the Fallen King, who had been floating alongside them, Jake gave him a look.

"You got briefed on what's going on?"

"The vampire gladly did so," the King answered.

"Thanks for getting him up to speed," Jake said as he looked at Farleigh, who quietly walked with them on their way there while apparently telling the King what was about to happen.

"It is the least I can do," he smiled and bowed. "I'm also uncertain if this information is useful, but I came to learn from an acquaintance of mine that this get-together will be hosted by a trusted person of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore."

Jake looked at the vampire before sighing. "Probably Minaga again..."

"That... I cannot rule it out. But I do not believe it is," the vampire patriarch scratched the back of his head.

"Guess we'll see."

Soon standing before one of the entrances, Jake and the Fallen King were already beginning to gather a lot of attention on themselves. Especially Jake, but a Unique Lifeform also gathered interest in its own right. Seeing no reason to stand outside and get ogled, the two of them entered the large venue, as Viridia and Farleigh stayed outside, seeing them off.

Once inside, Jake scanned the area and found a nice empty spot for him to chill at. Throwing the Fallen King a look, the Unique Lifeform gave a small nod and followed him as the two stuck together. Luckily, it wasn't just the two of them for long as a bird entered the hall and headed straight for Jake.

The Sword Saint also soon walked in before even more familiar faces made their appearance. Arnold and Eron both entered next and after only briefly looking around, headed toward Jake and the others. Jake smiled when he saw Carmen waltz in, and she did not even think twice before splitting off from the others from Valhal to head their way.

Jake had barely said hello to her when he saw two more Earthlings walk in. Both of which he kind of hadn't expected to see there. It was Maria, the fire archer blessed by Gwyndyr, and Jake's very own brother, Caleb. Waving them over, Jake soon had gathered quite the group... as Casper also arrived together with a group of Risen that he quickly bailed to walk toward Jake and what had soon become quite the gathering who all had one thing in common:

They were all from Earth.

Jake, Sylphie, Sword Saint, Carmen, Fallen King, Caleb, Maria, Arnold, Casper, and Eron... ten people from a single planet in the new universe. Okay, the Fallen King kind of wasn't, but he had been revived on the planet, so Jake counted him. This gathering reminded Jake a bit of the get-together they had on Minaga's City Floor, just without Jacob and Bertram, with the setting also quite a bit different.

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Quite a lot of attention was garnered as their diverse group gathered. So many factions represented in one group were rare to see, and many were throwing them looks as if to find out what this group had in common.

Ell'Hakan had also entered and stood a good distance away with his own gathering of people. Jake just ignored him as he followed Viridia's advice and acted like the other Chosen didn't even exist. Which was quite easy as he did a bit of catch-up with old friends and family.

"Who in the hell did you scam to make it into the top 250?" Jake asked Caleb shortly after he arrived.

"You," Caleb said with a smile. "At least I'm pretty sure that's why Umbra suddenly wanted me to join an even better team after the Challenge Dungeons to try and get more Nevermore Points."

"So what you're saying is that you owe me big time?" Jake grinned.

"Sure, sure," his little brother waved him off. "I would say I'm also surprised to see you take the top spot, and Umbra sure seemed like she was, but honestly, I can't say I am."

"Glad to impress an ancient god and meet my little brother's expectations," Jake said jokingly.

After a brief talk with Caleb, Jake also briefly checked in with Maria, who had joined a group of followers from the Crimson Flame and apparently done quite well for herself in Nevermore. She did know she had primarily been chosen for her group because it was required to have someone from the new universe in the party, but she still believed she carried her weight.

She also recognized that her relations with Jake made Gwyndyr want to invest more in her. Even if they weren't close in any way, she was still the closest Gwyndyr had. Jake also learned that the reason everyone had gathered around Jake near-instantly wasn't just because they liked his company. They had borderline all been told to seek out Jake once in the conference hall, in large part to communicate their faction already had an established bond with him. Bullshit politics that Casper confirmed to be true. Not that Jake particularly cared, and he felt many of them gladly used the excuse of wanting to forge a stronger bond with the top performer on the Leaderboards to chill with all the other Earthlings.

He also asked Eron some stuff and generally just caught up and got a feel as to how others were doing. Carmen mainly complained about her party members disappointing her with how fragile they were while throwing in jabs about a certain Challenge

Dungeon that may or may not have contained labyrinths. Besides that, they just shared stories of Nevermore and had a good time.

Arnold was just using their group as cover as he stood and fidgeted with a tablet, not engaging with anyone. Just as Jake expected of him.

All in all, things were chill for a while as the entire hall filled up, and due to the already pretty large group Jake was with, no one really bothered them quite yet. The fact that they hadn't officially started yet also helped, as people were still arriving.

Soon, there were just shy of four hundred people in the hall... and with that, a magic formation activated that sealed them off from all observers who wanted to spy on them. Jake instantly felt a few dozen observers disappear as it activated, most of which were gods or high-level mortals, as far as Jake could tell.

Shortly after this formation activated, a stage was raised in the middle of the hall and a figure appeared on top of it. Jake looked over and saw the newcomer, who was definitely not a C-grade.

"Welcome, everyone. It's my pleasure to have you all here, young talents of the multiverse. I will be your host today and am present to ensure everything proceeds calmly and peacefully, and I will also admit that it will be nice to make some new acquaintances I may come to know better in the future," the man Jake recognized to be... probably A-grade, said.

"Now, I am not much for speeches, but let me still give a small one. One that can also serve as a small warning and food for thought. All of you have already proven yourselves, but do not forget Minaga's words. You may be exceptional now, but who is to say the same will be true in a few centuries or even just decades if you stop striving to improve? If it's worth anything... when I was in C-grade, I didn't even crack the top 1,000,000 on the Leaderboards as far as I could tell. I was just a wyvern back then, trying my best to find my Path, teamed up with a ragtag of others who also didn't have any trusted comrades. Compared to me back then... you all definitely have a better start on your Paths. Revel in that knowledge, but do not let your momentum and potential go to waste."

This presenter had shoulder-length silvery hair and a fair, almost androgynous appearance. He wore what looked like an expensive medieval shirt, pants, and boots and looked entirely human outside of his eyes. Rather than pupils, it looked like he had a spinning wheel of lights in there. Again, could still be human, but Jake felt an aura he had gotten quite good at recognizing: that of a dragon.

As Jake looked at the dragon in human form, he also felt an odd sense of pressure. One he could easily resist... but it hit somewhere he hadn't ever felt be hit before. It wasn't that of grade suppression or even power, but one born of Records related to something Jake hadn't expected:

His Blessing.

An Identify quickly confirmed the reason, as Jake realized this was a first.

[Dragon of the Silverstorm Fissure – lvl ??? – True Blessing of the Wyrmgod]

Ignoring the overly long name, this was Jake's first time ever meeting the Chosen of another Primordial.

"Ah, where are my manners. A few of you seem to have already checked me out yourselves or realized who I am, but allow me to introduce myself: I am known as Silverstorm, Chosen of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore. Currently A-grade, but with hope I will reach S-grade soon. It's truly a pleasure to meet all of you."

Jake observed the man closely, and he didn't have a shadow of doubt in his mind: this Silverstorm was definitely already at the level of a weaker S-grade. Jake also felt that despite his gentle outward appearance and words... he was hiding quite the bloodlust. He was not someone who had reached his current level of power through making labyrinths and crafting but through slaughter.

"Now, let me not delay things anymore. Enjoy, all of you."

With a clap of his hands, tables appeared all throughout the hall, containing food and beverages. A few dragonkin also entered the hall, and as Jake checked out a few, he saw they were all C-grades and all held Blessings of the Wyrmgod. Jake had expected them to join the get-together but soon realized... they were the catering staff.

The stage in the center also lowered into the ground, just fading into solid matter, as the Chosen of the Wyrmgod returned to ground level. Nearly instantly, he was swarmed by people from the different large factions, and Jake truly knew the dragon's pain. Living the life of a Primordial's Chosen wasn't easy.

"This is going to be so awkward," Carmen commented after a few seconds. "Who thought it was a good idea to throw a bunch of strangers into a conference hall? They could have at least set up a dueling ring in the middle or something."

"Doubt you would find many willing to fight you. All that would do was expose your skills in front of hundreds of potential future rivals," Caleb shook his head. "I sure wouldn't want to fight anyone here."

"... I hate that you're probably right," Carmen mumbled, annoyed. Turning to Jake, she threw him a look. "So, what's the supreme genius of our generation going to do?"

"I have absolutely no plans, and I'm currently in full survival mode," Jake answered, only half-joking.

"Just take it easy and deal with whoever approaches you," the Sword Saint advised. "You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and as Carmen said, the top performer on the Leaderboards. It's only good etiquette they come to you and not the other way around."

Jake slowly nodded as he looked toward one of the tables right next to them. Reaching out, he sent out a string of mana and pulled a glass to him, not spilling a single drop. "Well, in preparation for that, I think I'm going to check out if they at least got some proper alcohol."

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"I feel like you shouldn't," Jake said as Sylphie asked if she could also have something to drink. For more chapters visit m0v3ll•fire•net

"Ree..." Sylphie screeched dejected.

Jake took a swig of the drink he was holding, and as he felt it burn its way down his throat, he got an idea.

"Alright, alright," Jake shook his head, and using a bit of mana manipulation, he made a small bubble of the liquid float out of the glass and up toward Sylphie. "Have a taste."

Sylphie, with glee, opened her beak and consumed the bubble. Half a second later, she began flapping her wings rapidly while making screeching sounds. Having fully expected this result, Jake had erected a sound-sealing barrier around the two of them while Sylphie learned alcohol maybe wasn't for her.

Still smiling, Jake saw the Sword Saint motion, making Jake remove the barrier right as Sylphie had also calmed down.

"Approaching on your six," the old man said.

"I noticed, but kind of hoped he was gonna change his mind," Jake said while calming down dear Sylphie as he had indeed seen the approaching man. Turning around to meet him, Jake saw the one he recognized as the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell and third-place finisher on the Leaderboards, trailing only after Jake and Ell'Hakan.

Guess it makes sense the number three approaches me first... though I don't hope it becomes a pattern.

Something Jake feared it would, as he saw the elemental called Wintermaul throw a look toward Jake's group, seemingly checking out when they were free next...

This is going to be a long day...

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Chapter 879: A Proposal From the Heart

Jake hadn't met many demons throughout his time in the multiverse. Even if they were a widespread and diverse race, he just hadn't really run into many of them outside of the occasional enemy here and there. Outside of dungeons, Irin was the only one he really knew, and she was practically an entirely different species to the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell.

He had mostly ashen skin with what looked like blue crackled lines across it. As if he had more mana in his body than it could contain. On his forehead was what looked like an amethyst crystal merged with his flesh, veins spreading out from it. The elaborate blue robe he wore was clearly not of poor quality, and overall, he radiated the aura of a rich young master. However, he clearly also had the power to back up his demeanor. The ones with him were four other demons who Jake guessed were from his party, meaning they all made it into the top 250.

Stopping in front of Jake, the Demon Prince smiled and reached out a hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Chosen of the Malefic One. Rather than waste your time, let me get straight to it: I have come with an inquiry that I hope you might entertain."

Jake didn't reach and grab the other man's hand right away as he asked. "What kind of inquiry?"

Pulling back his hand, seemingly not at all offended, the Demon Prince smiled even more than before. "How you might benefit from assisting us in bringing upon the second coming of the Cerulean Devil."

... yeah, Jake had no idea who the fuck that was.

This was far from the first time someone walked up to Jake and dropped some kind of grand revelation while looking at him as if he should totally know what the fuck the other party was talking about. How in the hell – pun intended – would he know about some devil that he guessed based on context clues was dead?

Alright, think fast, Jake. Devil is the name demons give to their gods, so likely some dead devil who really liked a slightly off-blue color. Got it... and I guess it's pretty easy to figure out how he wants me to help.

Keeping his calm, with a great assist from the mask, Jake looked deep in thought for a second. "I wonder what the Demon Prince might have in mind."

The demon observed Jake's reaction for a moment before speaking.

"I guess my name would make things a bit clearer. I am known as the Cerulian Demon or the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell. I have inherited a fragment of the Crystalized Cerulean Devil's Heart and the Legacy of the once great ruler of the Fourth Hell," the Demon Prince answered as he motioned toward the crystal on his forehead. "All of this is no secret... neither is it a secret that the remaining fragments are not as potent as those that once were."

"Am I right to assume you are not asking the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but what people call the Harbinger of Primeval Origins?" Jake asked clarifyingly, already certain about the answer.

"A bit of both, I believe, but that will depend on if you are willing to take up the task and how you would be able to accomplish it. In either case, we, no, I, require your unique talents to do something we believed impossible and that I have cause to believe you may be capable of."

"Let me take another guess, you want me to use my abilities on one of these Devil Heart Fragments to make it more powerful?" Jake also assumed.

"No... no, not quite; we may have our own methods to do that, even if they are likely more flawed than what you can accomplish," the Demon Prince shook his head. "What I want to ask of you is not to empower a fragment of the Crystalized Cerulean Devil's Heart... it's to create an entirely new, fully formed Crystalized Ceulean Demon Lord's Heart using the Records of a fragment... my fragment."

Jake's eyes narrowed a bit. "You want to create a Demon Lord's Heart with the Records of this Cerulean Devil using that crystal in your forehead? That... sounds risky, to say the least."

"Of that, I am fully aware. Usually, I also wouldn't attempt such a thing, but this iteration of Nevermore has offered me a golden opportunity. I am certain you are aware of what this is," the Demon Prince said as he summoned a familiar-looking item that Jake quickly Identified nearly on instinct.

[Crystalized Demon Lord Heart (Legendary)] – The crystallized heart of a Demon Lord. The immense energy contained within the crystal can be absorbed by any demon, allowing them insight into the heritage of Demon Lords. Grants demonic powers to any item it is fused with. Can be used in a limited number of alchemical products of a demonic nature.

"You, too, have one of these, yes? Or at least someone in your party does," the demon asked.

Jake nodded slowly. "I have one."

Smiling, the Demon Prince admired the heart. "A Crystalized Demon Lord Heart is usually created through a ritual using a Demon Lord, which inadvertently leads to some of the Records of this particular Demon Lord to enter the crystalized heart. However, look at his heart. It's pure. Untouched. So brimming with power and Records pertaining to no particular Demon Lord. Now, imagine if all this energy was aligned to the Cerulean Devil. No, not just the energy of this heart... the energy of several hearts, fused together with my fragment into one!"

He radiated ambition as the Demon Prince spoke of his plan, and Jake was... not entirely averse to the idea. In fact, it sounded quite feasible the more the demon talked about it, even if it remained incredibly risky. Moreover, based on what Jake heard, he wouldn't even need to use his Jake Juice. Arcane energy should be more than good enough as long as he kept everything under control during the fusing process.

Jake also understood why the Demon Prince had approached Jake in particular. It truly hadn't just been due to his talents as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins – even if that certainly did play a part. It had as much to do with Jake being the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, the greatest alchemist in the multiverse in the eyes of many. Plus, as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins, he had already shown himself capable of similar feats before.

One also had to remember that the Demon Prince likely needed a C-grade to do the ritual. It was similar to how a B-grade blacksmith couldn't craft weapons for a C-grade, their Records simply not making it possible. So if the Demon Prince wanted to craft this heart to be useable by a C-grade, he would need another C-grade to craft it... and Jake likely looked like the best candidate to do just that.

As for why Jake would accept such a task? Perhaps a better question would be why he wouldn't. To do a ritual with several legendary hearts and a fragment likely of a rarity above even that was bound to reward a shitload of experience and Records. Plus, it would be a positive diplomatically. And, finally, he did, of course, expect some form of payment. All of this naturally assumed he would succeed.

"So, what say you?" the Demon Prince asked after a few seconds, where Jake looked deep in thought.

"I'm tentatively interested, but I will need to think it over a bit," Jake said. "At least if you don't want me to just try and wing whatever ritual you are planning, more likely than not killing you in the process." This content belongs to *novel✕fire✕net*

"I would very much prefer an outcome that does not involve my death," the demon smiled, at least seeing the humor in Jake's response. "That was all I wanted to ask, and I will not take up any more of your time. Congratulations once more on your achievement, and I will be staying here in Nevermore City for a while after this ceremony. If you do accept the task, do be aware it's time-sensitive in nature and I would much prefer for it to happen before you depart from Nevermore City. I will make sure to have everything prepared ... and I will do anything in my power to fulfill any request you may have, should you succeed."

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Jake simply nodded. "I will send a response whether I accept or not before I just leave the city."

"That is more than I could ask for," the Demon Prince said with a small bow as he backed away.

It was definitely an interesting proposition, even if Jake had a few doubts... many of which were dispelled by what his brother told him next. "If you are doubting if you can trust that demon, you definitely can. The Cerulean Demon is part of an old Lineage of very proud demons, and they value verbal contracts nearly as much as written ones. It would quite literally hurt his Path if he went back on his word or tried to deceive you."

"You seem to know an awful lot about demons," Jake commented.

"What can I say? They are the best clients and wonderful assassins. Great work ethic all around, and they are one of the few races where the majority love paperwork," his little brother said with a smile.

"Huh," Jake muttered. Now that he was thinking about it, Irin did seem a bit too happy with doing administrative tasks...

As Jake was thinking, he was already prepared for the next group of people to approach. The ice elemental, Wintermaul, who had seemingly been waiting for his chance, was just about to make his way over after the Demon Prince left when someone else jumped ahead... someone the C-grade ice elemental would definitely not raise an issue with.

The silver-haired Chosen of the Wyrmgod appeared only a few steps from Jake, space barely affected as he moved through it effortlessly. He looked at Jake as he took a step forward, and Jake's mind worked at high speeds as he tried to figure out what he was supposed to do or say.

Villy had never coached him on how he should act around other Chosen of high-level gods. Was he supposed to act like they were the gods they represented? Villy talked about that often being the case... but he was also a Chosen, so maybe he should just

treat them equally to himself as he wanted to? But then there was the issue of the grade disparity, so... yeah, fuck it, Jake would just act like usual.

Right as Jake was about to greet the other Chosen, the dragon named Silverstorm smiled brightly and reached out to grab Jake's hand faster than he could react.

"We meet at last!" the dragon said in a jovial tone. "I have been hoping to finally get a chance to thank you! Ah, and it sure was wonderful to see you take the top spot on the All-Time Leaderboards! I cannot hope to begin to express the debts of my gratitude, my fellow Chosen!"

Jake, completely confused, had no idea what the hell the guy was talking about. "... why would you want to thank me?"

Had Jake met the dragon before? Nope, definitely not. He would have remembered if he had. He was good at forgetting stuff in his spatial storage, but he tended to remember auras pretty damn well, and this definitely wasn't an aura he had experienced before.

"Oh... I guess you haven't been told," the dragon named Silverstorm said, still looking extremely happy to see Jake, even if he calmed down a bit. "You're the reason why I'm the newly selected Chosen of the Wyrmgod, and this little gathering is more or less my first big public appearance."

Once more, Jake had to search his memory to try and figure out when or how the hell he caused that to happen... but luckily, the dragon quickly saw through his confusion and elaborated.

"Let me clarify. I have carried the Divine Blessing of my Patron for a long time and was one of a dozen or so Chosen candidates, waiting for our Patron to choose one of us," he began before Jake subtly felt space around them seal off, as it was clear the other Chosen only wanted Jake to hear the next part. "The thing is... and this part naturally shouldn't be shared, my Patron is not the best at picking his Chosen. That's not to say that he is bad when it comes to who he picks, as that would just be putting myself down needlessly. It's more to do with how and when he picks them."

"Now you got me curious... and I'm still waiting for why I am the reason you got chosen to be the Chosen," Jake commented.

"Getting to it," Silverstorm said as he continued. "You see, there are nearly always a few Chosen candidates picked, all of us working for our Patron and fulfilling our duties, such as handling the mortal affairs of Nevermore, gathering certain items that are required, recruiting more members, handling politics... all of the things we should not bother the Primordial with. We do all this to assure our Patron can focus on the World Wonder itself, which has led to the minor problem that he can get a bit... engrossed in it."

Jake was beginning to understand as he wasn't sure what to feel...

"So, what tends to happen is that all of us candidates kind of end up staying as candidates while he works on the World Wonder... and by the time he decides it's time to make a selection, we are all dead to the endless march of time. That means the next batch of candidates will be picked and given Divine Blessings, as the Wyrmgod naturally doesn't want to pick someone as his Chosen without vetting them first, and the cycle continues. To a god who has lived for that long, even the life of an S-grade is short and forgettable, so perhaps this is all understandable. I also just don't think my Patron cares particularly much about having a Chosen compared to many of the other Primordials, on account of him not really having a faction. However, it seems that seeing an old acquaintance inspired my Patron to select a Chosen rather promptly this time around, with it ultimately being me who was chosen. So for that, I must truly thank you, even if you caused my Blessing simply by existing."

Remaining silent for a while, Jake still wasn't sure what to say or feel. But one thing was for sure: "I don't think you have anything to really thank me for. Doesn't look like he picked you as his Chosen without merit."

Silverstorm was powerful; of that, there was no doubt. As for that entire thing with the Wyrmgod being forgetful... Jake could totally see that happen. Duskleaf had talked so many times about massively long experiments, and for a dungeon engineer in charge of the most popular World Wonder in the multiverse, Jake didn't doubt the Primordial also kept busy. One could even say that Silverstorm had gotten unlucky to be born just before a new initiation, as that meant the Wyrmgod was even busier than usual. Now, it seemed Jake had somehow turned that misfortune into good luck, though.

"Even if you do not believe you did anything that requires my gratitude, you still have it," Silverstorm insisted. "Anyway, I didn't mean to be overwhelming; I just had to thank you. Oh, and the Wyrmgod did say that he may be interested in seeing if you could assist him in getting a lower-grade Chosen using your unique abilities at a later time. But, as I said before, the Primordial tends to work on pretty broad time scales, so don't think it will happen any time soon, if ever unless you ascend to divinity."

"I still think it's unnecessary to thank me, but you're welcome about the entire Chosen thing, I guess. As for the other Chosen thing, I won't make any promises," Jake said.

"No need for any rush or pressure. Just know that I owe you a favor that I will be sure to repay one day. Now, let me dispel this barrier and let us show the multiverse how great friends the two Chosen of Primordials are," Silverstorm smiled... perhaps this having been part of his plans all along.

The barrier faded as Jake and Silverstorm shook hands, and the dragon gave the human a nod. "Thank you for taking the time, and congratulations once more. I hope you enjoy yourself the rest of the day."

With that, the Wyrmgod's Chosen left again and promptly got swarmed by interested parties, and almost like clockwork, Wintermaul was right there to also greet Jake. At least that's what Jake thought he was there to do... until he noticed the elemental wasn't really that fixated on him. Instead, he was far more interested in Sylphie from the looks of it.

Wintermaul had slightly changed his form even more and now looked like a human with extremely pale skin, wearing a fur coat of sorts. His body was still made of pure mana, and the subtle signs of ice and frost could still be seen here and there, but he could easily pass for a human from a distance. A human that was definitely also an ice mage.

"I greet thee, Chosen of the Malefic One, and I bring congratulations for your accomplishment," the ice elemental said to Jake as he came over with a small bow.

"A pleasure," Jake nodded. "I should congratulate you for your impressive performance as the top-scoring monster of the era."

"Your words bring me honor," the elemental said, very much going through the usual pleasantries. "If I may, would it be possible to speak to your companion?"

Jake already knew who the elemental was talking about, and he just shrugged. "Depends on if she wants to talk to you."

She was definitely interested, though, as Sylphie also stared at the ice elemental. For a bit, they both seemed to evaluate something about the other before Wintermaul finally spoke. "The Sovereign of Ice greets the Sovereign of Wind."

"Ree," Sylphie responded as the elemental nodded. "Your authority is strong indeed. Impressive."

Jake decided to just sit back for once and observe as the two of them communicated a bit back and forth, seemingly discussing elemental magic stuff. It was nice that Jake wasn't the center of attention for once, especially after talking to the Demon Prince and Wyrmgod's Chosen. Especially the other Chosen had been mentally taxing to deal with. So, to see the elemental and semi-elemental talk was a nice break, and he was happy Sylphie seemed to be making a new friend. Yep, definitely a good turn of-

"Your power truly makes you worthy, and so do I believe I have chosen myself worthy. Join hands with me, as my empress, and I, your emperor, and may our offspring be-"

And just like that, Jake was about to break the rule of no fighting in Nevermore City.

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Chapter 880: An Unexpected Encounter

Jake took a second to process what the hell the elemental had just said, and before he could even do that, he felt bloodlust radiate from behind him. This shook Jake back to reality as his own aura also unconsciously leaked, joining that of three others.

Carmen had been the first to stare daggers at the elemental, seemingly ready to pounce, but, to Jake's slight surprise, the Fallen King and Sword Saint also showed their clear displeasure as they looked ready to assist Carmen should she attack.

However, before any of them could do or say anything, Sylphie proved that she didn't need anyone to stand up for her, as she made a no-nonsense reply.

"Ree."

The elemental was taken aback, partly by Sylphie's screech and partly by the four C-grades seemingly ready to turn him into slushed ice. Still, he managed to keep his head cool as he focused on Sylphie.

"Please do not take offense. It would be an honor for you to join hands with me. We are both holders of autho-"

"Ree."

"Such a reply is shortsighted and-"

"Ree."

"... what?"

"Ree, ree, ree. Ree," Sylphie explained as the bird stood perched on nothing in mid-air.

Surprisingly, Wintermaul looked deep in thought for a moment before he tried one last time. "I... I can change, or we can maybe find a solution..."

"Ree," Sylphie shook her head, making the poor ice elemental look dejected.

"Alas, it seems we are not meant to conjoin our Paths. I apologize if I overstepped... I did not mean to make anyone uncomfortable or make any enemies."

Turning to Jake, who was still looking at Wintermaul with narrowed eyes, the elemental bowed. "I congratulate you on your brilliant accomplishment and shall take my leave before I make a further fool of myself."

With that, the elemental backed away, as Jake, the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Carmen didn't let him leave their sight before he was far enough away.

"I swear, if not for those rules," Carmen muttered as she unclenched her fists.

"An uncalled-for proposal," the Sword Saint also said with a hidden anger in his voice.

"Such arrogance for an inferior being that dares approach one superior to himself," the Fallen King also chimed in, clearly not being entirely honest with himself as he tried to hide his protective nature of the little hawk.

As for Jake... well, he briefly considered the possibilities of marking Wintermaul and tracking him down in the ninety-third universe to have a "conversation" around boundaries and social etiquette, but that didn't appear to be necessary.

Sylphie had handled the situation surprisingly well, and while the knowledge did make Jake a bit uncomfortable, she clearly understood what the elemental had asked. Her response had also genuinely sounded like she considered the offer carefully before rejecting it. With brilliant Sylphie-level arguments, too.

"So... not to butt in, but I have no idea what Sylphie's screeches meant," Caleb muttered, having not yet learned to speak Sylphian Hawk, something perfectly understandable, as it took a bit to get used to the nuances of the complicated language.

"She just kindly explained to the ice elemental why they could never work out," Jake said, shaking his head.

"And that explanation was?"

"He's too cold, hard, and spiky to make a proper nest, and Sylphie only likes to sit in cozy and warm places, making them incompatible," Jake explained to his little brother. "Plus, he didn't even have any feathers. Which is apparently a deal-breaker to her."

"Ree," Sylphie confirmed with a firm screech.

"I... I see," Caleb said, looking at Sylphie and then back at Jake. "I guess that works."

"Sure as fuck hope it did," Carmen added in, throwing a final glare toward the elemental. "I don't hope for that icy bastard he decides to try again somewhere without a Primordial keeping watch. Then again, I do like crushed ice in my drinks."

"Him trying again does appear like it would be an unwise decision," Caleb agreed as he glanced at the four people who had been ready to start a major conflict over an elemental who had absolutely no flirting game.

The atmosphere in their group had gotten a bit more tense than before due to the visit of the elemental, but it soon calmed down again as Jake gave Sylphie some well-deserved scratches for dealing with the situation well.

Even if Sylphie was more than fifty years old by now and was to many definitely an adult, Jake still thought she was too young to get into any committed relationships quite yet. Then again, to Jake, she would always be the little fluffy ball of feathers that would run away whenever he took out his cauldron, screeching bloody murder.

As things were calmer, they also got to speaking more internally, as Jake finally got to catch up with Casper his old buddy. And it turned out his friend had a favor to ask.

"So, you know how the Prima Guardian is descending on Earth in a few years?"

"Still got a system notification hidden away somewhere about it," Jake nodded.

"Well, so do I, which is kind of the reason I'm asking. There is good reason to believe there will be some unique rewards from the event, and not participating would kind of suck, so could you maybe hook me and some others up with a way back to Earth? Just for the event," Casper asked, seemingly a bit nervous about making the request.

"Of course," Jake said. "Shit, if you want to stay afterward, that would also be fine. It's ruled by a council of sorts now, and there are already plenty of immigrants there, so one would notice a bunch of Risen also settling there again."

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"Thanks for the offer, but we're quite happy with what we got going on," Casper answered. "We have quite a nice hidden world set up by now on our floating piece of rock. New Yalsten, we call it. It will take some time, but with the root you gave me, I think we can regrow the tree again and turn it into a proper mystic realm."

"Fair enough," Jake nodded. "Guess I'll have to visit one day. Fresh chapters posted on [movel**fire**net](#)

"One day," Casper smiled. "Right now, it's still very much closed off to outsiders. I could still get you in, but honestly, there isn't much going on there. Unless you want a lengthy lecture in Dungeon Engineering and the work that went into creating New Yalsten, that is."

"You know what? I think I'm good," Jake smiled.

"To add, I will also be returning for the event," Eron suddenly said as he had overheard their conversation. "For the same reasons, too."

"I also heard that some people from the Holy Church, including the Augur, will return," Maria added further. "Wouldn't be surprised if most people try to return to their native planets to try and reap some rewards."

"Sounds like we'll have quite the gathering," Jake smiled. At this point, he kind of felt bad for this poor Prima Guardian. Imagine arriving on a planet only to be met with Jake and all the others standing there, ready to pounce... definitely didn't sound like a fun time.

"Speaking of having quite the gathering," the Sword Saint said after a bit. "I believe I have a few people I should seek out. I sense two others who also carry the Blessing of my Patron, and it would be rude not to at least go say hi."

"Yeah, I think I should regroup with Azal, too. By the way, I asked if he wanted to speak to you directly, but he didn't seem keen on the idea," Casper said as he shook his head. "He did something very dumb to try and get a higher spot on the Leaderboards, and I don't think he is feeling good that you pushed him out of the top 5."

Jake nodded as he remembered what Nevermore had said about Azal. He had been the one to gain the most levels out of everyone, but only by making a dumb sacrifice that would likely hurt his future. Jake was a bit too curious, though.

"What exactly did he do to gain so many levels?" he asked, knowing full well there was a good chance Casper couldn't or wouldn't respond.

Casper sighed. "I probably shouldn't share this, but fine. The weapon he carries around is a powerful mythical sword he made himself, and with it, he can absorb spirits and souls to increase its power and use them as resources for certain skills. However, at the end of Nevermore, he chose to do a pre-prepared ritual to absorb and destroy all of the spirits he had gathered not just throughout Nevermore but since he made the sword right after he evolved. Repairing the sword will be expensive as hell and take a long time, and his Records took quite the hit, but I think he can recover, though it won't be easy. He isn't a bad guy, and it does suck, but he cares way too much about the honor of the Risen and all that. At least he can take solace in having beaten every person from the Holy Church, even if I heard they did something similar. All in all, as I said... he did something dumb, in my opinion."

"I see," Jake said, as the others had also listened intently.

What Azal had decided to do was similar to if Jake had done a ritual to absorb all the curse energy inside of Eternal Hunger. Well, alright, it would also require Jake to have a Path that revolved around curses far more, but if he did, absorbing all the curse energy to gain a lot of levels would technically have been possible. It would be stupid and lead to a shaky foundation and a limited, if not ruined future, but it would have been an option.

These thoughts also inadvertently made the face of a young half-elf pop into Jake's head as he shook his head to dispel the thoughts. What Azal had done wasn't even close to the same level as Temlat.

"Anyway, enjoy," Casper said as he left a few seconds later after he gave Jake time to process what he'd said. "Oh, and I will now have to also share some details about you with Azal to make things fair. Like the fact you are still walking about with the curse-version of a nuclear bomb in the form of a katar."

"Fair enough, not exactly a secret," Jake smiled as he saw his old coworker and friend off. It was still a bit weird that Casper had turned into a pale undead, but alas, what can you do about it?

With Casper gone, Jake just took the time to observe the hall a bit using his sphere. Carmen and the Fallen King were talking as they compared if his claws or her fists were tougher, and Eron and Arnold had somehow ended up standing and staring at a tablet together as the healer motioned and pointed at the screen, with Arnold giving short responses.

Meanwhile, Maria talked to Jake's brother, leaving just Jake and Sylphie, the bird enjoying the relaxing downtime. Elsewhere in the room, groups had also gathered and talked, with a huge group around Ell'Hakan, pretty much as far away from Jake and the other Earthlings as possible. Silverstorm was with a woman with golden hair and horns, which he recognized as the princess from the Regalflight and fifth-place finisher. Together with the two of them was also the seventh-place finisher, the Disciple of Heartsoul Daolord, a young girl who looked barely in her teens, though she was definitely far older in reality. He had a good feeling he would get to talk to them later, and based on how they threw some glances his way occasionally, he even got the feeling they were talking with Silverstorm about him.

Jake had been a bit surprised Dina hadn't gone over to say hi yet, but he soon saw why not, as she chatted with a few people he presumed to be members of the Pantheon of Life and United Tribes. More accurately, the wolf who took the ninth spot on the Era Leaderboards, Grimclaw Noxmane. Jake did know that the United Tribes and Pantheon of Life had a close relationship, so it made sense she was doing a bit of politicking. He also saw the beast that reminded him a bit of the Great White Stag with this group, along with several other beasts and beastkin who had all placed highly.

Speaking of beasts, Jake had to check an extra time before he found another person of interest. Lopas, the sloth-like beast and fourth-place finisher of the universe and eighth in the era, was currently sleeping under a table, having taken one of the tablecloths to cover himself.

To that, Jake could only show respect. He was a sloth who knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was apparently to just be left alone and sleep. Jake also looked a bit around for the person known as Immortal Faith and the Eastbound Monk, but he wasn't

sure what they looked like. The monk was probably part of the Dao Sect, though, with Immortal Faith... well, that person could be part of pretty much any faction with gods in it. He had even considered if it was maybe Eron who had used that name, but that wasn't the case.

Finally, of all the factions Jake looked for, there was the Holy Church, the largest of them all. In their group alone, they had nearly forty people – one-tenth of the total number of people attending. While they didn't end up taking any of the absolute top spots on either the Era or Universe Leaderboards, they could still be said to have dominated it simply by the sheer number of people they had in the top 250.

Alongside their many allies who also stood nearby, with Ell'Hakan even standing not that far away, it was almost as if a line had been drawn down the middle of the conference hall. There definitely were cliques, with many of the fully neutral factions standing in between.

As Jake was standing there, just looking out at the room after taking another drink, he was approached by someone. He turned and looked, instantly seeing an appearance that didn't match what was in his sphere, and he also felt an aura he wouldn't ever fail to recognize.

"Greetings, Viper's Chosen, and congratulations on your performance," the young woman said as she got closer, raising a glass with a smile on her lips. Jake narrowed his eyes as he responded.

"Thank you, miss...?" Jake responded, keeping calm as he wondered what the hell this person was doing here. Everyone else was busy, and Jake made sure to be a bit way as he tried to speak privately to not get any of the others involved.

"Does what you call me matter?" they responded, swirling the liquid in their glass as Jake only now realized that only he could hear what this person said, while anything he responded was also only heard by them. "And no reason to act that suspicious. I have come with no ill intent, just curiosity about something."

Jake narrowed his eyes as he stared at the young woman... the shapeshifted Eversmile. He couldn't understand why he had appeared here or how he had even done so. Then again, he had seemingly been able to hide his true identity even from the Wyrmgod inside of Nevermore...

"What are you curious about?" Jake asked... with the answer not at all the one he expected.

"Where did you get those boots?"

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Chapter 881: Mysterious Boots & Dragon Princesses

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

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

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

"Why are you asking?"

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

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

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

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

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

"You are fully aware there is something with those boots far more complicated than merely a connection to your Patron," the Primordial didn't even try to entertain what Jake said. "However, seeing as you have been cooperative and the fact the Malefic Viper would likely gladly share the details of our future conversation with you, I shall give you an explanation."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake slowly nodded. Yeah, that made sense.

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

That... was weird?

A third thread was tabbed. "Blightfather."

Okay, definitely weird.

And a fourth. "Holy Mother."

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

"Wyrmgod."

"Starseizing Titan."

"Rigoria."

"Yggdrasil."

"Stormild."

"Aeon."

Before he reached the last thread.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, even more confused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Al... alright, I shall... Jake..." Aisha said, stammering as she quickly worked to regain her composure and the volume at which she spoke his name would make even mice

ask her to speak the hell up. The Disciple from the Dao Sect just smiled, seemingly finding the situation amusing as she still didn't say anything, which... not gonna lie, Jake found kind of weird. Something Aisha likely noticed and jumped onto as it was a great change of topic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She seemed a bit nervous as she spoke.

"I know you have had some interactions with both the Emberflight and the Azureflight, some of which haven't been the most positive... and I just want to ensure that there is

no lingering resentment or negative sentiment toward you and the Dragonflights," she spoke, her volume a bit lower than usual.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 882: Heartfelt Conversations & Hidden Agendas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake felt a bit relieved as he nodded in response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took a lot from Jake to not just blurt out and ask what the hell the guy wanted, but he kept his cool. He couldn't let emotions control any of his actions, especially not in front of Ell'Hakan, who could read everything. Jake really didn't like to be put in this situation, but he would have to manage as he evaluated the situation.

Ell'Hakan had clearly taken a more respectful stance. His choice of calling Jake "Lord Thayne" was definitely also deliberate. It communicated a closer relationship than merely using a title and remained polite in nature while also conveniently leaving out

mentioning any relations to Jake's Patron. Just from this alone, and his earlier talk with Carmen, Jake had a guess what Ell'Hakan's goal was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"With my deepest sincerity, I apologize for past transgressions. I acted foolishly and committed sins I can only hope to be forgiven and strive to make up for," Ell'Hakan continued before speaking to the room as much as to Jake. "I invaded your planet, killed people close to you, and created chaos, believing I was doing the right thing. Believing I was freeing your world from a tyrant who wished to use the planet in the fashion we have seen the Order of the Malefic Viper use so many others. I was wrong and had jumped to conclusions, and now I realize you never acted on orders of your Patron. I

realize you are not the second coming of the Malefic Viper... you are Lord Thayne, your own person, through and through."

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

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

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

Ell'Hakan continued his speech, as he no longer had his head bowed, but looked up with a smile on his face. Official source is [novel●fire●net](#)

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, take the time to consider my words... I do not need an answer here today. I merely wished to express my emotions and regret, as I hope to one day be forgiven. Regardless of your decision, know that I no longer hold any animosity toward you. Even

if you can't forgive me, I, at the very least, hope that the next time we meet, it will not be as enemies. I truly do not want to fight you if it can be avoided."

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

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

"Do not think my words a mere ruse or deceit. I truly have nothing against the man known as Jake Thayne, only he who identifies as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper... and I have a feeling you perhaps are more of the prior than the latter. You do not need the Malefic Viper, but he desperately needs you to rebuild himself. I already know how thin your loyalty is and how little faith you have in your heart. This is not a sin, but merely recognizing your own worth. So, I implore you to rethink your position. Rethink if staying with a god such as the Malefic Viper is truly in your best interest in the long run. Valhal, a reputable and respected faction, is also interested in having you join them, and if you choose to throw off the chains that is the failing Malefic Viper, I truly believe the War God himself would take you as his Chosen. I will not tell you what to do; just remind you of the many alternatives you have. You will thrive anywhere; you need no one. Can find a home anywhere. So why stay on a sinking ship?"

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Chapter 883: Temporary Farewells

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

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

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

Jake didn't hold the kind of loyalty one would expect of a Chosen toward a Patron. He held no faith, and he wouldn't just do whatever the Viper told him to do. Ell'Hakan and

Yip of Yore had already figured this out from the looks of it, making their current strategy make a lot more sense.

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

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

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

Ultimately, this meant Jake staying with the Malefic Viper was framed as a choice. That Jake chose to stand on the side of an evil tyrant, despite having been given ample opportunity not to, giving them an excuse if they did somehow kill him. Perhaps they also bet on Jake's sense of self-preservation and wanted to clarify that should he choose to bail the proverbial sinking ship, there would always be a lifeboat waiting.

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, Ell'Hakan and Yip had made one major mistake. Ell'Hakan had been right about one thing, though: one can truly only do their best, but the best one could do was limited by knowledge... and those two clearly had no idea Jake was a Heretic-Chosen,

nor could they comprehend the concept behind a god and a mortal genuinely just being friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ree!" even Sylphie agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yep, see you around," Jake smiled.

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

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

Dina nodded resolutely. "Farewell for now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean it won't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fair, if we set all the conditions right, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper will abandon him for greener pastures. You should know that better than anyone.”

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 884: Having A Cold One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why am I feeling offended by that notion...” Jake muttered.

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

“Speaking of incomplete information... a certain orange bastard approached me during the get-together,” Jake said as he quickly explained what had happened with Ell’Hakan inside the conference hall. Due to the barrier made by the Wyrmgod, not even the Viper had been allowed to look inside, meaning their little encounter was a surprise to him.

After Jake was done talking, the Viper just shook his head. “I had not expected them to take such a direct approach. But yes, you are definitely right that they no longer view

you as a target to kill but still one to separate from me. And in many ways, their approach is correct. You are gathering so much attention these days, and I'm getting so many benefits with you as my Chosen. In nearly all ways, that's good, but should you choose to abandon me as your Patron, Yip of Yore would be able to turn all my gains against me, turning your exceptionalism into a demerit for me."

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

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

"Bit of both, I guess?"

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

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

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

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

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

reputation is based on stories of old, and that's very much his domain," the Viper gave a lengthy answer, seemingly fine with sharing quite a lot of information.

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

"That isn't a question worth considering," the Viper shook his head. "I wouldn't even try."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" Jake asked, confused.

"They won't stop, but there will be less now..."

"Yeah, not taking that bai-"

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

"You know? I think I'll survive," Jake said in a deadpan tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 885: A Day Of Forced Socialization In Nevermore City

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

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

The second message was from the Cerulean Demon, saying where to find him and asking if Jake was still interested. If he was, a disc detailing the ritual and the preparation the demons had made was also included for him to look through, which was

part of the reason he would need to spend a few days at Valhal's compound. He needed to look through it and familiarize himself with the ritual, and he may as well do that there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is the Chosen satisfied?" the hobgoblin asked, a bit nervous as Jake didn't say anything.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, Jake hurried along with his day as he headed for his next destination. He wanted to avoid being on the streets as much as possible because, quite frankly, he attracted a bit too much attention. No one actually approached him, but nearly everyone couldn't help but gawk his way when he just wanted to casually pass by. Annoyingly so, he couldn't just try and sneak around either, as he did want to be seen visiting all sorts of different places.

After the "shitty" shop visit, Jake decided to go to a small base belonging to the Altmar Empire next. He only went there briefly to thank them for their congratulations and was naturally met by some high-ranking young talents from the faction whom he briefly interacted with. He did the same with a few other factions, including those he knew people in. He spent a few hours at both the Risen's base and the one belonging to the

Court of Shadows while he tried to be faster in those only filled with strangers. A bit surprisingly, many of the young talents from the factions had already left Nevermore City, so he couldn't meet many of them, but luckily, Casper and his little brother were still there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

even more fun now that Jake's awkwardness could have an actual impact on multiversal politics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 886: The Mystery Deepens

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

"You got here faster than expected, huh? Didn't anyone wanna host you longer or what?" Carmen commentated, and Jake saw his escort grimace at her curt tone. Even

the poor S-grade threw Carmen a look, which she seemed to not notice or care about. As things should be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

waste of time, and the one with any promise, Colosseum of Mortals, was ruined by its idiotic rules.”

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

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

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

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

“Are you offering a tour of the compound?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake looked at her weirdly as Carmen stopped herself mid-step. "Wait, you're serious?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But first... archery range.

And, damn, was it everything Jake had hoped for. The latest_episodes are on the novel★**fire**★net

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yep," Jake nodded.

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

"Nope," Jake agreed.

"But I guess it's pretty damn useful," Carmen muttered.

"Definitely is."

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

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

While stats did mean the majority, the ability of each individual to apply those stats still mattered a lot. The difference between getting punched by someone who knew how to throw a punch and someone who didn't wasn't small, and with ethereal elements such

as concepts also getting more and more mixed into every action one made, things got even more complicated.

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

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

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

"I guess," Jake shrugged as he took a seat.

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

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

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

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

"Why?" Jake asked, genuinely confused.

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

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

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

"... sorry?" Jake muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

He... did not know that.

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

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

“Exactly what I said. Those boots are connected to us, and I cannot discern the cause,” Eversmile said. “My best theory right now is that this is due to your Records as a Primordial bleeding into them over time, which managed to form a karmic connection between the boots and anyone else with the title of Primordial. Boots, as equipment, represent the art of travel, progress, and shortening the distance between two destinations... it is theoretically possible for some of these concepts to have led to this, but I believe there is more behind it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The First Sage.”

Silence returned as the seconds ticked by.

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

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

“Forbidden Knowledge.”

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

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Chapter 887: Forbidden Knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Master! To what do I owe the-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only the Malefic Viper would remember.

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

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

No ifs. No buts. He was dead.

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

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

Jake had no idea about anything the Viper was doing, as he was busy being in quite the situation himself. Standing within an arena, Carmen stood opposite him, wearing her leather armor with a big grin on her face. The stands around them were absolutely filled to the brim with members of Valhal who wouldn't miss out on a fight between the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and the Runemaiden of Valdemar to save their lives.

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

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

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

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

"You underestimate my bowmanship," Jake smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

Fast.

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

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

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

"Why didn't you dodge?" she asked, perplexed.

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

"Yeah? I think I do?" Carmen asked, confused.

"Let's just say I expect a better performance out of myself this time around."

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

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

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

Carmen stumbled back as Jake's hand hurt from the impact. Even so, he didn't stop as he attacked again, this time trying to use his Blackpoint Nanoblade and its slightly higher penetrative effect compared to Eternal Hunger. New **NOVEL** chapters are published on *novel.fire.net*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pretty sure you already saw the result once."

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

Carmen likely suspected something was off but still charged in kind. Right as they clashed, the arcane bolts hit Carmen... and didn't explode. Instead, they struck her like

hard crystals, throwing her slightly off-balance and allowing Jake to put proper power into his blow as he stabbed her in the stomach.

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 888: Pillow Talk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Probably," Carmen semi-agreed as she opened and closed a fist. "It's pretty sweet, though. I used to be really careful when fighting, and I had to make sure not to take any

hits... now, I can take quite a beating without much struggle while giving plenty more back."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hm?" Jake exclaimed, surprised.

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

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

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

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

"It's just weird," Carmen sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

He really wanted an archery range.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One annoying thing did become clear, though.

I'll need to throw in some Jake Juice as a binding agent of sorts, he noted to himself. Not a lot of it, just enough to nudge things to merge together. Maybe other alchemists or ritual experts could find some way to make them merge without this method, but Jake sure as hell didn't know any. With what he was reading from the disc provided by the Demon Prince, the demons sure didn't have any set plans either but would "leave the merging process entirely up the Chosen's discretion."

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

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

Jake did also have to consider the-

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

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

"Sure as hell didn't react."

"Why would I?" Jake kept smiling.

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

"And what may you want?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Already told you," she said unbothered.

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

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

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

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

Her entire arm exploded, launching Jake and Carmen away from each other, splattering blood all over both of them. Jake even had to react at the very last moment by using

Eternal Shadow as bone fragments flew for him, each of them giving off an intense sense of danger as he felt like each of them could have pierced pretty damn deep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 889: Time To Make History

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

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

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

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

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

When Carmen saw him off, and he left the compound, Olaf was naturally also there, along with a few others who gave him knowing looks. In retrospect, maybe spending all his time alone with Carmen inside her private residence could lead to some unforeseen rumors. Not that it hurt Jake in any way, and these rumors had been around ever since their meetup on Minaga's City Floor anyway... they weren't exactly wrong either.

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

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

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

"Worst case, we'll just handle this Prima Guardian on our own," Carmen said with a shrug.

"Shouldn't be that hard, though I do expect our Guardian to probably be the most powerful in the ninety-third universe. At least that's what Valhal's intel indicates with how many Primas we killed."

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

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

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

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

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

Well, it turned out that it did exist... it was just really dialed down for those competing on the Leaderboards. So rather than it going from 10x to 25x, the version he had done only went from 14x to 17x or something like that. Jake didn't know for certain, but he had a feeling this had something partly to do with the upcoming system events and whatnot and to make sure that those who did badly wouldn't end up being late. Either way, for all the other versions of Nevermore, the difference would be way more noticeable,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake nodded as he followed the Demon Prince into the large mansion... and down into the basement. Yeah, Jake felt like someone was pulling his leg. To have a demonic

ritual take place in a large creepy cellar was almost too on the nose, but nope, they were entirely serious. What's more, when he arrived in the main ritual chamber, he saw that everything had been drawn in blood, and the circle was indeed shaped like a pentagon with a pentagram in it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Demon – lvl 280]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gotta be thorough," Jake just smiled.

"Indeed," the Demon Prince said as he made a small cut on his finger and pressed it against Jake's contract. There was no magic mumbo-jumbo or anything, but Jake did

feel a tiny bit of energy get infused into the contract. "Now, my excitement and anxiety for what is to come next is beginning to overflow... does the Chosen need any more preparation time? If not, I will go fetch the team."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake said the last part in a slightly threatening tone, as he decided also to apply a bit of the carrot. "Meanwhile, if you all help make this a success, you will have been part of a ritual to do something likely never done before, all while working together with the Malefic Viper. Seeing as we're all smart people here, hope I don't have to explain the

significance of that. Oh, and dispel all thoughts of this ritual being impossible. It may be to you, but I don't see why that should make it impossible for me. I'm pretty good at doing what others believe impossible."

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

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

"Let's make history indeed."

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

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Chapter 890: A Couple Of Major Oversights

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

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

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

Gazing at the ritual circle – which was more of a ritual pentagon – Jake saw everyone had gotten into position. The Demon Prince had purchased ten Crystalized Demon Lord Hearts from other Nevermore Attendees before he even approached Jake in the first place, and while Jake considered if adding his own would help, he quickly realized it

wouldn't. The ritual was made for ten hearts, and Jake also knew numbers could have some weird conceptual significance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Five."

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

"Four."

Activating his energy, he linked up with the ritual.

"Three."

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

"Two..."

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

"One..."

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

"Start."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake next did what only he could do as he activated energy from deep within himself. A mere spark, a whisper at most. It traveled through the arcane strings he had laid down

before, unaffected by all other energies as strings rose and wrapped around the cerulean gem as the spark of Origin Energy entered it.

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

It was originally a damn heart.

A heart!

Not a fucking forehead gem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luckily, they had managed to retrieve his body and completed the ritual to create the fragments from his heart. One of these fragments which the Cerulean Demon had been granted. When he had merged with it and the Legacy of the Cerulean Devil, he had believed himself a genius at the pinnacle of the multiverse. In some ways, he was. He had proven himself in Nevermore, yet two people still beat him, but he wasn't particularly disappointed. In fact, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had given him hope of truly being the second coming of the Cerulean Devil... and in some ways, hadn't he succeeded? Just not in the way he had hoped.

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

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

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

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

Until the heart didn't stop growing.

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

A husk that was currently destroying him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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?* The source of this content is **novel**fire**net**

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 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 Soulspace 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 Soulspace. 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 Soulspace, 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 Ell'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.

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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. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT novel-fire.net

"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.

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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 (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)], [Unseen Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of (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 (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 (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?" This text is hosted at [novel~fire~met](http://novel-fire-met.com)

"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.

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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." Newest update provided by **novel**♦*fire*♦**net**

"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.

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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.

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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. New **NOVEL** chapters are published on *novel•fire•net*

"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."

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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.

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"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.

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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 – lvl 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. This chapter is updated by **novel•fire•net**

“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 suppressing 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...

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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. Official source is
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"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 disgust-

"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!"

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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.

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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. This chapter is updated by ***novel~fire~net***

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...

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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.

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“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.

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“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.

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