

Hunter 651

Chapter 651 - Nature's Attendant

Jake felt how serious Viridia was, so he assumed this Nature's Attendant was someone important just from her reaction.

"How will we meet?" Jake asked.

"I believe a private meeting room has been prepared. A god of his level descending upon this hall filled with mortals wouldn't end well for anyone but you and a few others," Viridia said.

"That strong?" Jake asked, a bit surprised. "I must admit I have never heard of this god before..."

Viridia seemed taken aback for a moment but quickly gathered herself. "Nature's Attendant is the right hand of Yggdrasil and her most trusted partner. Some compare him to what the Lord Protector is to the Order of the Malefic Viper, but that isn't entirely accurate. He is far more of an equal part of the Pantheon of Life, standing tall at Yggdrasil's side. As a god from the second era, he is incredibly strong and has one of the most powerful Bloodlines known to the multiverse," Viridia briefly explained.

"A Bloodline, huh?"

"His namesake. While I am uncertain as to its exact nature, it has to do with manipulation of nature affinity energy and communion with plants."

"Alright. Will you teleport me to the meeting room?" Jake asked.

"The Malefic One will welcome this guest personally, so no," Viridia answered. "I just simply wished to inform you to avoid any issues and warn you to remain respectful. While he is not a Primordial, you may as well consider him at the level of one, and I also know that the Malefic One personally holds him in high esteem," Viridia said. "Ah, I believe the Malefic One will fetch you now. Good luck."

Jake didn't even have time to answer before he appeared in a separate room from the one he had been in with the three factions earlier. This wasn't even a meeting room but was instead a large living room he had been in before, and after orienting himself, he looked at the Viper, who was sitting on a couch.

"So, special guest?" Jake asked.

"The one I told you about before," the Viper smiled.

"Viridia seemed pretty freaked out about him."

"As she should. This isn't the kind of guest you can treat casually. And I will echo what she warned you about. However, rather than tell you to be respectful, I will warn you about trying to get into a dick-measuring contest using your Bloodline. That won't end in anything productive, alright?" Villy asked.

"Alright, alright," Jake said. "Why meet here, though? Isn't this your personal space?"

"And he is as much a personal guest as he is a guest to this ceremony," the Viper shook his head and got up. "Now, let's welcome him. Oh, also, he has brought someone along. A potential party member for your Nevermore party."

"Oh yeah," Jake said, his interest piqued. "Any idea who it is? Are they any good?"

"I do, and considering who is personally bringing her, I would have high expectations," Villy smiled.

Jake nodded and waited. Less than ten seconds later, he felt it. Outside of the living room, in a small entrance area, a presence descended. Jake felt like the entire living room was bathed in energy, and he imagined himself back in the Tutorial forest again. Instantly, he understood.

The mana... it's nature affinity.

The environmental mana itself had changed its affinity. Moreover, Jake felt something else resonate from deep within himself, and his heartbeat sped up slightly.

Then, just as he had properly registered this, two figures appeared in the room outside. One was a tall man wearing simple brown robes and carrying a staff with a flower at its tip, while the other was a young woman who looked to be in her late teens or early twenties. He could only see her face, and she looked mostly human, except for two small bumps on her forehead, and her hair looked very much not like hair but more like vines with flowers sprouting from them. After he saw them in his sphere, he understood why he got this odd feeling.

Bloodlines.

Both of them had one. Both were incredibly powerful, too, though Jake felt a slight difference between them.

As the two of them appeared, Villy went over to greet them with an oddly serious look on his face.

The old man – Nature’s Attendant – walked into the room with the girl following close behind, and Jake finally laid his eyes on them.

The woman surprised Jake a bit due to her light green skin and her entire form looking semi-plant-like. She also wore a large baggy robe and cloak and didn’t visibly wear any weapons, though she could have something hidden under her large cloak, which he couldn’t look beneath even with his sphere due to how Soulshapes and all that worked. Only her face was visible, and there he saw her small horns, which he recognized were actually antlers and her long green hair of thin vines with flowers blooming from them.

As for Nature’s Attendant, he indeed did look like an older man, but one in peak physical condition with dense muscles displayed where visible. He reminded Jake a bit of an old farmer, and he had a soft smile on his lips as he opened his arms wide, allowing the staff to just float beside him.

“Vilas, it has been too long,” he said in a soft tone.

“It has indeed,” Villy answered, returning the smile as he walked over and went for a hug, which surprised Jake.

But not as much as the words he said next.

"I am glad you could come, father-in-law."

Wait, what? Jake asked, and he also saw the woman he had brought with him look surprised. The two exchanged a quick glance before both looked back at the two gods.

"Well, you could have invited me earlier, but I guess you had your own stuff to deal with," the old-looking man smiled, patting Villy on the back.

The two pulled away from each other as Nature's Attendant looked a bit more serious. "I take it you have this entire Yip of Yore situation handled? He isn't an ordinary opponent."

"Of course I do," the Viper shook his head. "No need to worry, okay?"

"Alright, alright," the other god nodded before he finally turned and looked at Jake. "So, is this the young man who was the impetus to finally make you leave your divine realm?"

Jake perked up as the Viper answered. "Yep, he was the guy who one day popped into my realm, and we had a good talk. My first one in far too many eras. After that... well, I decided to take that step and come back. I couldn't have stayed in here forever, now could I?"

Nature's Attendant nodded as he still looked at Jake. "Thank you for getting Vilas to see some sense."

The god slightly bowed, making Jake feel a bit uncomfortable.

"I didn't do much," Jake scratched the back of his head.

"Perhaps it doesn't seem like so, but you still managed to give him that final push. Now, let's have a proper look at you," the older-looking god said as he walked over and studied Jake a bit more closely.

Jake felt a bit awkward as the old man scrutinized him in both body and soul. Nevertheless, he stood still and just threw Villy a glance as the god put up his hands in defense, not saying anything.

"Pretty good, solidly built, good stats for your level," Nature's Attendant nodded. "Though your Bloodline is not quite as simple as resisting auras, now is it? Ah, don't worry, not gonna meddle in your secrets, just a small observation."

Jake's eyes opened wide, and before he could ask, the god answered.

"I feel your constant observance of the mana all around us, and you are using your Bloodline to do that. My own Bloodline allows me to feel the mana and has linked me to it, which is why I know," Nature's Attendant explained. "So don't worry too much."

"Father-in-law is known as one of the most powerful Bloodline Patriarchs in the multiverse for a reason; I should have guessed he would figure it out," Villy also said in a nonchalant tone. "I will echo what he said, don't worry too much."

Jake was just slightly relieved he hadn't figured more out than knowing he had some kind of Perception-related skill.

"Either way, it's nice to finally meet you," the god finally stopped his inspection. Then, with a big smile, he went to the one he had brought to this meeting.

"This is my granddaughter, Dinaldria," Nature's Attendant introduced the girl as he practically dragged her over to stand in front of him. He proudly had both his hands on her shoulders, and she looked embarrassed and like she wanted to run away. Jake hadn't done it before, but he took this chance to use Identify on her and finally saw her race and even her level of Blessing.

[Dryad – lvl 205 – Divine Blessing of Nature's Attendant]

With a big proud smile, the Nature's Attendant glanced between Villy and Jake.

"When I heard you were looking for another party member for your Chosen to enter Nevermore with, I couldn't help but think of her. Do you know how difficult it is to find a proper party for a young druid like her? Ah, I am sure you do, but it has only gotten worse through the eras, I tell you. With Dina here, it is even worse, as she can't just go with an ordinary top-tier party but needs one that is truly top-tier, you know? Anything else would waste her talents. And if Vilas here thinks you are talented enough to be his Chosen, then I can only trust his judgment."

"Oh, he won't disappoint, and neither will his party members," Villy said with a grin.

"Aye, I saw that old swordsman teach those young ones a lesson. An odd one for sure, but definitely powerful," the god nodded. "The Unique Lifeform is also quite something, and the hawk is interesting. I am sure you will like them too, Dina."

The dryad just nodded as she still looked at the floor. The old man finally let go of her shoulders, and she looked at him with a meek expression as he nodded and smiled.

Jake felt a bit awkward just standing there and was surprised when he saw the staff Nature's Attendant had brought float over to the girl. He saw the lotus flower at the head of the staff wave its leaves back and forth, and he got the feeling the staff was somehow talking.

Dina looked at the staff and nodded a few times as Jake tried to understand what the staff was up to.

"Is she talking to the staff?" Jake asked Villy.

"The staff in question is one of the most powerful weapons in the multiverse, infused with true life and a soul, practically making it a living being capable of slaying most gods by itself," Villy answered. "But yes, she is talking to it. The Bloodline of Nature's Attendant allows my father-in-law to communicate with plants in a way unlike any other, and his granddaughter has inherited this aspect."

"I see. Her Bloodline is strong, too, isn't it? It feels strong," Jake commented.

"Nature's Attendant's is often mentioned when people talk about the most powerful Bloodlines in the multiverse, and this girl has part of that. Oh, just to note down, his granddaughter is the child of one of his daughters and is a quarter human," Villy answered.

"Who is the grandmother?" Jake wondered.

"Yggdrasil."

Jake held himself back from visibly reacting as he asked further. "I thought it was incredibly hard for gods to have children? And isn't Yggdrasil a tree? How does it all... you know, work?"

"Alright, it is not their kid in the way you expect. Their daughter was born from a seed they made together. Mind you, Dina here is a biological child, with her mother being a dryad god and her father an S-tier half-dryad. Both of which had Bloodlines," Villy explained. "I won't reveal much more of her personal history, but you need a fifth party member, right? It is difficult to do any better. She is enlightened with only a class, which is a druid. Coupled with her Bloodline, natural talents, and having been taught by Nature's Attendant from childhood, she is also considered an absolute monster by multiversal standards. There is just one tiny little issue."

"And what is that?" Jake asked, even if he already had a good feeling what it was.

"Well, she hasn't really ever been outside? As in, she has no real-life experience. Every interaction she has had with others has been curated, and she has never been in a fight where there wasn't a god waiting in the shadows to make sure she didn't get hurt. That is one of the reasons she is here. She needs experience. She is also on the younger side, not even forty years old yet, and considering her lack of exposure to, well, anything, she is sheltered and not that mature despite her appearance," Villy said.

"Got it; I guess that explains why she doesn't exactly give me the vibes of a genius," Jake said. "Now, are you going to tell me more about him being your father-in-law?"

"He was the father of my wife, with the mother being an S-grade who never made it to godhood," Villy answered. "I guess you could say he is my only family. And that is where I will leave it for today."

Jake knew to not push and just nodded.

Back in the real world, it seemed like the staff had managed to convince Dina to finally come a bit out of her shell as she looked up at Jake.

"Hello..." she said in a meek tone.

"Hi there," Jake said and extended a hand. "I am Jake Thayne, a pleasure to meet you."

She looked at his hand for a moment until the staff bumped into her, making her raise hers from beneath the robe. She shook his hand very lightly before quickly retracting into the robe. "I am Dina..."

This is going to be an uphill battle, Jake said to himself. However, the brief moment of physical contact did allow him to properly confirm the powerful Bloodline dwelling within her. His instincts also told him that she wasn't simple but hid quite the power.

Nature's Attendant stood to the side and had a radiant smile as the two of them greeted each other. "See, already getting along so well! I take it there will be no discussion about whether Dina here will join you for Nevermore, right?"

Jake considered for a moment before answering. "It isn't solely my decision, but a collective one made with my party members."

"Alright, so it is a done deal then because none of those other kids can even begin to compare," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Dina looked back at the god, but he just grinned. "Now, now, don't be like that. This is for your own good, and I am sure you will have a great time! Also, you still got Bobo with you, right?"

"Yeah..." she said, clearly a bit embarrassed at the name.

"All good then," he waved her off before looking at Jake. "Now, why don't you take Dina and go talk to the other party members so you can all get to know one another?"

"Sounds like a fine plan," Villy agreed.

Jake also just nodded as he thought that was fine. Dina didn't look too enthusiastic but more like she had just resigned herself to her fate.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Jake," the nature god smiled at Jake.

"The pleasure is all mine," Jake nodded.

"Ah, and Jake?" the Nature's Attendant reached out telepathically.

"Yes, Nature's Attendant?" Jake asked, remembering to be respectful, though wondering why he didn't just talk. Though the reason became obvious in the next sentence.

"Please, just call me Tonken. I just wanted to tell you to be nice to little Dina, okay? And if anything happens between you two, then while I am not against it, just be aware that should you break her heart, I will break you, alright?" the old man said in what sounded like an amicable tone, but Jake felt a shiver run down his spine nevertheless

"Yes, sir," Jake simply agreed. If he had learned one thing from Caleb, it was that one should never make the grandfather of a girl angry. Jake still remembered that time Maja and Caleb had a misunderstanding, and her grandfather came and paid Caleb a visit... yeah, let's just say it was lucky they got over their high school spat.

"Good. I hope you two have a good time. Try to get to know each other, alright? When you return, I will be sure to give you proper compensation, but till then, I will leave her in your care," Nature's Attendant said. "She may seem fragile and meek, but don't be afraid of pushing her."

Jake sent a mental confirmation, and the older-looking god smiled even brighter. "Now, you two go have fun!"

With that, Jake and Dina disappeared from the living room and were unceremoniously teleported back to the large hall.

Back in the living room, with Jake and Dina gone, Vilastromoz looked at Nature's Attendant.

"You want to go see them, right?"

The other god put on a sad smile. "Of course I do."

Vilastromoz nodded and sighed. "I am glad you came."

Nature's Attendant walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't your fault, and you know that."

"No," the Viper shook his head and stared at the ground. "No, I don't. Let's just go, alright?"

His father-in-law nodded and squeezed his shoulder. "Let us."

Chapter 652 - Onwards, To Nevermore

Back in the main hall, the festivities that were actually just a glorified political event continued. A number of people still held hope that they could join the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his party for Nevermore, as they all knew what that would mean.

It wasn't out of the question for weaker individuals to effectively get carried through the mega-dungeon, thus earning a better title, more levels, and more items than if they had gone with equally skilled people. That was why those with supportive roles hoped they would get selected simply because there weren't any better options. The scope of potential party members that met the stringent requirements was limited, as finding good support between level 200 and 210 who weren't already with powerful groups wasn't easy.

However, that hope was shattered when the Chosen returned. He did not come alone but was accompanied by a dryad who met the requirements, and what was more, she carried the Blessing of Nature's Attendant. If there were anyone with Bloodlines, they too would have realized how screwed they were as this dryad surpassed any and all of them.

As the Chosen went over to greet his party members, it was quickly realized that the choice had been made, and all the young talents could do was be happy they had at least been able to attend, and some even had the chance to spar a swordsman who few would be able to forget.

Contrary to popular belief, the Fallen King was not actually related to plants or trees in any way. This was despite him looking like a tree guy and being named King of the Forest when Jake first met him. The bark-like skin also wasn't even bark, or even wood for that matter, and while the mask did look and feel like wood, even being described as wood-like by the system, it wasn't actually wood either.

All of this is to say that the Fallen King and the meek Dina didn't immediately make friends due to her Bloodline, and Jake honestly felt a bit bad for the girl after being grilled with questions from the Unique Lifeform. Questions she mostly didn't answer or just gave one-word responses.

In some ways, Jake found it liberating. This was the first time he had met someone who was worse at being social than himself. What they did get out of her was that her horrible ability to communicate wasn't because she never talked to others. She just wasn't used to talking to people. More accurately, she was the trope of a flower growing up in a greenhouse. In that, she had literally grown up in a large greenhouse with the plants there being all her best friends. Even the ones who couldn't talk could still express emotions, which Dina could understand.

However, despite Dina's issues with talking to them, there was one member of their group she looked capable of talking to. No, not Sylphie, as Dina didn't quite understand what "ree!" meant, but the Sword Saint and his overpowered old-man aura.

"So you did explore this forest with your friends?" he asked with a grandfatherly smile.

"Yeah... it was a bit weird there, and the beasts didn't like us, but Bobo was with me," she answered, seemingly only focused on the old man.

"You mentioned him before, but who is this Bobo?" the Sword Saint asked.

Jake was curious, too, remembering Nature's Attendant mentioning this Bobo being with her.

"Bobo is my Guardian," she answered before quickly looking like she had said too much. "I... I mean..."

"We are meant to explore the depths of Nevermore together; secrets like that are counterproductive," the Sword Saint smiled and shook his head. "While we all respect each other and the respective secrets we all hold, please do not withhold information if it hurts others or hampers us in any way, alright?"

Dina looked in thought before she nodded. "Alright."

Old-man energy was truly too strong; even Jake got the compulsion to overshare. He had a strong feeling Dina was just more used to being around old geezers, which was why she could handle the Sword Saint so easily, but he did severely hope she would open up more with time or spending years with her in Nevermore would be hell. Luckily, the old man, using his old-man insight, already knew this.

"We need to trust each other and build rapport. As we learn from and about you, so will you learn about us, and I sincerely hope we can all get along well," the old swordsman said with a comforting smile.

Dina nodded once more and looked at Jake and the others. "Sorry..."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, scaring Dina a bit, but she quickly realized the hawk wasn't mad. The King stayed silent while Jake smiled.

"Either way, it is good to have you on board, and I look forward to seeing what you can do. Your grandfather hyped you up quite a bit," Jake said, trying to be nice.

It didn't work that well, as Dina looked embarrassed and stared at the ground again, but luckily she quickly recovered. "I... I'll do my best."

Jake felt a bit lost and reached out to the Sword Saint telepathically.

"Will this really work out? She seems a bit... you know?" Jake asked the old man.

"While I don't truly know her history, it is clear she has lived a sheltered life. She reminds me of my cousin from when I was a child. My uncle feared his daughter would be corrupted by the world outside, and as she was born a genius, he hired private teachers and people to teach her everything there was to learn. Yet even as she reached adulthood, her father kept her inside their compound. My uncle was narrow-minded and wanted to find her a husband he thought was worthy of her. When he finally did, she was already in her early twenties and had never interacted with anyone under the age of forty, and the only men she had ever spoken to was her father and her grandfather," the Sword Saint answered.

"That must have fucked her up," Jake responded.

"It did... for a while. Humans have an incredible ability to adapt, and while she may be a dryad, this is a trait I believe is shared by all with true sapience. For now, she will be awkward, but once she opens up, learns our social cues, and begins to feel comfortable, all will be well," he explained further. "But what my true point is, is that even if my cousin could not speak a full sentence in front of a man her own age, she could still write a thesis or give an ethereal performance on the violin – for that is what she had learned. This girl has learned how to be a dryad and a druid. I see no reason to doubt her abilities within Nevermore."

"Aight, you convinced me, but are you sure the others are-"

"I just gave the exact same speech to the Fallen King," the old man sent in a slightly cheeky tone.

Jake nearly choked but held himself together, no doubt helped by his mask.

"Also, I don't think your attempt to make friends is made easier by you wearing a mask and only showing her your eyes," the Sword Saint added mercilessly.

"Okay, good point," Jake answered, seeing a problem there.

Their conversation had been performed rather swiftly due to the power of telepathy, so only a few seconds had passed where the King had asked Dina some basic questions about her skills, and she – to the surprise of no one – revealed that she did nature affinity magic exclusively. Luckily, nature affinity was a composite affinity that included the life affinity, giving her plenty of healing magic at her disposal. The more Jake heard, the more he looked forward to seeing what she could truly do.

Jake wanted to stay and talk more, but soon he was dragged away by Viridia as some people wanted to meet him. The Sword Saint also informed him that with the final member of the party recruited, he wanted to take the time before Nevermore to check in on the members from the Noboru Clan that resided in the Order, Reika included.

This left Dina alone with the Fallen King and Sylphia as Jake walked off to help Viridia with something he had truly dreaded: acting nice in front of a bunch of S-grades as they praised him and wanted to discuss the ceremony.

A shrunk-down Sandy also made their way into the hall not long after, having delayed their arrival to a time when Jake didn't take up all the attention. That worked out pretty well, as for a good hour, Sandy was the center of attention and got a bunch of gifts – every single one of them edible.

While Jake had been a struggle to find gifts for, he learned that the Lord Protector had sent out some basic information about Sandy, and once they learned these basic traits, gifting became easy. Because how hard could it be to find gifts for someone focused on the concept of consumption and capable of absorbing nearly any kind of natural treasure or form of energy?

Yeah, Sandy was truly the exact opposite of Jake when it came to gifting. Was it energy dense and considered a high-Records item? Good enough! The fact that they didn't need to give gifts to the same level as what they gave Jake made it even simpler.

Sandy was a happy worm and sent several messages to Jake throughout this entire gifting session. The one thing he had feared was a lot of people judging Sandy for being, well, Sandy, but all he heard were positive comments about how dedicated they were to their Path and how rare it was to see such a powerful and committed creature. Some even described the damn glutton as humble.

With all the gifts, he imagined Sandy would spend the majority of the time he was in Nevermore digesting and sleeping.

After the entire ordeal with Sandy was over, things finally seemed to die down, and Jake had no more obligations. The after-after party was also clearly canceled, though none present there were supposed to attend, to begin with, so it wasn't like anyone noticed. Villy had likely just had private meetings with all the gods he wanted to discuss with, and he also guessed a few had gone to visit Nature's Attendant.

Jake regrouped with the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Dina, who had each gone to a corner of the room, where Jake also saw Caleb had managed to sneak in. Jake hadn't seen him around before now, wondering where he had been all this time.

"Hey, when did you get here?" Jake said as he went as his brother talked to Dina, who already seemed more comfortable around the shadow assassin than Jake himself.

"I was here from the beginning, but I hogged one of the side rooms with a few other members from the Court and had a few meetings here and there," Caleb said with a smile as he turned to greet Jake. "Also, I guess congratulations are in order, oh Chosen of the Malefic One."

"Thank you, thank you," Jake said, hearing the false sincerity in his little bothers voice.

The two of them smiled at each other as Caleb spoke privately to him. "So, Dina is directly related to Nature's Attendant, isn't she?"

"Oh? I thought the public information only said she was a student of his?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, it does, but she isn't the best at keeping secrets, and there is intel on him having a granddaughter who was soon to reach C-grade and was considered extremely talented, in part due to her Bloodline. I can put two and two together and guess this is her," Caleb explained. "Quite the find, all through the power of nepotism. Having a Primordial as a friend sure makes life easy; you know how hard it is for a group of assassins to get a good healer?"

"Pretty hard, I assume," Jake teased him.

"Damn right it is, but hey, we managed to snatch up one of the people you discarded, so better than expected."

"How benevolent of me, allowing you my leftovers," Jake relentlessly continued.

"Do you want me to start talking about you being thrown into a dungeon with a Unique Lifeform, a hawk, an old man, and a young, slightly naive dryad, and what kind of hijinks might develop? Just don't let poor Sylphie be corrupted. She is still so precious, and-"

"I am a single word away from punching you in front of everyone," Jake sent as he smiled at his little brother.

Caleb didn't say anything else but just threw him a cheeky smile. Only when the King asked him did he respond, and he stayed a bit longer before he looked at Dina and the others. "It was nice to chat with you all, but sadly I have business to attend to. I wish you all luck during your trip to Nevermore. I would say for us to have a good competition, but I would prefer not to lie to myself and think there will even be one."

The Judge of the Court left after that, leaving just Jake, the King, Sylphie, and Dina. With people already leaving the hall all around them, Jake also thought it pertinent for them to soon take their leave.

"Do you all have anything you need to do before we head off to Nevermore? Any last-minute preparations or shopping you need to get done?" Jake asked.

"Not here at the Order, and if there is any required shopping before we head off, we can simply do that at Nevermore City before we enter the dungeon," the King answered.

"Alright," Jake nodded. "I still have to meet up with Miranda for a talk and to get all the useful stuff I wasn't directly gifted that may come in handy during the dungeon. How about you guys just relax back at my residence before then?"

"Acceptable," the King agreed, with Dina tentatively nodding and Sylphie yawning.

"Great."

Shortly after, he had Viridia come and help with teleportation as the three of them were teleported to his mansion, and Jake went to check in with Miranda and see how everything was going on her end. He found her looking pretty damn stressed out within a room set up by the Verdant Witches, which was also where Jake learned he had gotten over a hundred million slaves that would soon be transferred to his home planet.

Being the kind World Leader he was, Jake wished Miranda luck dealing with all that and also made sure she would have all the authority she needed to handle the situation by practically giving her control over all the slave contracts. He also collected all the natural treasures and alchemical ingredients he had been given before sitting down and having a short chat with Miranda about her plans upon returning to Earth. During this, he also reluctantly got one of the drops of venom from that accursed statue, and while he knew it would be useful, he didn't like it.

Jake wasn't sure how long he would be at Nevermore, but chances are it would be at least a few years in Realtime. You could be there for five years at D-grade, and that only increased in C-grade to a total of fifty whole years within the dungeon. A tenfold increase. With how the time dilation worked, Jake wasn't sure exactly how long it would be, and no one else could be either, as the dilation increased the more floors you managed to clear.

He also decided to give her the spaceship the Automata Legion had gifted him and informed her of the plans of the United Tribes and their desire to send people, something she was in huge support of. The spaceship would go to Arnold to study, and the United Tribes members were more a gift to Miranda and the beast factions on Earth, so he was happy that this gifting session could benefit more than just him.

After talking with Miranda, Jake did his rounds and spoke to a few others to say goodbye before he headed off. Fifty years seemed like a long time, but when one could live thousands of years, it truly wasn't, so those who were used to operating on the timescale of the multiverse didn't even see this trip as a big deal. Irin and Draskil both at least didn't seem to care much, and Draskil was also busy planning his own trip to Nevermore anyway. Scarlett seemed sad he would be gone for a while but didn't say much as she had already prepared herself and was busy integrating with the Order.

Finally, Jake found his way back to the mansion, where he finally dispelled his mask and sat down to have a proper talk with Dina, Meira, the King, and Sylphie. Well, Sylphie didn't talk much, and Dina was even shyer than Meira, so not much productive talking was done as they waited for the Sword Saint to return.

When he did, there truly was no more reason to delay as they headed off toward the most well-known World Wonder of the multiverse:

Nevermore.

Chapter 653 - Nevermore City

Every single universe in existence was filled with life, planets, stars, and incredible opportunities. Yet the thing it had more of than anything else was nothingness. Empty spaces that seemed infinitely large, so big that some S-grades would struggle to pass through it in their entire lifetimes.

One of the largest empty spaces of all could be found within the second universe.

And at its center, one could find it: Nevermore.

A floating flat landmass that looked like a continent just sitting there in space at first look, but once one came closer, it became obvious it wasn't one. Instead, it was a ring. This donut-shaped object truly didn't look like much to an onlooker, but once one got near, things changed. Beneath the hole, darkness stretched, coated in nothingness surpassing even the blackness of space all around it. Stretching down what felt like infinitely.

Not even the most powerful of gods could pierce this dark pillar. This dark space. An indestructible concept blocked their path, with the only way in through the large pit on the floating ring. When looking down this endless pit of darkness, it looked like certain death, but in reality, it was an entrance to the single-largest dungeon in the entire multiverse. Floor after floor extended downwards, and entire cities on "safe" floors were interspaced throughout.

Despite the floors making it sound like it was a linear path, this wasn't even true. The pit allowed you to fall to where you belonged, and when the system decided where to send you, you simply appeared there. Nobody could even know one truly appeared in a space inside this pillar.

Nevertheless, this place was a place no faction in the multiverse could neglect.

Even the ring itself had become home to a massive city, barely any space unoccupied as every single faction had made their own compounds, and merchants had taken what was left. All this was under the purview of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore – the dungeon master of this World Wonder.

And on that day, a party of five appeared in the ringed city that had aptly been dubbed Nevermore City.

Nevermore.

Jake had heard so much about it for years. William had used it at D-grade to get a huge level advantage, and many D-grades who weren't considered top-tier talents went there to get an edge and often to try and overcome their current limitations. Nevermore was a well-spring of Records, surpassing other dungeons by quite a margin as the mega-dungeon had something none others did:

Unique titles.

The deeper you went, the better the title, so if you had little confidence to reach far into D-grade, going to Nevermore after evolving was a great way to ensure you would at least have some progress. For these people, C-grade was still a long shot, but Nevermore would at least give them a chance.

To people like Jake and his party members, they went there only at C-grade to compete on the Nevermore Leaderboards. These Leaderboards mattered not only for reputation and to show off to others but would give tangible titles based on how well you did. How the Leaderboards worked was also simple as could be.

Rack up points based on how you did in Nevermore. All scores were individual, and points could be gained both during solo portions of Nevermore and group portions, with the final score being cumulative, meaning to be the best, you had to be good at both. With a time limit of fifty years, it was a marathon to get as many points as you could.

The easiest way to gain points was to clear floors, do quests, complete challenges, get achievements, and participate in events. Simply killing a lot didn't necessarily give any rewards, though level-gain during this period did also reward points. The fact levels gave points was also one of the reasons it was generally considered best to be at close to 200 as possible, though being at a higher level could help allow you to dive further down.

Getting to Nevermore was also far easier than one would expect. The Wyrmgod himself had set up teleportation beacons that were incredibly easy to hone into even for forces that didn't have any gods, and through direct aid by the system, even the cost of teleportation was significantly reduced. During one of their long conversations, Jake had briefly talked to Villy about the Wyrmgod, and the Viper had revealed that out of every single Primordial, if not all gods, period, the Wyrmgod was the top expert when it came to space magic.

This is to say that Jake and his party of five arrived at Nevermore City without any issues. More accurately, they appeared within the compound controlled by the Order of the Malefic Viper. Even if the Order had become derelict throughout the ages, they had still maintained this compound, and it still remained one of the largest in Nevermore City since the day it was established in the second era.

"Welcome to Nevermore City, Chosen of the Malefic One and his comrades in arms," an attendant spoke as soon as they stepped off the teleportation circle.

Jake allowed his sphere to spread out and even released a pulse immediately to scan the area. He saw a massive compound that looked like it could house millions, if not billions, without issue, though it appeared mostly empty. Besides that, he felt quite a few presences lock in on him after he appeared, most of which were of a divine nature.

There are at least a dozen gods here, Jake quickly realized. All of them were within the Order compound, too, indicating they were members. A few seconds after he detected these auras, they all pulled back, leaving Jake to wonder.

Ultimately, it didn't matter as Jake greeted the attendant. "Thank you, is everything prepared?"

"Yes, please follow me," the attendant quickly nodded and motioned for them to follow. Their odd party moved through the halls of the large building they had appeared in as Jake took the chance to ask the Sword Saint something that was on his mind.

"Do you need to go shopping for equipment?"

He noticed that the guy hadn't changed that much stuff, at least not outwardly, since their duel in the Treasure Hunt. His robe was new, and the bracers he wore also looked newish, but the sandals looked the same, and his sword was his old ancestral weapon. Jake naturally couldn't see the old man's jewelry, but he knew that if he had to rely only on stuff from Earth, he would have been struggling. Considering how recently the Sword Saint hit C-grade, it only made sense he would need some upgrades.

"No, that won't be necessary," the Sword Saint smiled.

"Oh, really? Damn, for me, it was quite a challenge to hit the stat cap," Jake commented. "Did you have Reika get you some stuff, maybe?"

"No, it is that I don't need equipment to hit any stat cap," the Sword Saint explained. "Or, more accurately, I cannot get stats from equipment. I instead simply get stats when I am wielding my sword, roughly equivalent to the stat cap. A limitation of my class, if you may, that without my sword, I am far, far weaker."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Didn't even know that was a thing, but I guess it makes sense."

"That does not mean I shun away from upgrading what I wear. The robe still offers good protection and even increases my resource regeneration, my bracers are defensively focused, my sandals increase the

effectiveness of my movement-related skills, and I naturally wear a necklace with spatial storage,” the Sword Saint further clarified. “It is just that I don’t get stats, and I can only wear a total of five different pieces of equipment.”

“Five? So, what is the last one?”

“The item you chose to give me after our last duel,” the old man smiled.

“Wait... will that work inside the dungeon?” Jake asked skeptically.

The Sword Saint smiled even more as he turned to Dina. “Your friend Bobo can be summoned inside the dungeon, can’t he?”

She seemed surprised at suddenly being asked but still nodded. “Yeah, Bobo is a Guardian.”

“So is the Monarch classified as,” the Sword Saint said. “Though there will likely be some restrictions considering it is an item I cannot fully control, so I cannot promise we will have another combatant, just that he should at least be able to give out some advice. Not that he could fight for prolonged periods even without these restrictions.”

“Hm, alright,” Jake nodded. If they could summon the Monarch of Blood at all times... yeah, that would be overpowered.

Jake knew that the rules about Guardians and tamed beasts and whatnot were quite complicated when it came to dungeons. Sylphie and Jake had their Union Oath that technically made them Companions – hence why he could take her along to the Treasure Hunt – but that did not mean they could do the same for Nevermore. They each took up a slot, as while they were linked, they were still entirely separate entities. One thing Jake had learned was that those you could bring along without any restrictions were classified solely as Guardians and always had one core aspect:

If their "owner" died, they would die, and their strength would always be directly tied to the "owner" in question. This made them closer to permanent summons, at least in the eyes of the system, than true separate lifeforms.

Of course, the entire thing was more complicated than could be easily summed up. The Monarch was in a gray zone, Casper and Lyra were in a gray zone, and there were so many damn gray zones one single rule simply could not exist. This ultimately resulted in every situation being judged on a case-by-case basis, where the system decided if it was okay or not. Luckily, there were several ways to test it before already being at the dungeon. This was mainly an issue for tamers who, more often than not, had to limit the number of beasts they would bring.

Bringing a horde of ten thousand beasts into a sewer dungeon also probably wouldn't be very comfortable...

Anyway, their party of five went towards a prepared meeting room in the Order compound where their final preparation would be done, and a basic strategy would be formed. In reality, they had not discussed much internally about how they planned on approaching the dungeon and tackling the challenges, as they all knew one thing: they were overqualified.

More accurately, they were overqualified for the early parts of Nevermore.

The dungeon was split into a huge number of floors that got progressively more difficult, so it only made sense for the first ones to be far too easy for a party like theirs. It was possible to skip floors altogether, but Jake and the others had no desire to do this even if they could as these early floors were a good way to rack up some easy points.

Considering they would likely spend at least a few months going through floors that weren't overly challenging, they would have that time to also form some synergy and truly learn how the others fought. Jake knew the most in their party about how the others approached combat, and even his knowledge was limited.

So, with this in mind, their preparations mainly consisted of some basic briefings. Oh, and of course, it was a chance to give Sylphie the gift from the United Tribes.

"Alright," Jake said when they were all in a meeting room, and he had sent the attendant away. "First of all, Sylphie, come here for a good thing."

The hawk flew over, and Jake quickly took out the box. "I got this gift from the United Tribes for you. It is the feather of a super strong bird, and if you eat it, you can absorb its energy and stuff."

"Ree?"

"No, I don't know what it will taste like, but probably not too bad. Also, you will have to eat it rather quickly based on what the phoenix goddess who gifted it said," Jake explained.

"Ree," Sylphie acknowledged.

Jake nodded as he slowly infused his energy into the box to unlock it. The moment he did, the lid slowly opened, and powerful energy radiated into the room as it was bathed in orange. Jake saw the feather in the box, its almost crystal-like appearance and radiant red-

Gulp

He barely had time to study it before the small hawk had pecked forward and gulped it down like a hungry chick. Jake was momentarily scared something bad would happen and quickly looked at Sylphie. "Are you okay?"

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, confused.

"No, I mean, how do you feel?"

"Ree, ree," Sylphie said unbothered.

"Oh..." Jake muttered. Yeah, Sylphie claimed she felt full but otherwise didn't comment much. He was a bit annoyed at failing to identify the feather fast enough, but based on Sylphie's response and the phoenix goddess' description, it was likely that the feather had been prepared specifically to be so easily consumable.

"Well, that was fast and easy," Jake muttered. He threw a glance at everyone before asking: "Do you all have any comments? Any personal plans for exploring the city?"

"No," the Fallen King said dismissively.

"No more preparations can be made that will truly assist us within the dungeon," the Sword Saint shook his head. "Though I would like to take a look at Nevermore City. Not doing so would be a waste."

"Ree!" Sylphie said, agreeing they should just get going.

"Grandpa gave me everything I need, so..." Dina said, making fast progress at becoming able to talk like a normal person.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment. They truly didn't have any more preparations to do. It wasn't even possible to gather information on the floors they would explore as that was censored to foster competition. It was censored in such a way that even if Villy tried to tell Jake, he just wouldn't hear or see anything, and even if Villy wrote something down, the words wouldn't appear. Perhaps there were some ways to get around this with Bloodline bullshit or some Transcendents, but Jake saw no reason to try and cheat.

"Then we should get a move on," Jake smiled. He was naturally also ready and had a stock of more ingredients than ever stored away in his spatial necklace. High-level stuff too. Most of the gifts he had left over were given to Haven or stored back at his mansion for use upon getting back, as a lot wasn't something he could use quite yet. Oh, and if Jake did need to get more stuff, it wasn't like one was stuck in there. As long as one had reached one of the city layers, one could always teleport away and back there again. This would still waste time for the leaderboards, so it wasn't advised, but it was a possibility.

Their group of five thus left the Order of the Malefic Viper compound shortly after they had arrived and left towards Nevermore. However, even if they did not need to do any preparations in the city, there were still a few places they wanted to stop by.

The first of which was the place dubbed the Leaderboard Square. This was where one could see all the Leaderboards of Nevermore, though not all of them were displayed at all times. The Leaderboards also only displayed the top ten, though one could pay Credits to search up specific individuals, and as long as they hadn't made their entries anonymous, one could still see it. A lot of factions also had special tokens to see individuals from their own force or even their enemy forces. Oh, and one could naturally always see their own ranks.

It was also announced to the entire square whenever someone got a good score, though this usually didn't happen more than a few times a year.

On the way there, Jake and his party gathered quite the attention. They stood out even among geniuses, but Jake still had to admit he felt slightly humbled by the number of powerful people he saw while walking toward the square. He did not encounter any he would consider truly top-tier, but he did see some parties that he believed could give him quite the challenge if they all came at him together. All these parties were below level 210, of course. The square they were going to was the one with the C-grade Leaderboards, after all.

Luckily, no one bothered them. Even without Jake there, the Fallen King alone would scare anyone off. Those able to Identify Blessings especially stayed out of their way, as Jake didn't hide his identity as a Chosen, and Sylphie and the Sword Saint naturally didn't hide their Blessings either.

This is to say they made it to the massive square quite easily. It still required them to teleport once and walk quite a distance, as flying was not allowed in Nevermore City. Neither was fighting of any kind – outside of the arenas, of course.

Walking into the square, Jake's eyes instantly landed on the four massive monuments on display. Each of them were over a hundred meters tall, and each had only ten golden names written. Jake quickly scanned them all as he marveled at the craftsmanship, the old swordsman at his side also nodding and complimenting them.

Two of the leaderboard monuments were related to the ninety-second era that had just ended with the integration of the ninety-third universe, while the two final ones were related to his own universe. He had not expected anything to be on the last two, but when he got closer, his eyes opened in surprise.

People have already reached C-grade and done Nevermore to get on the Leaderboards? How in the actual fuck!?

Chapter 654 - Nevermore Leaderboards

Jake instantly understood how the list was full when he laid his eyes on the first wall, which displayed the top ten individuals of the ninety-third universe.

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

1. Holy Templar – Low Tier

2. Holy Knight – Low Tier

3. Holy Priestess – Low Tier

4. Holy Ranger – Low Tier

5. Holy Knight – Low Tier

6. Holy Mage – Low Tier

7. Holy Duelist – Low Tier

8. Holy Mage – Low Tier

9. Holy Knight – Low Tier

10. Holy Templar – Low Tier

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They were all shit scores. For reference, there was no actual display of points; people were just placed into a “tier” based on their performance, with the lowest being the Low Tier. After that was Middle-Low Tier, High-Low Tier, and then Peak-Low Tier. Then from there, one moved into the Low-Mid Tier, Mid Tier, High-Mid Tier, and so on and so forth.

All of this is to say that Low Tier was the bottom rung. Jake was still a bit surprised, especially when he saw the list dominated by people who chose to remain anonymous and only post the archetype of their classes. Moreover, they were all from the Holy Church based on their names.

The reason he found it weird was that having “completed” Nevermore already shouldn’t really be a thing, right? To complete it would require one to spend the full fifty years inside, which would be at least a year or two, even with great time dilation by getting to the lower floors, something these people clearly hadn’t. Jake had only managed to reach C-grade recently, same with the others, and this list was only for people from the ninety-third universe.

Perhaps there were some beasts and whatnot already inside, but the final score would only appear on the Leaderboard after one was done in there... so how had the Holy Church managed to speedrun the place? Jake wasn’t the only confused one.

“Have I misinterpreted how Nevermore functions? I believed one would have to spend their full term inside before the score displays?” the old man asked.

Jake was about to comment as Dina spoke. “It’s normal.”

“Could you elaborate?” the Sword Saint looked at her while smiling.

She nodded enthusiastically as she explained.

“The Holy Church always does this. Every new era, the Wyrmgod changes up the dungeons, and the Church sends in C-grades from the new universe to effectively scout it out for their later, more talented parties. While those who get through it can’t relay any direct information, through different methods,

the kind of environments, mana types, and of course, the general sizes of the floors can be determined. They even often wear equipment capable of tracking distances traveled through subtle means,” Dina explained quite articulately. “To see the new version within the first decade, one must bring along at least one person from the new universe too, so that is why they are on the list.”

“Huh,” Jake said. “But how did they complete the dungeon that fast already? They can’t have reached C-grade that long ago...”

Dina looked at Jake before she gazed back at the old man, and it was only after he nodded she answered.

“They don’t try to complete it... they just get helped by four far more powerful individuals to the first city layer. There, they then enter a time dilation chamber just to wait out the time and get their names on the Leaderboards. They do this to communicate they have knowledge of the floors and try to recruit people and sell intelligence,” Dina explained.

“That... sounds like such a waste?” Jake said, confused.

“The Church often does things that seem like a waste... and I am sure they also got other parties going to the floors after the first city layer. They usually only bring one member who is getting helped by the four others, and then that person is abandoned for someone they deem actually talented for the floors that provide actual challenges.”

Jake nodded as he kept staring at the Leaderboard. “So they are pretty much sacrificial pawns?”

“Sounds like it,” the Sword Saint said with a frown.

Dina didn't deny it as she subtly nodded.

"Is this knowledge they gain even worth that much?" Jake asked. "Or the advertisement by having a bunch of low-tier scores on the Leaderboards?"

"No, not really," Dina admitted. "But a bunch of C-grades aren't worth much either."

Jake wanted to protest... but after just thinking for a moment, there was some truth to it. If the Church just had some people who weren't judged to very talented level to C-grade quickly, ignored trying to get Perfect Evolutions or even good classes or professions, it shouldn't have been that hard. Especially if the Church invested extra resources in them to help raise them. Maybe these people wouldn't even have been able to reach the grade naturally.

Or maybe the Church had just thrown away talents because they viewed them as a dime a dozen. Either way, it left a bad taste in Jake's mouth, and he looked at one of the other Leaderboards that showed the scores from those of the 92nd universe to try and better his mood by seeing the performances of some actual geniuses.

That didn't make him feel better.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 92nd Universe.

1. Yip of Yore – Pinnacle Tier

2. Altius of the Blade – Pinnacle Tier

3. Holy Templar – Pinnacle Tier

4. Hand of Umbra – Pinnacle Tier

5. Chosen of the Blightfather – Pinnacle Tier

6. Warrior of Valhal – Pinnacle Tier

7. Monk – Pinnacle Tier

8. Anonymous – Pinnacle Tier

9. Scion of Life – Pinnacle Tier

10. Altmar Prince – Pinnacle Tier

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Jake read over all the names, and his eyes naturally settled on number one. Yip of Yore. It seemed that even in C-grade, he had been at the top of his game. As for the others, Jake didn't care much. Most chose to just name themselves something representing their factions and not themselves as people. The one exception was the top two, which did make Jake wonder who this Altius of the Blade was. Not that it truly mattered.

Instead, he inspected the Leaderboard showing the scores from the ninety-third era. While the Leaderboard before only displayed individuals native to the ninety-second universe, this one displayed every single C-grade who had completed Nevermore during this entire Era. In other words, the top geniuses of nearly fourteen billion years.

Jake opened it... and while it shouldn't have been unexpected, he saw a familiar name at the top once more.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 92nd Era.

1. Yip of Yore – Era's Pinnacle.

2. Monk – Pinnacle Tier

3. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier

4. Altius of the Blade – Pinnacle Tier

5. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier

6. Champion of Valhal

7. The Eldritch Dancer

8. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier

9. Estrastromoz Regalflight – Pinnacle Tier

10. Chosen Son of Gwyndyr – Pinnacle Tier

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This list was of the entire era. The top ten C-grade geniuses for billions of years. Yet Yip of Yore still found himself at the top, recognized as the Era's Pinnacle. Jake was also surprised to see that the guy called Altius of the Blade managed to come in fourth overall, making it seem like there were two supreme geniuses in that era. Jake wondered what happened to that guy... though the most likely explanation was that he failed to ever become a god. In fact, Jake got the feeling that one of the reasons few names were used was because most were dead. At least it would help someone like Gwyndyr to have his name referenced on the Leaderboards even if this Chosen Son died.

Jake shook his head as he looked at the final Leaderboard – the one for the ninety-third era.

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

Leaderboard Opens in 615 Days

He wasn't sure if he should be surprised to find it empty. No one had gotten on it yet, as it wasn't even open yet, but even if it had been open, Jake didn't imagine many top geniuses would have had time to get Pinnacle scores, which seemed to be the norm for the top geniuses. Jake felt determined to, at the very least, put his name towards the top of that list – if not at the very top.

The 615 days till it opened also seemed rather arbitrary, though perhaps it did have a deeper meaning Jake wasn't aware of. Or it was literally just a random number chosen by the Wyrmgod based on how fast the Primordial estimated people will take to clear it.

Wait, maybe it has something to do with titles?

Yeah, that made sense. If claiming the top spot, even for a moment, rewarded a special title or something, then it made sense to not allow people like those chumps from the Holy Church to just claim it. Jake also reckoned that even if you completed your Nevermore run before the Leaderboard opened, you would still be rewarded whenever it did, just on a delay.

However, as he stared at the four Leaderboards, one thing did strike him as odd.

"Is there no all-star Leaderboard? One for the best of the best?" Jake asked.

"No," the Sword Saint asked. "I had asked my Patron about this once before, and he explained to me that while there was one in the past, it was eventually done away with. The issue is that each era tends to be too different to directly compare their scores, so the Wyrmgod believes a composite list of comparisons to be faulty. In most cases, the top spot would be claimed by the most powerful of the current era, making it shift all the time and ultimately be useless. At least that is the official story."

"Official story?" Jake asked. "So, what is the unofficial one?"

"That it still exists, but if you aren't worthy of placing yourself on it, then you aren't worthy of knowing about it either," the Sword Saint said with an amused smile. "I do still think there is some truth to the official story, but I believe the framework is still in place if the Leaderboard did exist once upon a time."

"Hm," Jake mused to himself. No matter what the truth was, it didn't change their goal in Nevermore in the slightest. They just had to do as well as possible in both the group portion and the individual challenges.

"We have delayed enough, have we not? Let us continue towards the entrance to Nevermore proper. We shall claim the top places of this Leaderboard and stand here next in admiration of our own glory," the King said with confidence in his voice.

None of the others seemed to disagree with heading off. However, just as Jake was about to agree, he heard voices behind him from two C-grades speaking loudly.

“The Chosen of Yip of Yore will claim first place, won’t he? You saw in him the northern arenas?” one of them said with reverence in his voice.

“Yeah, did you see when he took on an entire party from the Altmar Empire? It wasn’t even a fight...” the other guy answered with an equal level of reverence. “He is probably the top genius from the new universe, right?”

“Definitely,” the first one agreed.

Jake stopped listening in as they just kept sucking the orange fucker off. Jake couldn’t even say he was surprised anymore at hearing about the guy. Jake also wasn’t dumb enough to think this was a coincidence, and clearly, the Sword Saint agreed.

“This was planned,” the Sword Saint said as they still stood in front of the leaderboards. “That he is at an arena just when we happen to arrive at Nevermore also isn’t coincidental. He has been waiting for you.”

Nodding, Jake agreed. “Let’s go check it out either way.”

“Chances are he wants you to come. It is even likely he wants you to challenge him there,” the old man continued.

“I know,” Jake said.

"I do wonder who this Ell'Hakan truly is. Perhaps I should enter the arena for a bout with him," the Fallen King voiced his interest.

"No," Jake shook his head. "Can you take Sylphie and Dina elsewhere? The Sword Saint and I will go check out the arena and then regroup with you three afterward."

"Why?" the Unique Lifeform questioned.

"Because he is dangerous in a way that pure power doesn't work against. I know the Sword Saint faced him before and walked away fine, but I barely trust myself, which is why I won't go alone," Jake explained.

Jake knew the smartest move would probably be to just not go to this arena, but his curiosity ultimately won out over his logic. He wanted some clue about the party members Ell'Hakan had gathered, and he wanted to feel how strong the other Chosen had grown since their last encounter. After his recent talks with Villy, it became clear Jake couldn't half-arse dealing with Ell'Hakan. This is why he didn't want to risk exposing the others to the nahoom, or more specifically, expose them to his Bloodline.

His Bloodline was, in all honesty, scary as hell, and while Jake trusted the Sword Saint to handle his emotions, he wasn't so sure about the three others. Dina, he barely knew, but she had grown up isolated and only around trusted friends, so she had little experience with the world. He could easily see just a single encounter fuck her up and potentially even poison the well entirely, making them lose her as a party member.

Sylphie was too free-spirited and probably wouldn't be that affected, at least not when it came to turning her against Jake. However, if he instead tried to inspire doubt or even have her attack Ell'Hakan

to break the rules of Nevermore and have her be punished or something like that, Jake could totally see Sylphie fall for it.

Finally, there was the Fallen King. Jake had defeated the King once, and he knew how prideful the Unique Lifeform was. At times, Jake felt like they were talking a tight line of mutual respect and viewed the existence of the other as mutually beneficial, and Jake couldn't write off Ell'Hakan ruining that balance. Perhaps even go as far as make the King feel that death would be better than being bound to Jake.

Ultimately, it came down to Jake not truly comprehending what the other Chosen was capable of, and he knew it would be foolish to take too big of a risk by exposing them all. Hence why he would go with the Sword Saint only.

One other reason he wanted to go was for the sheer exposure. Chances are their final showdown would be in C-grade, and Jake wanted a better feel for what he would be dealing with Bloodline-wise. A part of him feared that perhaps Ell'Hakan's Bloodline had also evolved and grown stronger like his own, which would add a whole other layer to the challenge.

Jake explained this logic to the others, and while the Fallen King wasn't happy about it, he still complied.

"Very well, I shall respect your assessment. I have previously chosen to not respect the power of a Bloodline once, and I find it pertinent to not do so once more lest I wish to see myself twice-fallen," the Fallen King said as he turned to the girls. "Follow me, hawk of the wind, dryad of nature."

"Ree!?" Sylphie screeched at Jake in an offended tone for not wanting to take her along.

“He is dangerous, okay? He makes people think things that aren’t true. Like, what if he made you think that I was actually a bad person?” Jake asked.

“Ree!” Sylphie retorted.

“No, I am not saying you would for sure fall for something like that, but... what if he made you feel something really bad that made you do something you didn’t want to? Something really bad?” Jake tried again, pretty much saying the first thing. He wasn’t really sure how to phrase it...

“Consider this, hawk of wind. What if this enemy Chosen made you believe the rumored Smelly Pot, as you have aptly named it, is, in fact, the perfect nest?” the King said.

What the fuck kind of argument is tha-

“Ree, ree!” Sylphie’s eyes glowed with realization as she flew over and landed on the King’s head before promptly telling Jake to never allow the monster known as Ell’Hakan anywhere near her.

Jake stared a bit before just giving up. If it worked, it worked.

“I shall take these two somewhere else, perhaps another arena to observe some battles or have some entertainment for ourselves,” the Fallen King said. “I wish you luck facing your rival Chosen.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Jake smiled. Even if the entire plan was to not truly face him in the first place. Killing in the arenas wasn’t allowed, after all.

With that, the group prepared to split up as Jake and the Sword Saint headed to this Northern arena while the others headed toward the southern ones.

Chapter 655 - Last Say

The Nevermore Arenas. To Jake and the others in his party, these did not have much pull, but to others, they were a cornerstone of Nevermore City. They pulled in huge audiences and were somewhere geniuses from all over the multiverse gathered from C-grade to S-grade. It was a chance to show off their skills to others for a myriad of reasons, most of which revolved around recruitment.

Faction-less Individuals could show off their power and potentially find party members to join them in their pursuit to rank high in Nevermore. Others hoped to be recruited into powerful parties that needed someone with their skills. Some of these even hoped to join a faction.

This was especially prevalent due to the new universe recently getting integrated, and it would only increase as the Wyrmgod sent out these tokens for C-grades all over the new universe to teleport to Nevermore directly. All who had arrived now had to have some backing to even be able to make the trip.

Needless to say, many of these factions did not need to be in the arenas to recruit members but already had full parties, which led to another reason why some went to the arenas: to show off. Jake was pretty damn fucking sure Ell’Hakan was in the camp of people wanting to show off, and if he could also attract Jake, that was probably just a win-win for the guy.

Jake did find it regrettable that killing was not allowed in Nevermore City, not even in the arenas. Accidental deaths weren’t a thing either, as referees always watched the fight, and some odd formation

had been placed that made it so not even instantly fatal attacks would kill someone. Instead, it just threw them out of the arena. Jake suspected system-fuckery was behind this.

Either way, if this anti-killing rule was not in place, Jake would have gladly faced Ell'Hakan within an arena.

However, with the rule in place... Jake just wouldn't face him at all if he could avoid it. Yet he still wanted to at least lay an eye on the guy and get a feel for how much stronger he had gotten and if his Bloodline had grown more potent. Ell'Hakan had proven himself very good at suddenly popping up and attacking, and Jake wanted to avoid being taken by surprise if the fucker ambushed Jake with a Bloodline that was more powerful than Jake expected.

He also knew that curiosity would gnaw at him if he didn't at least see a few of the asshole's party members. Villy said they were powerful, and Jake knew that wanting to see them personally wasn't logical and potentially even Jake walking into a trap, but the alternative was him wondering for decades to come. Besides, If Ell'Hakan was fighting in one of the arenas, Jake should be able to scout out his party mates without even being noticed, but even if Ell'Hakan had set a trap... well, he did kind of have a plan for that.

"Would you happen to have an extra robe and a sword?" Jake asked the Sword Saint.

"Oh?" he asked with interest. "I do, but what for?"

"Something that will hopefully work," Jake answered. "Follow me."

He led the Sword Saint into a small alley and after he was sure no one was looking, he had the old man give him a robe and a sword and put them on.

Then, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he entered meditation. He focused on his heartbeat and soon heard it thumping strongly within his mind. Focusing even more on it, he made it slow down significantly as he felt slightly strained. His Sphere of Perception momentarily seemed to flicker before it stabilized, yet the sound of his own heartbeat had ceased to be within his mind. It was as if he had grasped it with a hand and squeezed tightly to keep it under control

“Your aura... I felt a slight shift,” the Sword Saint frowned as Jake opened his eyes. “You feel, hm, weaker, perhaps?”

“I made it a bit easier for me to hide from his detection,” Jake said. “To allow me to not attract attention but just be a follower of yours.”

“Oh?” the Sword Saint exclaimed skeptically. “I have done some research into Bloodlines, and from my comprehension, he will be able to feel yours if he gets close. Even if you change your looks and aura, suspicion would still arise if I am seen walking with an individual with a Bloodline.”

“Unless he is touching me, not even El’Hakan should be able to feel it.”

The Sword Saint frowned before simply nodding. “Do as you may.”

Jake nodded in return and made sure the robe was properly put on and the sword attached to his waist. He then lifted his hand and conjured a stable arcane barrier over his mask before infusing it with a bit of

dark mana, hiding his face. He finished the look by putting on his old cloak and changing its colors to dark blue, like the Sword Saint's robe.

Finally, he used Shroud of the Primordial to display himself as only level 200 while also entirely removing any trace of him having a Blessing.

"How do I look?" Jake asked.

"Different," the Sword Saint answered. "Enough so that I would not recognize you."

"Good enough," Jake nodded. "Let's go."

What Jake had done was something he had theorized for a long time should be possible. During his childhood, Jake had managed to completely suppress his Bloodline to the level of effectively deactivating it. This was not a usual function of Bloodlines or something anyone could just do, yet Jake had done it, which begged the question... why couldn't he do something similar again?

Which was what he had just done. However, it was flawed, and Jake had to actively focus on keeping it suppressed to the level of being undetectable lest he wanted to somehow try and suppress it entirely. Something he had no desire to do. For now, his Bloodline remained fully active while also being suppressed enough so that no one around him could feel it. It had been effectively pressed into his body and could only be discovered through touch.

Had Jake known he could do this before coming to Nevermore?

No, no, he hadn't.

So there was no fucking way Ell'Hakan could either.

In fact, the lack of a Bloodline would more likely than not make him entirely disregard Jake and instead focus solely on the Sword Saint. At least, that was the plan.

"Let's pick up the pace, can't keep this up forever," Jake said, as he did know he was on borrowed time. It wasn't effortless to contain the aura.

"Very well," the Sword Saint said.

The two of them hurried, and soon enough, they made it to the northern arenas. It was a huge complex of different arenas, and even for C-grade, there were dozens, making Jake fear finding Ell'Hakan would be difficult.

That proved to be a non-issue as one arena had far more fanfare than any other. More than that, Jake felt something. A familiar Bloodline lurked just through the entrance to the large double doors leading into the colosseum-like structure. Hidden, just out of sight.

"He is just past here," Jake warned the Sword Saint.

“Very well,” the old man answered. “I shall naturally take the lead, my fellow member of the Noboru Clan.”

Jake didn’t comment as they walked forward, and as they entered the arena, Jake heard the grating voice.

“What a wonderful surprise to see you here, Sword Saint,” Ell’Hakan spoke as he spotted the Sword Saint and the disguised Jake. He had been hidden by a large group of people, and they made way for him as he walked straight toward them.

“I do not believe I can say the same,” the Sword Saint said, turning to look at Ell’Hakan.

Instantly, eyes gathered on them as the crowd paid attention. It was clear Ell’Hakan had gathered all of them to witness this encounter.

Jake felt Ell’Hakan’s gaze briefly land on him, but it was only for a mere moment as he turned his attention back towards the old swordsman.

“Our last encounter was unfortunate; I will take that upon myself,” Ell’Hakan said with a smile as he turned to the crowd of onlookers. “Everyone, allow me to introduce the man known as the Sword Saint. A man I have faced once, and from that alone can firmly say I cannot assure victory. Also, a party member of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

A few frowns came from all around at the mention of the Malefic Viper. Really not a popular guy.

“Ah, do not misunderstand; the Sword Saint is not a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper, but a man who stands on his own, correct?” the Chosen said.

“It is so,” the Sword Saint didn’t deny. “I choose my own Path because do we not all seek to walk one that is only ours? Or perhaps that is just the ramblings of an old man. At least, his willingness to pave his own way is something I find admirable when we discuss Lord Thayne. His willingness to walk his own Path, even if it does not align with that of the Malefic One.”

“I have heard he recently did some quite impressive things indeed,” Ell’Hakan nodded in recognition. “Speaking of the Chosen, I had hoped to meet him here and perhaps have a fruitful discussion. While it is pleasant to meet you once more, it does make me wonder... who is this man you brought along? I do not believe him to be one of your party members.”

Jake really tried to keep it together, but he felt oddly nervous that he would be discovered. Too nervous. He still managed to remain stable, as the Sword Saint answered.

“This is my great grandson-in-law. Or, well, at least I wouldn’t complain if that is what he became,” the Sword Saint said as he let out a grandfatherly laugh.

Jake stared at the Sword Saint with wide eyes at that sudden declaration. What the hell was the guy saying?

“Amusing,” Ell’Hakan smiled and shook his head as he redirected his attention to the Sword Saint. “Say, would it be possible to have you arrange a chat with the Chosen of the Malefic One?”

With the attention off him, Jake could finally focus more on scanning the Chosen in front of him as the Sword Saint kept him distracted.

“Sadly, I do not think he wants to discuss very much with you. You have not exactly been a good conversation partner to Lord Thayne thus far, now have you?” the old man shot back.

“Alas, I cannot deny that. However, it does make me wonder... why would he not dare say this to my face? Is it perhaps accurate for me to assume that he sent you here because he does not wish to face me directly?” Ell’Hakan asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I would deem that assessment highly inaccurate. In fact, I believe he would gladly stand in front of you at this very moment if he wanted to,” the swordsman countered.

Ell’Hakan raised his eyebrow again before sighing. “Very well. I merely wanted to have a frank talk with him under the gaze of the Wyrmgod, with our safety ensured by the rules of Nevermore. Seeing as he is not interested, would you so kindly deliver a message for me?”

“That could be arranged,” the Sword Saint agreed.

“Thank you,” Ell’Hakan bowed. “Tell Lord Thayne that I truly do want a discussion. No deceit. A genuine olive branch, where an alternative can be found to the demise of either of us. I know he has... doubts about his Patron, so let him know he can find a home in so many other places than that forsaken Order with his unique talents. While we may had a bad first impression of one another, I genuinely believe that a friendship or at least mutual tolerance can be formed as long as he desires it to be so.”

The Sword Saint looked at the nahoom for a few seconds before nodding.

“That is truly all,” Ell’Hakan said as he bowed yet another time. “Thank you, Sword Saint. I would invite you to a duel in the arena to have a proper rematch, but sadly I will have to take my leave now as my comrades are done enjoying themselves in the arena. Nevermore awaits. Oh, and do know that even if I desire friendlier terms between us, I shall hold nothing back during the descent. Let us have a healthy competition.”

With those words, four people walked out of the arena. Jake turned his gaze to them, and instantly he felt relief. He didn’t recognize a single of the four figures that walked out of the arena. Jake instantly scanned them all, and together with his assessment of Ell’Hakan... he had a decent idea of what he would be dealing with.

The four were all peak-level geniuses. They gave him the same vibes as Dina but without the air of naivety. Among them was a beastfolk warrior that looked to be descended from a wolf. Another was a mage of an unknown race Jake didn’t recognize, and he didn’t dare use Identify. Second-to-last was an elemental in humanoid form. A metal elemental of some kind, it seemed. Lastly was a woman covered in all white and a veil hiding her face, giving off a familiar aura that did give Jake some pause.

It appeared the Holy Church had sent a healer Ell’Hakan’s way. If this was some official policy, he couldn’t be sure.

Ell’Hakan turned to meet his party members and was about to walk toward them, but he didn’t get far.

Scanning them all gave Jake enough information, and he looked at the Sword Saint for a moment as the old man gave a light smile and nodded.

“Are these your party members?” Jake opened his mouth for the first time, purposefully masking his voice with mana.

Ell’Hakan turned and looked at Jake as all eyes from the onlookers gathered on him. A lot of eyes at this point, with many also observing from far away. Jake felt the annoyance of the enemy Chosen at Jake speaking despite just being a follower of the Sword Saint, but Ell’Hakan didn’t show it. Who did show it was all the supporters around him who sneered at Jake daring to ask.

“They are indeed. Why do you ask?” Ell’Hakan asked, his tone neutral despite how annoyed he felt.

“Curiosity that has now been sated,” Jake said in a curt tone.

Ell’Hakan frowned deeply now. Jake didn’t need his intuition to tell him the Chosen was thoroughly using his Bloodline to try and understand why Jake suddenly had a change in demeanor. Sadly for him... it was too late.

“I am starting to believe there is more to you than meets the eye, masked friend of the Sword Saint,” Ell’Hakan said, clearly trying to claim back control of the conversation and have the last word. “However, as I said, I cannot delay here much longer, and I will-“

“The answer is no.”

Jake released the grip upon his heart as he allowed it to thump to life once more. Jake’s aura flared out as he let it all go, including his presence. The robe covering his body was shredded, revealing his true form as his yellow eyes drilled into the genuinely surprised Ell’Hakan, who stared at Jake with wide-open eyes.

“How dare you stand there and talk about unfortunate situations and bad first impressions. You came to my planet. Killed my friends. Proclaimed you would kill me and wreak havoc across my world. I didn’t even know you. And for what? To spin some grand tale of pure fantasy? To claim you tried to save my world? Guess what, the ones you manipulated to help you and then betrayed are rebuilding after the destruction you caused. They grieve the deaths you instigated. So no, I will not take your poisoned olive branch or listen to the words of someone who has only ever sought to deceive. I decide if I want to listen, not you. Remember, you came after me first. You started this. Never forget that,” Jake said, his voice echoing out so everyone around them could hear.

Shocked eyes were all around him as he heard faint whispers, making it clear they all knew who he was. More attention was ever focused on the square as Jake’s loud voice had attracted an even bigger crowd than before. Jake took the chance when they were still shocked and turned to the four party members of Ell’Hakan, who all stood there, looking perplexed.

“I do wish you four luck. You will need it, seeing as you chose to follow the vision of a coward who can’t even see the one he proclaims his fated enemy when he stands right in front of his eyes.”

With those words, Jake turned to leave as the Sword Saint looked at Ell’Hakan one more time before bowing. “A pleasure.”

The old man followed after Jake as they heard a yell from behind.

“Wait-“ Ell’Hakan tried as Jake retorted before he had a chance to say anything.

“Just stop,” Jake’s voice, infused with his Willpower, bellowed out. “I don’t care about your words. Speak with your action.”

With those words, Jake walked off with the Sword Saint walking tall beside him, not looking back. A sliver of doubt, if he had done the right thing, crept up in his mind, but Jake squashed it the instant it appeared as he knew it was a feeble attempt by the other Chosen.

Ell’Hakan’s Bloodline hadn’t evolved, and Jake had also confirmed one more crucial thing.

He was legitimately afraid of fighting Jake. Afraid of killing him. He was looking for a way to spin the story and to turn Jake to his side and against the Viper. Without realizing it, his recent stunt, which gave him the support of several major factions rivaling for surpassing the Order, had given Ell’Hakan and Yip pause when it came to acting against Jake. Moreover, they seemed to genuinely think they could turn Jake into a heretic... not knowing he already was one.

Jake wasn’t a schemer... but even he knew how to take advantage of someone acting on faulty information.

Meeting Ell’Hakan had been a risk. No doubt about it. But for the first time, he walked away with the last say, and his doubts and curiosity were laid to rest, allowing him to focus on what truly mattered:

Actually doing the damn Nevermore dungeon.

He just hoped his party members hadn’t gotten up to any trouble while he and the Sword Saint faced off against another Chosen.

Chapter 656 - Into The Abyss

"That must have been cathartic," the Sword Saint said after they had made some good distance between themselves and the northern arenas. "I take it no one is following us?"

"Nobody, as far as I can tell. And yes, it felt damn good to finally tell that fucker off," Jake wholeheartedly agreed, though he scratched his chin a bit embarrassed as he asked:. "But... eh... was that entire speech a bit overboard?"

"Hm, it was adequate and communicated what had to be said," the old man shook his head.

"Good, good," Jake nodded. He had pretty much made up the speech on the spot and let out a few pent-up feelings, so he wasn't sure how it came off.

"It was an interesting encounter, I must say," the Sword Saint commented. "More so than your speech, I believe your recent actions in relation to Vesperia are the real issue for this Yip and his Chosen. His attempt to try and find a solution that does not include killing you seemed genuine. I believe they fear the potential backlash of other factions if they kill you outright, and chances are they will attempt to discredit or spin that ability of yours, such as claiming that it cannot truly benefit others. Or perhaps say you refuse to help anyone."

"I had considered that and also planned a counter-strategy of sorts to that bullshit story, but all of that is for after Nevermore. I truly couldn't go and affect another evolution here and now even if I wanted to," Jake sighed. He was still annoyed at having to deal with El'Hakan, but he had also decided to take it seriously.

"In either case, today was a win. You turned the narrative from you pursuing him to him being the one chasing you. You threw the ball in his court to prove himself worthy of even competing with you. I do not doubt he can spin it to still be a position he can work from, but one thing I do believe is that you managed to change part of the discourse. You swept him up in your own tale, and forcing any storyteller to adapt and change his story to fit a new reality leaves it open for plot holes and mistakes," the Sword Saint said.

"Yeah," Jake nodded. "Thanks, by the way. You handled things pretty damn perfectly. I did not expect that line about great-grandson-in-law. Sure threw me for a loop, and I guess my confusion and embarrassment was a great veil to block Ell'Hakan from gleaming anything."

"Ah, yes," the Sword Saint nodded. "But it was genuine. I had hoped something would develop there, especially after the two of you got along during the Treasure Hunt. Sadly, it seems you and little Reika aren't meant to be."

Jake nearly tripped at the old man talking so frankly. "Well... sorry to disappoint. I only ever viewed her as a colleague and a friend."

"Perhaps for the best," the Sword Saint nodded. "I reckon she would not be accepting of any extramarital affairs with succubi or elves."

Glancing at the old man, Jake saw the cheeky smile, making him know the bastard was joking around. "You make it sound like I plan on building a harem."

The Sword Saint glanced back at Jake. "If you planned on having one, I would advise against it. It is exhausting and leads to needless drama if you want to keep everyone happy, and once children become involved, it is a nightmare. Better to settle for either one life partner or not truly commit to anyone."

“Wow, you almost make it sound like you’re talking from personal experience,” Jake teased the Sword Saint back.

The old man just smiled.

“Wait, seriously? You had a fucking harem?”

“Life is a journey. Looking back and focusing too much on the past will never lead to happiness. Instead, we should focus on present issues and the recent past. Such as you owing me a new robe,” the old man said in a fake sage tone.

“Hold up, let’s get back to the fact you apparently had a damn-“

“Ah, would you look at that? The southern arenas are on the horizon,” he cut Jake off.

“You aren’t getting that robe,” Jake muttered.

“A sacrifice I will have to make.”

Jake shook his head and walked silently, and decided to do something he probably should have handled earlier. At the very least, it should help take his mind off the exploits and the mental images of the Sword Saint in the past.

Walking, Jake finally got around to fixing the stats on his newly gained ring from the Altmar Empire. He had 5000 stats to distribute but only around 2500 stats till the cap, so he chose to only place 2500 of them for now. Considering Strength and Agility were already close to their caps, and Jake not feeling like he needed the other stats that badly, he made an executive decision.

+2500 Perception.

After that, he still had 59 stats to the cap and decided to put 100 into Strength just for good measure to not have any waste. Due to the awesome design of the ring, he could always fix it later. Opening his status, he did a quick check-over.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 204]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 203]

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

Health Points (HP): 88340/88340

Mana Points (MP): 174703/174703

Stamina: 89012/89110

Stats

Strength: 8536

Agility: 12496

Endurance: 8911

Vitality: 8834

Toughness: 7389

Wisdom: 11181

Intelligence: 9276

Perception: 23246

Willpower: 9385

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer IX], [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)]

Class Skills: [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [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)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter(Mythical)]

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

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

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

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

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Everything looked as expected, and his stats had all grown nicely, especially after he finally got fully capped out on equipment. Strength had significantly increased, with Perception naturally being the biggest winner. All in all, good stuff.

He closed his status as they had made it to the arenas. As with the northern ones where they had met Ell'Hakan, this was an entire complex, but also, as with Ell'Hakan, it wasn't hard to find the one they were looking for. Because in this place, there was also one arena with far more attention than any of the

others, and as Jake heard someone mention a Unique Lifeform, it wasn't hard to figure out what their three other party members were up to.

Jake and the Sword Saint quickly confirmed their suspicions after entering the stands of the large colosseum and seeing the creature that was down below with an entire party of challengers standing before him. Or, well, three people were standing. Another was embedded head-first into a wall, and the fifth one was just two legs sticking out of a large mound.

All of the challengers were humans, and the last three still standing were a man with a large sword, a woman with a spear, and a mage of some kind.

"I had expected more of the archer, though perhaps my view is skewed," the Fallen King said as he floated slightly off the ground, opposite of these humans. "Nevertheless. Continue."

Raising a hand, he released a blast of force toward the mage. Jake was surprised to see the guy capable of teleporting away in time as he reappeared nearly a hundred meters away and slammed his palms together as a massive pillar-like spear of earth formed above him.

The King ignored him and pointed at the sword-wielding warrior running straight at him. The warrior braced himself as a blast of force knocked him backward, but he managed to cover for the woman with her spear. Ice condensed all around her as she stabbed forward, only to hit a transparent barrier. The entire spear bent from the impact, and the King swiped his hand as the woman was hit by an invisible blast, sending her flying. Just then, the pillar of earth from the mage also struck, but it simply exploded into shards of rock, not leaving a single nick on the barrier.

Despite being knocked away, the warrior with the sword had rapidly recovered, and pure energy exploded from his body as he jumped and cleaved the sword downwards onto the barrier of the King.

Once more, the Unique Lifeform didn't even budge. The warrior's eyes opened wide as the Fallen King spread out his arms, and two golden hammers formed.

"A melee battle it shall be."

It wasn't a battle. Jake and the Sword Saint proceeded to watch the Fallen King manhandle the three of the remaining members, and less than a minute later, they all teleported out as Jake heard the chatter from all around.

"Truly a Unique Lifeform... is that barrier even breakable by a C-grade around his own level?" someone questioned out loud.

"Those five were all considered pretty damn good; they won four party battles just yesterday," another chimed in.

"We are looking at the pinnacle. Comparing that monster to a bunch of humans just isn't fair," a dragonkin shook his head.

The Sword Saint raised an eyebrow before throwing Jake a glance. "Would you mind if I go retrieve the King as you find Sylphie and Dina?"

"Sure thing," Jake said. He felt Sylphie through their Union Oath and knew she was halfway across the filled stands. He began to make his way over, trying to not bump into anyone, as he watched the arena below.

“Another glorious victory by the Fallen King!” an announcer of sorts spoke. “Are there any more challengers, or will the Unique Lifeform remain undefeated? Unchallenged? Remember, full parties are allowed!”

Jake heard a bunch of comments from people about how no one wanted to go embarrass themselves before the announcer spoke again.

“Ah, we have a challenger! An individual, no less!”

“Arrogant idiot,” someone muttered as Jake walked by, making Jake shake his head.

On the platform below, the Sword Saint appeared, standing opposite the Fallen King.

“Let the battle begin!”

As everyone seemed to expect the King to blast the weak-looking old man away the moment the announcer declared the match had begun, the Unique Lifeform instead spoke. “Ah, you are done dealing with the invader?”

“Yes, I came to fetch you,” the old man smiled.

“Very well,” the Fallen King nodded. “However, it would be a waste to give up a chance like this. I know of the power wielded by the others, but please, humor me. Let me feel the blade of the human who dares call himself the Sword Saint.”

The Sword Saint smiled as he drew his sword. Instantly the atmosphere in the arena below changed, and Jake felt a collective gasp from the many D and even C-grade onlookers from all around him. Even a few above C-grade suddenly showed quite an interest.

Jake heard comments about how not a single person had managed to pierce the barrier of the Fallen King yet... how not a single person had managed to make him even move. Which was why what came next was surprising to everyone.

Below, the swordsman disappeared. He next appeared right in front of the Fallen King, as the Unique Lifeform once more allowed his opponent to strike. Jake saw the Sword Saint faintly smile as he grabbed the sword with both hands and stabbed forward. As his blade moved, Jake saw countless droplets form in a line in front of it, and everything seemed to shift.

Time magic? With droplets?

The Sword Saint’s thrust made the entire arena shake, and the barrier reacted like it had been hit by thousands of small attacks every millisecond. It vibrated before hairline cracks formed, and it finally shattered into a million wisps of golden energy. The King responded as he moved his ivory claw, and as it was clad in gold, he blocked the sword.

Despite his efforts, the strike sent the Fallen King sliding back for a dozen meters before he stabilized himself. The Unique Lifeform looked at the palm of his hand and saw the faint nick in the otherwise pristine ivory claw.

“Indeed, another monster along with the hunter,” the Fallen King said in a satisfied tone. He then spoke loudly. “The battle ends here; I see no value in wasting resources and risking injury on either myself or my party member.”

“The Sword Saint nodded, and a moment later, both were teleported out of the arena to quite the fanfare as numerous people discussed the bizarre situation. Jake just smirked and shook his head as he finally found Dina and Sylphie, who seemed to get along quite well. Dina had even made a branch grow out of one of the benches on the stands for Sylphie to perch on.

Jake greeted them and promptly had a bird on his shoulder a second later. Dina also stood up and nodded at him. After that, it didn’t take long to group up with the Fallen King and the Sword Saint, even if it was a bit annoying that they were surrounded by what Jake could only categorize as fans. A lot of them questioned who else was in their party, and one guy even offered to pay if they would assist him.

However, when they saw Jake and the others walk over, they all backed off. Jake released his aura and flared his Blessing, and quickly, everyone knew the two were with Jake and his party. The Sword Saint thanked the people around him, as the King disregarded them all as both followed him out of the arena.

Their group of five quickly made their way through Nevermore City, not getting caught up in anything more that was happening. There were markets, factions trying to recruit with stalls, and of course, the many arenas. Not to mention other things regularly found in cities, like gambling houses, hotels, brothels, and a slew of entertainment options. Recruitment agencies were also a big thing, but luckily they left Jake and the others alone. In fact, no one bothered them as they did a few teleports to get closer to the entrance of Nevermore.

The last teleport took them about ten kilometers from the edge. For ten kilometers or so, all around the pit, not a single building existed. Only black obsidian stone marred the ground, and without further ado, their party of five made the trip.

In the speed department, it wasn't that surprising to see Dina be the slowest, but she was still plenty fast. The King was second-slowest, with the Sword Saint third, putting Jake and Sylphie at the front. Considering the ten-kilometer distance, it didn't take them long, but Sylphie still bragged at being first.

As one, they all stopped a few meters from the large pit.

They found themselves standing at the edge of an endless cliff that seemed to stretch infinitely out to both sides. Considering the sheer size of Nevermore and the ring around the pit, it didn't look circular at all, not even with Jake's high Perception. The curvature was simply not significant enough for a C-grade to even notice.

As they stood before the pit, the voice of Villy descended.

"Good luck in there, mate. Nevermore will be the first true challenge where you compete with not only your own universe but the multiverse as a whole. Every faction, every individual talent. Prove to them that you are worthy of sitting atop the food chain and exist firmly at the peak of your weight class. Prove to them you are the monster I believe you to be. Ah, but more than anything... have fun and enjoy yourself!"

Jake smiled to himself and sent a mental affirmation to Villy. "Thanks, mate. Just focus on your own matters, alright? I got the mortal stuff handled."

Villy seemed amused at his concern but still acknowledged Jake's words.

After they had all been standing there for a few seconds, someone finally spoke.

"I take it we are meant to jump in together?" the Sword Saint asked, also staring down.

"Seems to work that way," Jake shrugged.

"I do wonder who the first was to discover this. A brave soul indeed, choosing to leap into an endless abyss," the old man nodded as he spoke in a respectful tone.

"Or a complete moron," Jake grinned.

"Entirely possible," the Sword Saint chuckled as he shook his head.

Jake just smiled and looked at the others behind him. "You all ready?"

He got confirmations all around as Jake turned to look down the pit.

"Then let's fucking go."

Jake stepped over the edge without hesitation, and within a second, four more figures followed him as they fell into nothingness. The last thing he heard before he subtly felt the world fade away was a final whisper from the Viper.

“Happy hunting.”

Chapter 657 - Nevermore: First Floor

Jake didn't know how long they were falling. It felt like minutes, yet also hours. No notification ever popped up, and no prompt asked them to enter. They did not have to register or do anything to confirm they were a party, as the system handled all that. All they had to do was enter together and fall together.

Then, suddenly, Jake felt solid ground beneath his feet, and his sphere spread out to reveal the world around him. He also opened his eyes and was nearly blinded by the bright sunlight beaming down on him from above.

He and the others found themselves standing on a large rock in the middle of a giant desert-like landscape. Sand stretched infinitely no matter where one looked, and the wind was utterly still. Jake did not see a single living being anywhere either.

“So, this is Nevermore,” the Sword Saint spoke.

“It's-“

Jake was about to say something when he was cut off by a notification.

You have entered Nevermore.

Welcome to the first floor of the C-grade portion of Nevermore: the Sunlight Dunes. In order to progress to the next floor, the main objective of this floor must be completed, and the entrance to the next floor must be entered together with all surviving party members.

Completing events, achievements, and objectives rewards points that count towards the leaderboards and final rewards.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of the Dunes.

Bonus objectives: Gather at least 1000 Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes to open the Lord's Treasury.

Current progress: Lord of the Dunes (0/1), Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (0/1000)

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Godspeed, Chosen of Vilastromoz; I look forward to your performance. Do not expect any assistance.

Current Nevermore Points: 0

Jake read the notification and smirked a bit at it getting personal towards the end. While this was indeed a mega-dungeon and a World Wonder, it was also the domain of the Wyrmgod. Even now, Jake felt an odd presence observing him. It felt different than when Villy looked and more like it was passive in nature. Rather than an individual looking, it was more like a trained AI kept an eye on things.

“Lord of the Dunes, huh? And a thousand of these Sunlight Fragments?” the Sword Saint once more commented.

“Ree,” Sylphie complained loudly.

“The wind is oddly silent, huh?” Jake commented. The lack of wind affinity energy in the air was an issue for Sylphie for sure, and when he looked at the Sword Saint, the old man simply nodded.

“I do feel this environment is less than beneficial than it could be,” he said. “However, it is not truly an obstacle. Besides, this is not one of the difficult floors, now is it?”

He then turned to Dina, who looked to be in thought. “How about you, Dina?”

“There aren’t that many here,” she said in a sad tone. “This land is... dead.”

Not good for her either, huh? Jake thought. He suspected she was talking about plants, so the environment was also bad for her.

"I am unbothered," the Fallen King said. "How about you, hunter?"

"All good here," Jake smiled. "Now, let's not delay and get going right away."

The environment was maybe shit, but they still had one thing going for them. Jake smiled as he closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception. Seven.

Instantly, he spotted seven identical shard-like items hidden in the sand, all about ten to a hundred meters down in the sand.

"Two sec," Jake said as he quickly teleported over to the closest one and, with a blast of mana, blew up the sand and sent the shard flying into the air. With a string, he quickly caught the orange crystal, and the moment he did, it disappeared.

Current progress: Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (1/1000)

Jake grinned even more as he quickly made his way back to the others. "Aight, the shards appear hidden beneath the sand and are pretty much indestructible. Should be easy enough."

Once more, his Perception build proved supreme.

“Was the shard that orange thing?” Dina asked curiously.

“Yep,” Jake smiled, happy she was even talking to him. Progress!

Dina nodded. “Okay.”

She then took out a small pouch that she could somehow put her entire hand into. Then, she pulled out a handful of seeds and threw them onto the sand below. The moment they landed, she sent out a green blast of energy that soaked the hundreds of seeds she had just thrown out.

Within seconds, each seed grew as a stalk first appeared, then a flower at the head, and a wellspring of vines popped out everywhere. This happened to every single one, as soon there were several hundred. Jake curiously used Identify on one of them, not expecting it to work, and was surprised when it did.

[Vine Seed Soldier – lvl 194]

He saw it had a level, but he also felt like it was summoned and not a “true” creature. Closer to an ectognamorph drone than a truly living being.

“Go find the Sunlight Fragments,” Dina talked to the many Vine Seed Soldiers. Without any indication they even understood her, the many plants began wandering off into the large dune.

“Sure that will work?” Jake asked.

"They know what to do," Dina said with confidence.

"Alright then," Jake nodded, seeing no reason to question her. He did wonder how they would bring the shards, but he had no idea how long they would spend there, so it wasn't a problem.

"Stop dallying, and let's get this area cleared out already and move on to the next floor rather quickly," the Fallen King said.

"I would lean towards agreeing. Attempting to fully complete this floor would be a waste when all subsequent floors give more points," the Sword Saint also voiced his thoughts.

"Fair enough. Let's get this show on the road, then. First, we need to find the end boss, and I do still think we need to collect these thousand fragments, so finding this Lord's Treasury is also a priority. That sounds good?" Jake asked the group.

He got three nods and a ree in confirmation. "Great. Aight, Fallen King, do your thing."

The Fallen King nodded as he held out his ivory claw. Four golden orbs condensed and took on a solid, physical form before flying out to each of them. Once they touched the orb, they simply allowed it to be absorbed into their bodies as small golden tattoo-like drawings appeared for a moment before quickly fading.

"Testing, testing. We good?" Jake reached out.

“Loud and clear,” the Sword Saint said in a rather joking tone.

A major issue many parties faced on Nevermore was communication over vast distances. Jake had initially just wanted to bring in some walkie-talkies made by Arnold but came to learn that items like that were either not allowed or significantly weakened within the mega-dungeon. The same was true for many other supporting items, formation discs, and pretty much anything that one didn't create themselves. Well, themselves, or someone in the party.

Luckily for them, the King was capable of condensing these golden orbs people could infuse into themselves and then communicate over pretty much unlimited distances due to soul magic stuff. This was one of the kingly abilities the King had, and as the Unique Lifeform explained, the skill was originally made to keep in contact with his servants, and each orb could also be used to track through. The entire thing functioned by using the King as the focal point of their telepathy which did have the slight drawback of everyone hearing everything anyone said through the orb unless the King purposefully blocked it. A small drawback, all things considered, as many other groups simply relied on something akin to signal flares by shooting magic into the air.

Oh, and on the topic of them being lucky... one thing many groups needed more than a proper method of communication in dungeons was consumables. More specifically, they needed that good shit Jake chugged down with reckless abandon without a care in the world: potions.

That's right, even potions were restricted within Nevermore if they weren't created by one of the individuals in the party. Their effect would be “capped” to be far worse and below that of what an average alchemist could make at their levels. All this was naturally an attempt by the system and the Wyrmgod to introduce some level of fairness for those who weren't swimming in wealth or had huge backings. It was naturally impossible to truly curb all advantages people with deep pockets and solid backings would have, but at least it was an attempt.

With communication established, Jake did one of the jobs he had been assigned: scouting. Jumping, Jake took to the air as Sylphie threw a gust of green wind his way, propelling him up faster than he could possibly fly on his own. The others spread out in the immediate area where Jake had pointed out seeing Sunflight Fragmented with his sphere. As he took off, he also saw Dina take out more seeds to bolster her army of vine soldiers.

Jake kept flying upwards and felt the oppressive sun bear down on him more and more strongly the further up he went. As far as Jake could tell, it wasn't even a false sun either, like what he had encountered in so many other dungeons sub-dimensions. No, this was a true star.

A true star that served as a limiter on how far people were allowed to fly up. Jake felt his skin begin to hurt a bit from the sheer heat, and he identified some other concept mixed into the rays. Scoffing, he covered his body in scales as the pressure instantly disappeared.

He kept going for several more minutes, but soon he had to stop. Using his stable arcane mana, he condensed a parasol to cover himself as he turned to look down at the desert below.

"We're on a small planet," Jake told the others through the soul walkie-talkie. "Got a diameter of around nine to ten thousand kilometers based on my estimates. Can't spot any boss quite yet, but there are quite a few elementals spread throughout."

"Go look for the Lord and this hidden treasury?" the Sword Saint sent.

"That's the plan," Jake smirked. He scanned the planet beneath him one more time before he began flying. Down below, the others got to work collecting fragments, with Dina covering a huge area with summoned vine soldiers while Sylphie kicked up tornadoes to send anything and everything hiding under the sand flying up into the air. The King and Sword Saint were not particularly helpful in this part but instead made sure no elementals or other creatures bothered anymore.

Not like that job was hard... Jake had not seen a single creature above level 205.

After flying for an hour while scouting the ground below, he finally noticed the environment truly begin to change in the distance. It wasn't that it was no longer a desert but because a huge shadow stretched across the horizon.

Jake had moved to the other side of the planet. Seeing as the shadow seemed to get closer faster than he flew, he had also correctly flown counter to the planet's rotation. The sunlight energy had slowly been weakening for a while now, and looking ahead, he felt a different kind of energy. Squinting his eyes, he spotted something interesting.

Ice elementals.

The energy he felt was dense ice affinity mana that dominated the other side of the planet. Jake informed his party as he kept flying into the darkness, and soon after, it was as if he had passed some threshold. The warmth of the sun was gone, and rime began to form on his body and even his parasol. Seeing no need for it anymore, Jake dispelled the magical construct and picked up his pace even more.

Cold energy began to condense in the air in front of him, and finally, Jake faced his first enemy. A floating ghost-like creature slithered towards him in the sky, and Jake quickly Identified it.

[Ice Wraith – lvl 202]

He didn't even bother stopping as he simply summoned two spears of destructive arcane mana and blew it up. The creature's form was dispersed, but it managed to reform itself behind him. Luckily for it, Jake was long gone, and he had no interest in finishing it off.

The cold intensified, but Jake easily handled it. He did begin flying a bit closer to the ground as the constant drain on his resources to fight off the unfriendly environment was an annoyance, but he still had an easy time spotting anything of note on the planet below.

Jake noticed that more creatures gathered towards the north pole, and Sylphie also confirmed this was the case as she was scouting south. This made him question if this was also where this Lord of the Dunes was. However, not long after, this theory was dispelled as he saw something on the horizon. A large mountain of some kind of limestone-looking rock appeared, the entire thing covered in dense ice. At the peak of this mountain, on its spire-like tip, was a large six-legged chameleon-looking creature. Its entire body had a blueish hue, and Jake quickly identified it.

[Lord of the Dunes – lvl 205]

"Boss spotted on the dark side of the planet. How about you guys?" Jake quickly reached out to the others.

What he got in return was a mix of images from Sylphie. It seemed that while he had flown around the planet, she had reached the southern pole and found a huge mountain, far larger than the one Jake was at. Inside the mountain, she had then found a ritual circle requiring a thousand fragments. Likely the treasury.

As for fragments...

Current progress: Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (654/1000)

It turned out that having an army of vine soldiers scouting was pretty damn overpowered.

“Can you slay the Lord of the Dunes on your lonesome?” the Fallen King asked Jake. “Travelling to you would be a wasted effort.”

Jake just grinned. “I’ll be done in a jiffy.”

Still flying far up in the air, Jake pulled out his bow and took out a well-poisoned arrow from his quiver. He nocked it and activated Arcane Awakening at the stable 30% as he began charging his Arcane Powershot. Below, the creature seemed to be in some kind of hibernation with its eyes closed, and it didn’t react before it was too late.

An arrow tore through the sky as it descended upon the unsuspecting dungeon boss. The chameleon was slammed right in the head, its eyes opening in a panic as it was blasted off the mountain. While still in mid-air, it was struck by a barrage of arrows, sending it tumbling toward the ground.

It hit the frozen sand and sent it flying everywhere, but it didn’t even have time to stabilize as even more arrows stuck it, slamming it deeper into the sand. The boss let out a loud screech as ice magic condensed around it, and hundreds of ice elementals rose from the sand all around it, but its opponent was simply too far away. The chameleon struggled and tried to defend itself, but every barrier was broken, and every attempt to dodge stopped.

Jake had to admit it took longer than expected, but the takedown never even turned into a fight.

You have slain [Lord of the Dunes – lvl 205] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Dunes before it ever sees the sunlight. 3 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Dunes within 24 hours of entering the first floor. 1 Nevermore Point gained.

Jake saw the notifications come in, and he also quickly got a ping from the others.

“I see you are done on your end,” the Fallen King sent him.

“I take it you all got the achievements too?”

“Yes,” the Sword Saint came in and confirmed. “We are all moving towards the south pole as we gather the rest of the fragments. Can you check out the northern one?”

“Sure thing,” Jake answered.

It seemed like everything was going smoothly. Jake flew down and quickly stored the corpse of the large boss monster while also checking if it dropped anything. The answer to that was a big no, so he took to the air once more and flew towards the northern pole. On the way, he also checked a new part of his interface.

Nevermore Points: 4

Four points. Yay. Jake did find the name of Nevermore Points a bit lame, but hey, it was descriptive and easy to remember, so who really cares?

His flight towards the north was uneventful, but once he got closer, he did spot something interesting. Not unlike what Sylphie had shown him and the Lord of the Dunes had been sitting on, a large mountain appeared, and Jake flew closer to investigate. On this one, he also found a large cave to enter. Just as he walked into the cave, he got another round of notifications.

Bonus Objective Completed: Unlock the Lord's Treasury. 5 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Unlock the Lord's Treasury within 12 hours of entering the first floor. 2 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake saw the notification appear as he netted himself another seven points, bringing him to 11 total.

"Anything good in there," Jake sent to the others.

"I do not find myself impressed," the Fallen King answered. "Nevertheless, we shall bring what is here. Now, all we need is to find our way to the next floor."

"See, funny you should mention that," Jake grinned, having made his way into the mountain's depths.

Chapter 658 - Nevermore: The Dina Show

Just after Jake was contacted and told his teammates were done, he just happened to find himself standing in front of a large gateway that he didn't doubt led to the next floor. One thing did confuse him a bit, though. There was also another smaller teleportation circle of some kind near the wall of the cavern, but it was slightly damaged.

"Pretty sure I found it, but there is also this other teleportation circle. It looks like a short-range one, though," Jake sent through the link to the others and even included a mental image.

"Peculiar," the Sword Saint answered and sent the mental image of an identical magic circle down at the south pole. This one wasn't broken, though. "Is yours operational?"

"Nope, is yours?"

"Appears to be, but with yours broken... we shall begin making our way north now," the Sword Saint sent.

"Eh, gimme a minute," Jake said as he looked at the magic circle a bit. He tilted his head and went closer. Touching the circle, he closed his eyes and studied it for a minute or so while comparing it to the one at the southern pole.

“Pretty low-level one, huh,” Jake muttered as he infused his energy. Analyzing it and finding the flaws had been easy enough, and soon enough, the broken lines were restored as the entire magic circle hummed to life.

“Ours just seemed to activate. Did you do something?” the Sword Saint asked, surprised.

“What can I say? I know a bit about formations,” Jake grinned.

A minute later, the party of five all appeared in the cave on the north pole. The second the last person was there, the large archway that served as a gate activated as a portal appeared.

First floor completed. 10 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the first floor before the light of the sun could have ever reached the Lord of the Dunes. 5 Nevermore Points earned.

Nevermore Points: 26

“That’s one floor down,” Jake smiled as he turned to the others. “Anyway, what did you get from that treasury?”

The Sword Saint proceeded to take out two rare items, and a bunch of stuff clearly meant to help battle the Floor Boss and the environment, such as crystals that gave resistance to the sunlight and what looked like a grenade. These items would disappear upon entering the next floor, so, honestly, the only reason to even do the bonus objective was for the points.

Without further ado, the five of them entered the portal to the next floor. Upon entering it, the party found themselves in a large square room about fifteen meters on each side with a gateway in front of them, one behind them, and one off to the side. The walls were of dark gray stone, and Jake's sphere informed him that there was nothing outside of them but the empty void of nothingness.

Jake instantly understood what this room was. The gate in front of them had a sign saying "second floor," while the gateway off to the side was an exit. Mind you, if one exited Nevermore before one reached a city, then they would have to go through the first floor once more to progress. And not "go through" as in do the boss again and whatnot, but literally travel through the already completed dungeon, making it just a waste of time.

Anyway, In the middle of this new gray in-between-floors room was a small platform with a lockbox on it. The loot from the first floor.

"I must say, it is a bit underwhelming," the Sword Saint said as he looked at the lockbox. "Though we must consider this is simply the first floor, and it only took us a few hours to clear it all."

"True, true," Jake said as he walked over and unceremoniously opened the lockbox. Within was a rare rarity sword, and Jake could only look teasingly as he went over and handed it to the Sword Saint in an overly formal way, even going down on one knee as he held it up. "For you, our resident swordsman. It is only proper you receive this bounty. I hope there are no complaints?"

“Will... will he use it?” Dina questioned, looking confused.

“No, no, he won’t,” Jake grinned as he stood up.

“Then... why?”

“Exactly,” Jake nodded. “Let’s move on to the next floor?”

Dina was still confused as they all moved through the gateway leading onwards.

Walking through the gate was like stepping into an entirely new world. Probably because they did step into an entirely new world. Jake’s sphere spread out, and he saw a familiar-looking environment filled with greenery and trees as far as the eye could see. At least in front of them. Behind was an endless wasteland of nothingness.

They had appeared on top of a large cliff overlooking a valley filled with trees, the entire place utterly massive, stretching thousands of kilometers. When the others came through the gateway, they also just appeared standing beside him with no actual gate to come out of, making it clear there was no way back. The only way to proceed was to clear the floor... or wait for the full fifty years and get thrown out.

Welcome to the second floor of Nevermore: The Evergreen Valley.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of the Valley

Bonus objectives: Find 10 Illusory Lotuses hidden throughout the forest.

Current progress: Lord of the Valley (0/1), Illusory Lotuses (0/10)

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Current Nevermore Points: 26

Jake read the message and nodded. Only ten lotuses this time, but going by their description, these lotuses would be a bit harder to find than the Sunlight Fragments, as their name indicated an ability to create illusions to hide. The Lord of the Valley was pretty straightforward, though he was a bit disappointed at the name of the boss.

Maybe these first few floors are just low-effort by the Wyrmgod as most good parties just rush through, Jake considered.

"This seems nicer than the desert," the Sword Saint smiled, looking down at the valley.

"Definitely," Jake nodded as he looked at the King. "Sad this floor isn't called the Evergreen Forest. Then we could have had a Floor Boss called the Lord of the Forest."

"Your humor is far from as funny as you believe it to be," the Fallen King answered.

"Now that is just mean," Jake commented.

"The joke is only made worse by requiring inside knowledge only you and I are aware of, as no one else here has known me as anything other than the Fallen King," the Unique Lifeform didn't let up.

"I get it, I get it," Jake said defensively. "Geez. Anyway, let's just use the same tactic as last time. Find the ten lotuses, find and kill the end boss, and move on to the next floor. I can handle finding the lotuses while you all search for the boss. Sounds like a plan?"

"The boss is over there," Dina pointed northeast into the nearly endless forest spanning before them. Jake was about to question as she looked down at all the trees and spoke again. "And... oh, okay. Okay. That would be nice, thank you."

Dina looked like she was talking to herself as suddenly, the forest before them rumbled. Large vines extended upwards all throughout the valley, creating lines of giant pillars spanning into the horizon. Then, Jake saw the vines begin moving, and a few kilometers away, he saw an entire patch of land around five meters across being carried by vines by handing the patch off to one another. Within a few minutes, the patch was dumped on the ground just beneath them in the valley, and looking down, Jake saw the small landmass had an odd rock on it. After squinting his eyes, the illusion fell away, revealing a lotus.

"Did... did you just?" Jake asked Dina.

The dryad seemed confused and tilted her head. "I just asked if the trees wanted to help, and they agreed. They were very nice and even offered to bring the lotuses to us, so we didn't have to go through the forest and potentially ruin anything. Oh, and they asked if we could kill the Lord of the Valley as it isn't very nice to the trees and is hurting the natural balance."

Jake slowly nodded as he stared at tens of thousands of vines extending endlessly into the valley to slowly carry lotuses toward them. This was... kind of overpowered, wasn't it? Like, pure cheese of an entire floor. Would the Wyrmgod penalize them for shit like this?

"Good job, Dina," the Sword Saint smiled and gave the dryad a proud nod.

"Quite a display of power indeed. Is it your Bloodline that allows this?" the Fallen King questioned.

"Ye... yeah, I just asked... so..." Dina said, looking shy. Her green skin turned a slightly darker shade of green – the dryad way of blushing – which did make Jake wonder what color the blood of dryads was. It wasn't important, but he was a bit curious. Anyway.

"Definitely does make life easier," Jake smiled and gave her a thumbs up. Even Sylphie gave a happy screech.

"Did the forest also tell you where the exit is?" the Sword Saint asked.

Dina nodded and pointed in the same direction as the Floor Boss.

“So we will pass the boss if we go for the exit?” Jake asked.

“It moves around... but if we hurry, yeah,” Dina explained.

“Then let’s get a move on,” Jake said. “Can you handle collecting the lotuses on the way somehow?”

While they had been brought one lotus, then it wasn’t like the many vines were fast. They were pretty damn slow, actually, so it would likely take them a few hours at least to bring all the lotuses to their group, and while waiting for them at the entrance to the floor would be faster than searching themselves, it would be faster to just get them along the way.

“Oh, okay,” Dina nodded as she looked out at the forest. Jake didn’t feel the movements of any energy or any indication whatsoever she was doing anything, yet a few seconds later, she nodded.

“Okay, they will help.”

Jake smiled. “Then let’s go.”

What followed was something Jake could only call cheating. Along their way to the boss monster, they encountered upheld patches of land with lotuses on them, and by the time they reached the boss, they had six of the ten. Killing the boss took them less than thirty seconds as the five of them descended on the poor level 208 beaver-like monster that was just trying to enjoy a good meal by eating one of the trees.

The fight started with roots shooting up from the ground and entrapping the beast. Then, pure pressure from the King kept it utterly unmoving as Jake released a barrage of Powershots, with Sylphie and the Sword Saint cutting it apart with wind and water blades, respectively. It never even had a chance to fight, and the only reason it stayed alive as long as it did was due to its high health pool. On that note, after encountering it for the second time, Jake was pretty sure these Floor Bosses had artificially inflated health pools. Not that it mattered in a case like this.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Valley before it manages to return to its lair. 5 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Valley within 12 hours of entering the second floor. 2 Nevermore Points gained.

After the boss was dead, it was just a relaxed flight to the end of the second floor while collecting “hidden” lotuses on a silver platter along the way. As mentioned... it was pretty much cheating.

The second floor exit had also been meant to be a challenge to find as it was a hidden pit in the ground covered by vines when they first got there, but a slight nudge from Dina made them move out of the way. Right in front of this pit, they also found the final lotus.

Bonus Objective Completed: Collect 10 Illusory Lotuses. 10 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Collect 10 illusory Lotuses without using any of the provided tools to assist in their discovery. 4 Nevermore Points gained.

Seeing that there were tools to help find the lotuses nearly made Jake choke at how unfair Dina's ability was. He did have to admit that their illusion was quite good, forcing him to squint a bit to see through it. While that didn't seem like a lot, one had to remember that Jake had more Perception than pretty much any other C-grade at his level in existence. Because he was smart and knew what the best stat was, of course.

"Dina," Jake said as they had just jumped into the pit and walked through the small tunnel leading to another gateway. "You are awesome, you know that, right?"

The dryad blushed again. "I... I just did what I should..."

"If that is only what you feel like you should do, then you should definitely keep being awesome," Jake grinned, happy with Nature's Attendant for introducing her to the group. Just that brief interaction with the boss monster also made Jake aware she was no slouch when it came to combat. Her support capabilities were still unknown, but if anything she had shown so far was an indication of her skills in that department, they were indeed in for a fantastic time.

The Sword Saint also praised Dina, making her even shyer than before. No one really had a chance to show off any of their skills on this floor, and in the end, the entire thing ended up only taking them a bit over an hour and a half. Most of their time was spent flying at a semi-leisurely pace as they still had to wait for a few places for the vines to bring a lotus. The floor was quite a bit smaller than the first one but was far more densely packed. Even then, they only explored a few percentages of the forest as the trees did all the work.

When it came to the setting of the floor, Jake learned that a war of sorts had been going on between the forest and invading beaver-like monsters that were pretty much just all smaller variants of the Lord of the Valley. Their group of five had not gotten involved in any of this fighting but had just beelined for the boss and gotten their lotuses. It wasn't like the wanton slaughter of the beavers would help any of them, and the trees were nice and helpful, so there was no way they would fight them either. The trees even told Dina to avoid killing anything besides the boss, so they saw no reason not to follow that advice.

Anyway, after only a bit of walking, they reached the exit of the floor.

“Ree,” Sylphie said as they reached the gateway properly.

“Yep, a lot easier and faster than the first floor,” Jake smiled. In the room with the gateway, they also found a small pond with a sealed treasure chest in the middle and ten small rock formations with holes in the middle, each perfect to fit a lotus into. After placing all the lotuses, they opened the lockbox and got an epic rarity lotus crown that they decided to just give Dina. No one else needed it, and she had done everything on this floor, so it was only fair.

Without any reason to stay longer, their overpowered party moved through the gateway and completed their second floor within the day.

Second floor completed. 20 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the second floor within 12 hours while collecting all ten lotuses. 8 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Traverse the Evergreen Valley and complete the second floor while collecting all ten lotuses without killing any other living creatures than the Lord of the Valley. 15 Nevermore Points gained.

Nevermore Points: 90

The points just kept rolling in. Jake wondered if the points would keep doubling, considering they got 20 for just doing the floor, but he had a feeling they wouldn't. Exponential growth like that tended not to end super well. Oh well, he would find out once they did the third floor.

Leaving the local wildlife and ecosystem alone also proved to be a good idea, as it netted them an extra 15 Nevermore Points. Taking the advice of trees was definitely a lesson to remember.

As for loot... well, it was shit again. Two pieces of rare equipment they once more just gave to Dina.

Let's hope the third floor is fun, Jake thought to himself as their party continued.

Spoiler alert: it wouldn't be fun.

It was the exact opposite.

A fucking water level.

Chapter 659 - Nevermore: The Worst Floor

The Wyrmgod of Nevermore. One of twelve Primordials, and a being often viewed as the greatest of all the dragons. The Draconian Accords had been overseen by the Wyrmgod, and all dragons in existence viewed him as the most powerful. While the Malefic Viper was also a dragon before godhood, simply by his chosen name, it was clear he identified as a snake more than a dragon. Hence why the Wyrmgod got the title.

When the Wyrmgod managed to directly work with the system and create the World Wonder known as Nevermore – the most famous in all of the multiverse – the skill of this Primordial only became more widespread. Not only was he the most powerful dragon, but also the apex of all dungeon masters.

No one could discount the achievements of the Wyrmgod. However, on this fateful day, Jake did feel like he could question the title of apex dungeon master. Or, perhaps, even the greatest of dungeon masters fell victim to the folly of trying to do the impossible:

Make a fun water level.

And a folly it was. Because the third floor was complete shit compared to the two before it. Their group of five found themselves appearing on the dry ground within a cave, but soon it became clear it was but a temporary refuge.

The only way out of this cavern was diving into a large pool of water extending into a vast ocean. As they all appeared in the cavern, the system also popped up with the message for this floor.

Welcome to the third floor of Nevermore: Deep Coral Ocean

Main objective: Defeat Coral Ocean Lord

Bonus objectives: Collect at least 500 Deepsea Pearls to open the Ancient Clam.

Current progress: Coral Ocean Lord (0/1), Deepsea Pearls (0/500)

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Current Nevermore Points: 90

Jake hated the place from the very moment they appeared there, and the description of the place sure didn't help. Defeat a boss? Sure, but collect five hundred fucking pearls? That sounded like suffering. To make matters worse, his one hope was dispelled when he looked at the Sword Saint shortly after they all realized what they were dealing with.

"I delve into the concept of rain, not water as a whole. While my understanding does assist me, I too find myself heavily impeded while underwater," the old man shook his head. Jake then looked to the King with hope.

"Water is an obstacle, but it is manageable. It weakens all but my soul magic, and while my force magic still has significant potency, I have to fight the environment itself," the Fallen King also said.

Dina?

"Water plants... are rare," Dina said, sounding a bit sad. "I don't hear anyone nearby here either. I can do okay in water, though. Grandpa made sure I was prepared."

So, at least they had one combatant. Their support. Jake looked at Sylphie, who he estimated to be the weakest of their group. As a bird using the wind affinity primarily, she would naturally be unable to fly while in water and would have to solely rely on her magic. Her speed would also be reduced, her maneuverability nil... Jake honestly considered if it was best for her to just take up the role of ranged fighter for this floor.

"Sylphie, want me to help carry you?" Jake asked.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she tilted her small head in confusion.

"The water," Jake pointed as he had a realization. Actually... had Sylphie ever really encountered deep water? The thought struck Jake, and he was about to explain what Sylphie would face and even mention she would probably need to acclimate herself to the pressure as she screeched again.

"Ree, ree."

"No, you can't fly in the water," Jake shook his head. "There is no wind there. The pressure and density of the water will also make it so every action is harder. You can't even properly flap your wings."

"Ree."

"I said you can't."

“Ree.”

“It doesn’t work like that!”

“Ree.”

“Yes, we can bet on it!”

“Ree.”

Jake had mixed feelings about what happened next. They had all rushed into the water at Jake’s ushering, with Sylphie being the last one to enter. He goaded the bird to please go ahead and show him how she could “totally just fly in water like normal,” and he already had his “I told you so” ready on his lips when the bird dove into the water.

And... yeah.

“I have difficulty comprehending how that works,” the Fallen King asked.

“She is indeed a peculiar creature,” the Sword Saint echoed through telepathy.

“Yeah...” Dina even agreed.

Jake was floating there, surrounded by water and passively fighting off the pressure with the four others, while the hawk was just zooming around them, flying as if she was in the air like normal. She wasn't even slower than before. Straining himself, Jake tried to see what Sylphie was doing, but no matter what he did, it just looked like Sylphie was flying like normal. As if the pressure just didn't really matter.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched, not even using telepathy.

“That makes even less sense!” Jake complained. You couldn't fucking talk underwater.

“Ree.”

“I... I give up. You win,” Jake surrendered, and Sylphie happily flew over to him and perched on his shoulder as he was swimming just outside the small alcove leading into the vast ocean.

Perhaps he had been foolish to believe Sylphie cared about things such as logic, and he was now paying for his mistake by owing Sylphie “all the scratchies,” with the hawk cashing in right away by forcing Jake to rub her stomach.

Either way... Sylphie's unexpected prowess proved to be incredibly valuable. They all agreed on not wasting more time than necessary in the damn water level and to just find the boss and the exit as fast

as possible. Because of Sylphie, they could explore things a lot easier, and Dina could also summon some aquatic plants to help scout, but she could make far fewer plant summons than above ground. Even if she could have made more, they encountered one more issue.

While the prior floors had been relatively absent of enemies, this one was filled to the brim. Sharks, squids, fish, coral monsters, elementals, giant floating crabs, and even a few undead creatures met them. While none were a challenge to Jake and the others, as they were all weak variants that didn't even reach level 210, they were more than strong enough to kill Dina's summons, making their ability to gather information limited. This meant they had to explore the ocean as a group, with Sylphie being the best scout by far, as she was several times faster than anyone else.

Besides water, there were also giant rock formations floating in the water in different areas, their buoyancy somehow allowing them to just float there without being attached to anything. Some of these were utterly huge and allowed their party to enter and even find dry land within, and it had even been within one of these giant floating rocks they had appeared on the floor. These became needed because compared to all prior floors... this one was not a speedrun.

Instead, it became a long and arduous journey of trying to explore an ocean that even Jake didn't have good visibility in. Finding their target was a huge challenge, and Jake sent out Pulses of Perception so often that he got a headache just in an attempt to find something – anything – of note. Sylphie also took the initiative to try and fly upwards to find the surface while the others tried traveling downwards to the sea floor, but after quite a while, they reached another slightly horrifying conclusion.

The "ocean" had no bottom and no surface but was just a huge bubble of water floating within a massive goddamn fishbowl. They did eventually find some kind of barrier that sealed in all the water, but their hope of discovering some clue as to the location of the final boss was shattered.

Their entire first day was spent just trying to figure out the environment and find clues to locate the final boss. They did find a few pearls, all of which were carried by flying clam monsters, but they had no expectations of collecting all five hundred.

Combat was still piss-easy even when they got ganged up on, meaning the only real challenge was figuring out where the hell to go. Ultimately, they decided to split up and explore different areas of the huge fish bowl while using the King's markers to stay in communication, with the King also keeping track of their locations and making sure they didn't have any overlap in the areas they covered.

This was how the first week of the dungeon passed by.

For some reason, the Wyrmgod decided that making the water floor larger than the two before was a great idea. Based on what the King said, the spherical ocean they were in had to be at least twenty thousand kilometers across, making it far larger than the entire planet on the first floor. Considering everyone besides Sylphie was far slower in this environment too... it was hell.

Two weeks into the water level, the Sword Saint had found the giant clam they were supposed to give the pearls for the bonus objective, not that it was any help. Meanwhile, Sylphie had located the gateway leading to the next floor, but before it would unlock, they had to find the final boss and kill it. Something none of them had managed to do yet.

Now, Jake liked to find positives wherever he could. While it was undeniable this floor was complete shit, and everyone hated it, it did force them all to take the time to properly adapt to an underwater environment. If one compared their speeds from the day they entered the ocean to now, they had all gotten significantly faster. Well, besides Sylphie, who was never bothered to begin with. Especially the Sword Saint had managed to leverage the concept of rain to propel himself forward and nearly merge with the water. The Fallen King used his force magic to far more aggressively move around while even shaping a barrier around him to make his entire form have better fluid dynamics.

Dina slightly morphed her own body to almost resemble some ocean plant and swam far faster than before while also simply adapting better to the pressure. Finally, we had Jake.

Jake had spent nearly all of this time not trying to learn how to swim faster but to adapt one skill: One Step, Thousand Miles. Space magic shouldn't care that much about being underwater or above ground, and the environment should at most lead to increased energy consumption. His primary issue with the skill wasn't actually the space magic part either, but the activation of the skill – the act of taking a step.

Without any solid ground in the water, taking a step seemed impossible. Even if Jake condensed stable arcane platforms to step on, it was still damn slow. It was unnatural. While the entire concept of One Step was rooted in the natural movement of taking a step, one simply couldn't walk underwater naturally. However, with so much time just having to explore a damn ocean without much else to do, Jake had time to properly explore the skill.

He considered dozens of ways to improve his useability of the skill. Condensing the water itself to harden it, trying to step on the water itself but just with a hard stomping motion to force himself forward, having constant platforms beneath his feet. He even had one crazy idea of making some spring-like system so whenever he forced his foot downwards, the springs would collapse and make a stable arcane platform hit the sole of his boots. All of these ideas ended up being shit, but the experience alone did allow him to realize some things.

It was all about making it natural. To not make it into some kind of forced movement that Jake would never make if it wasn't for the skill. That is how he had his breakthrough on the sixteenth day. He slowly moved away from the concept of stepping down normally but turned towards what he considered a "step" while in the water. If he didn't have a seafloor to walk on, how would he normally move around?

Well... Jake would swim. So, rather than try and force his movements to fit with the skill, Jake changed his perspective to make the skill fit his movements. He also began to break away from some other usual assumptions. Normally, a step would be taken from a horizontal position, but Jake had walked on several vertical surfaces and used the skill like that before, so why would that be an issue while in the water?

This was a true three-dimensional space, and while some odd kind of gravity allowed them to know what was up and down, it wasn't that impactful. With all his insights and realizations coming together, he finally managed to form a far more effective way of getting through the water.

Swimming forward, Jake naturally moved his legs up and down to propel himself, but rather than simply push against the water to get himself forward, he "stepped" on it as every stroke teleported him several hundred meters in the direction he was facing. Coupled with Unblemished Arrows, using his Wings of the Malefic Viper to swim even faster, and his increased adaptation over time, Jake became far more potent in the water. He estimated he could still fight with nearly seventy-five percent effectiveness while in the water. He could also still do a normal "step" while in combat, but his new swimming-stepping was far faster moving around the vast ocean.

Sadly – or perhaps luckily – he didn't need these new capabilities much as Jake did not do anything of note on this floor.

On the twenty-second day, Sylphie finally encountered the Floor Boss. Their group had been under the assumption that something called the Coral Ocean Lord was stationary as it was a coral, but they found that to be an entirely wrong assumption. The boss was instead a huge floating rock filled with corals that traveled around the ocean at an impressive speed. This was how they had somehow kept missing it despite feeling like they had explored everywhere.

The only way Sylphie found it was due to the whispers of the wind. While the wind was far more silent under the water, Sylphie eventually did manage to hear them. They began to tell her of the environment, and when the Fallen King found a rock formation filled with seaweed and had Dina come over to talk to them, they managed to narrow down the area the boss was in.

While everyone would have loved to let out some pent-up frustration by teaming up and tearing up the Floor Boss together, Sylphie did it alone as that was just faster. Meanwhile, the rest of the group made it toward the exit.

On the dawn of the twenty-third day, they finally all managed to get there as they promptly entered the gate and finished the god-awful water level.

Third floor completed. 30 Nevermore Points earned.

Nevermore Points: 120

Jake noted that the floor gave 30 Nevermore Points upon completion, which made him believe that each floor gave points based on what numbered floor they were, times ten. They also didn't get a single achievement, yet no one cared. They were just happy to be done with the third floor.

Sitting in the small in-between room before the fourth floor, they were all regrouped for the first time in weeks and all relaxed as they reflected a bit on the third floor.

"Even if this particular experience was less than pleasant, I do believe it was a valuable one. If we find ourselves in a similar environment on a later floor, we are not entirely powerless, and I almost have a feeling the Wyrmgod placed a level such as this early on to prepare us," the Sword Saint spoke words of wisdom.

"Doesn't make water levels like this less shit," Jake spoke even wiser words.

“While I do agree with that assessment, the Sword Saint is also correct. It is a potentially lethal weakness for our group that only the Sylphian can act unimpeded in the water. Improvements are needed,” the Fallen King also chimed in.

“Yeah, we did all get better at dealing with water, and this will definitely prove beneficial if we encounter a water floor later on. Also, if some monster is capable of summoning a water domain or something, we won’t find ourselves as limited,” Jake nodded.

Dina also seemed in agreement as she looked deep in thought after the water level, having also not enjoyed it much either.

“Ree,” Sylphie shrugged, not understanding why they all cared so much. Jake seriously wanted to figure out how the hell Sylphie did it, but alas.

He sighed and looked towards the next gate as the others went through the lockbox with loot. Once more, the reward was useless, and Jake was more determined than ever to get a move on. They had just wasted over three weeks, so now it was time to pick up the pace and rapidly clear their way to the first city layer.

Chapter 660 - Nevermore: Monarch Of The Skies

The fourth floor. Jake and his party entered and were all met by a very different environment than the one they had just been in. Pure darkness roamed, and the air smelled of soil and death. The environmental mana affinity matched this as it was an odd mix of earth, death, and dark. Shortly after they were all there, the dungeon informed them of their objectives for this floor.

Welcome to the fourth floor of Nevermore: Darkrock Caverns.

Main objective: Defeat the Darkrock Revenant Lord.

Bonus objectives: Smelt and create at least 200 Darkrock Ingots using Darkrock Ore.

Current progress: Darkrock Revenant Lord (0/1), Darkrock Ingots (0/200).

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Current Nevermore Points: 120

Instantly, they encountered one pretty major issue:

Jake was the only one who could see properly.

The dark mana was intense, and it appeared that Jake was the only one who possessed a natural affinity to it. Even the Fallen King was significantly affected by the dark mana, which reminded Jake of how well his dark mana had also worked on the King back when he was known as the King of the Forest. He had managed to blind the Unique Lifeform back then with his weak dark affinity mana, so for it to be a weakness of his made sense.

Sylphie still managed to adapt by using a domain of wind that was barely detectable. It was only as if a slight breeze appeared all around them, but it allowed the bird to know everything going on in the area.

Dina adapted by quickly growing some odd flower on top of her head that could apparently see for her without any problems and warn her of dangers.

This still left the Sword Saint and the Fallen King as the most affected individuals. The Sword Saint truly had no good tools to see in the darkness but did have skills that allowed him to fight quite effectively nonetheless. The same was true for the King, who did have a skill to sense souls in his vicinity even through the darkness, but this wasn't very useful when it came to the primary challenge of this floor:

Navigating the caverns. Oh, and avoiding the traps that were placed bloody everywhere. It really took Jake back to his Forgotten Sewers days in the Tutorial, except the enemies here were not rats but a mix of earth affinity creatures and – as indicated by the death mana in the air – a whole lot of undead.

If the second floor had been Dina's time to shine and the third Sylphie's, then this floor was Jake's. Collect ores to form ingots for the bonus objective? Sphere of Perception. Avoid traps and find their way through the labyrinthian cavern network? Sphere of Perception. Locate hidden "vaults" of sorts hidden deep beneath the earth? Well, okay, the sphere wasn't quite big enough to reach these in its passive state, but the occasional Pulse of Perception had that covered.

The Darkrock Ore was quite easy to discern from the other rock around it due to its highly-increased mana density, so Jake spent quite a lot of time directing the others where to blast cavern walls apart or where to dig. His party members did slowly adapt to the environment more as time went by, but it honestly wasn't even needed.

There was only one problem Jake had seen, and that was how to change the ore into ingots. He considered if he could melt it himself using Alchemical Flame or maybe even try to summon an actual fire affinity flame, but that turned out to be a non-issue. In one of the secret vaults, they found an entire damn forge that one just had to pour the ore into, and ingots would be spat out shortly after. By the time they found this vault, they had more than enough ore and quickly made the 200 ingots and moved on.

Less than half an hour later, Jake spotted a large being that seemed to be made of pure energy through his sphere. It was also in a large cavern surrounded by other smaller variants of itself, and it didn't take much brainpower to know this was the boss. After getting there, Jake finally saw this Darkrock Revenant Lord. It looked like hundreds of corpses fused into stone, mixed with a shitload of dark affinity mana. It was a mix of an elemental and a ghost, making it quite an interesting opponent. Not that any of them cared, as this abomination was rapidly ripped apart. After that, they found a large smelter pot to throw all the ingots they had formed into, with the result being an epic rarity breastplate and a pair of legguards that none of them needed.

From there, they moved on and quickly located the exit and moved on to the next floor, having finished this one in less than a day.

Current Nevermore Points: 234

114 Nevermore Points earned on the fourth floor. 40 from just completing the floor, 74 from the bonus objective, and then a bunch of achievements. These achievements included one for finding more than half of the hidden vaults, killing the boss fast, no one taking any damage from any traps, and of course, one for swiftly completing the dungeon.

The loot from the in-between room was once more useless, so they moved on to the fifth floor.

Upon entering the fifth floor, a theory they had discussed was pretty much confirmed. The moment they stepped out of the gateway, they were met with vast open skies and found themselves standing on a floating island, surrounded by other floating islands of sizes varying from a few meters across to several kilometers.

The environmental mana was dense with wind, water, and lightning affinity energy, and Jake even saw a few cloud islands in the distance, reminiscent of those he had seen on Earth. The theory they had confirmed was that the first five floors of Nevermore all served a quite simple function: make sure the challengers could at least handle different environments.

They had gone from a desert of extreme heat and cold to a nature-filled forest of life. From there they entered an ocean of pure water, followed by a dark cavern with death, with the final floor in the sky surrounded by wind mana. Each floor had a theme. Perhaps this was why the design at times felt so lazy... they were meant to be relatively simple and to test the basics of those who dared attempt to explore Nevermore.

Though Jake called the design lazy... upon reading the description of the fifth floor, it did appear there was more to this one.

Welcome to the fifth floor of Nevermore: Cloudspring Archipelagos.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of Winds, Lord of Clouds, and the Lord of Lightning.

Bonus objectives: Catch at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits before they escape the archipelagos.

Current progress: Lord of Wind, Lord of Clouds, Lord of Lightning (0/3). Caught Cloudspring Spirits (0/24).

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Current Nevermore Points: 234

Rather than only a single boss to kill, this one had three. Perhaps it was because this was the final floor before they would enter the first city floor. After every fifth floor, there would be an intermitting floor that didn't actually count as a true floor and wasn't even a dungeon. Either way, even if Jake admittedly didn't know much about these city floors, he planned on getting there fast.

This floor was also different in one other way. All of the prior floors had either been an unfavorable environment to at least a few people in their group or, at the very least, not a beneficial one. Dina had been advantaged in the second floor, and Jake in the fourth, sure, but this floor... this one was different.

Wind. Clouds. Open area. Sylphie, the Sword Saint, and Jake all felt in their element. Due to their advantage, they all knew that this level was theirs to utterly dominate. It wasn't like the King and Dina were disadvantaged either. They set out with great gusto, and quickly it became clear just how ridiculous their advantage was.

The wind whispered far louder than on any other floor, allowing Sylphie to know where everything was, meaning that within a minute, she already had a rough idea of where the three Lords were. The bonus objective of wanting them to capture at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits was also one they wanted to tackle, and it didn't take them long to find their first spirit. These spirits were small fairy-like creatures that all moved incredibly fast and were quite elusive. Their group discussed how to capture them and even laid out plans that included the King creating small cages and Jake weaving stable arcane mana nets, which made their first encounter with one incredibly anti-climactic.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched loudly the second they saw this first spirit.

The spirit stopped dozens of kilometers away and turned around. Then, like an arrow, it flew straight towards them before circling around Sylphie and eventually settling on her back as the small fairy rubbed its head against the hawk's feathers.

Current progress: Capture Cloudspring Spirits (1/24)

It turned out that these Cloudspring Spirits really liked Sylphie. As in, after the first one was "captured," they kind of all just came flying as they traveled through the floor toward the three bosses. They weren't even a quarter of the way when they passively completed the bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Capture at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits. 20 Nevermore Points earned.

After completing the bonus objective, they learned that the three bosses were all in roughly the same area on three massive cloud islands. It turned out that a reward for collecting the spirits – outside of the points – was information, and damn were the spirits all chatterboxes. They told them all about the secrets they could find on different islands, warned them of what the three bosses were capable of, and once they had captured all twenty-four, they had then been told where the three bosses were. Something they already knew, but hey, it was something.

When it came to opponents on this floor, they came in the form of birds, elementals, and even some pterodactyl-looking monsters that breathed lightning. None were a problem and were killed before they even had a chance to attack, though most foes actively avoided their group.

A bit less than halfway to the bosses, Sylphie was practically surrounded by Cloudspring Spirits, and they got an achievement.

Achievement earned: Capture more than 50 Cloudspring Spirits. 25 Nevermore Points earned.

With the achievement came more information. They were informed that if they crushed the orbs dropped from all three Lords instead of bringing them to the exit of the dungeon for an extra reward, they would be able to summon an optional and even harder boss. So that was definitely cool.

By the time Jake spotted the first large island with one of the Floor Bosses, Sylphie was drowned in spirits, and when just one more joined them, a second achievement popped up.

Achievement earned: Capture all 100 Cloudspring Spirits. 30 Nevermore Points earned.

The reward for getting every single spirit wasn't information. Instead, all of the one hundred Cloudspring Spirits merged together and formed one Cloudspring Spirit Queen. The Cloudspring Spirit Queen was only slightly larger than the smaller spirits, and Jake wondered what her function was. Something he would never come to know.

Shortly after she appeared, Sylphie let out a few screeches. The Spirit Queen seemed ecstatic, and her body began to fade and turn into a small marble before Sylphie inhaled the entire marble before burping and looking happy.

No one bothered to question the hawk. Instead, they split up to take down the three bosses. The Lords were all relatively close together, but there were still around a thousand kilometers between each island.

Contrary to the other floors, this one was not as much about finding the end goal. The islands were all placed in a long strip, growing larger as one traveled, with the final four Islands being the largest by far.

It was one massive island in the middle with three large islands floating around it with smaller islands in between.

Jake went for one boss, the Sword Saint another, and Sylphie a third, with the Fallen King and Dina going toward the massive central island to secure the exit Sylphie told them was there.

The three Lords were elementals, and they divvied it up by giving Sylphie the Lord of Winds, the Sword Saint the Lord of Clouds, and Jake the Lord of Lightning.

The fifth floor, still being only the fifth floor, meant that what followed was not truly a fight. Jake took down the Lord of Lightning by barraging it down with arrows from afar, while Sylphie demolished the Lord of Winds by, in her words, “out-winding it.” The Sword Saint took the longest as cutting an elemental wasn’t the most effective, but it was still taken down within minutes.

Each of the three Lords dropped a basketball-sized orb corresponding to their affinities, and as agreed upon, the three of them instantly broke the orbs to summon the optional boss.

And summon an optional boss it did.

After he broke the orb, the island Jake had fought the Lord of Lightning on began to crumble and released a giant arc of lightning that flew towards the central island. Shortly after, a tornado-looking beam of wind flew from another broken island before finally, a stream of clouds was launched from the final boss island.

Event unlocked.

The three Lords of the Cloudspring Archipelagos have fallen, powerless before their foes. As the three islands crumble, the Orb of the Winds, Clouds, and Lightning all lie broken. Behold, as the Monarch of the Skies awakens.

Objective: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies.

Warning: the Monarch of the Skies is an optional objective and is significantly more powerful than any prior Floor Bosses.

“Meet up at my location,” the Fallen King sent to Jake and the others as they began flying towards the central island.

On the island, a massive pillar of wind, clouds, and lightning had appeared that soared toward the sky. Far above, lightning clouds formed as the wind picked up, the occasional sound of thunder audible. It truly gave off the vibes of a proper final boss being summoned.

Meeting up with the Fallen King, Jake saw that Sylphie had already returned, and they waited only for the Sword Saint to make his way back as they observed the pillar slowly fade to reveal the form of the final boss.

Jake wasn't sure what he would have expected as he laid eyes on the Monarch of the Skies. Considering the three Lords had all been elementals, Jake had assumed that this Monarch of the Skies would be an elemental too, but what he saw instead was a humanoid creature that stood nearly ten meters tall. Feathers crackling with lightning covered the creature's entire form, only hidden by silver-ish armor that

protected the Monarch's chest area, with two large white wings springing from its back. The Monarch looked androgynous, and Jake honestly had no idea what its race was either.

What he did know was that this creature was far more powerful than any Floor Boss they had faced before in Nevermore.

[Monarch of the Skies – lvl 225]

However... even if this one was stronger than anything they had ever faced in Nevermore, it was not stronger than anything Jake had ever faced before. Compared to the Isoptera Hive King, this Monarch of the Skies fell short by quite a margin. Moreover, Jake was not alone.

"Are you disappointed?" the Sword Saint, who had just returned, asked Jake as they both looked at the event boss.

"I don't know," Jake said honestly. "But I guess I had hoped for more."

"We are barely at the starting stages of Nevermore. This foe already surpasses what the vast majority of parties would be capable of handling," the King chimed in.

"I know, I know," Jake said with a sigh. "Anyway, let's just get this over with."

Jake wasn't gonna lie. While he did find the experience of exploring the floors of Nevermore kind of interesting, and he enjoyed the company he was there with, the entire thing had been quite disappointing so far. He would have preferred to just skip to floor 20 or some shit. Sadly, he had to bully far weaker foes for a while longer before that was possible.

However, just as they were about to engage, the Sword Saint seemed to get an idea as he turned to Dina.

"Dina... how about taking on this foe alone?"