

Hunter 661

Chapter 661 - Nevermore: Nature Magic Is Scary

The dryad didn't seem to register the words immediately but finally reacted after a second.

"Huh?" Dina asked, confused. "I... I could... but why?"

The old man shook his head and smiled. "The four of us have either fought side by side or against each other before. We know about one another. I believe it would be pertinent to get a better idea of your skills, too, before we move on to the later floors so none of us are taken by surprise."

Dina seemed to consider the words for a moment before nodding resolutely. "Alright."

"I take it you are all fine with this arrangement?" the Sword Saint asked Jake and the others.

"It is acceptable to me as long as she does not take too long," the Fallen King said.

"Ree," Sylphie said as she flew over and landed on top of Jake's head before quickly sitting down and resting. Apparently, she would need some time to properly digest the fairy queen thing.

"Fine by me," Jake also shrugged, giving his approval. He didn't really believe the Monarch of the Skies would give him a good fight, so why not share the love? Besides, he was interested in seeing how well Dina would handle the thing.

While the Monarch of the Skies wasn't some pinnacle creature, it did feel pretty powerful for its level. Chances are it also had some of that special Floor Boss extra juice that Jake noticed all the other bosses had. The extra juice came in the form of expanded resource pools, specifically their health pools. That should push the Monarch up a level.

The highest-leveled boss so far in Nevermore had been the Lords they had just killed, and all three of those had been level 212. At 225, this did put the Monarch quite a bit above anything else and twenty levels above Dina herself.

Moreover, the environment obviously favored the Monarch of the Skies. Chances are it would turn into a battle in the air, and so far, most of what Dina had shown was summoning vines from the ground, throwing out seeds and growing soldiers, and some occasional enhancement magic.

Jake looked forward to what more she had to show, and he gladly sat back as Dina made her way down towards the large central island where the Monarch of the Skies stood with its eyes closed.

Still floating in the air a good distance away, Dina threw out two small seeds that grew to become spear-like trees. Using some kind of plant telekinesis, she kept them floating there as she took aim toward the Monarch below.

The second she threw them, the Monarch awakened. A whirlwind appeared around it instantly, and Jake and the others backed away to not get involved in the fight. The two trees entered the whirlwind unimpeded, but the ten-meter-tall winged creature still managed to dodge, resulting in the two trees stabbing into the ground, embedding themselves.

With lightning crackling on its wings, the Monarch was about to take to the air as suddenly vines exploded out of both trunks from the thrown trees, seeking to entangle its talon-like feet. It managed to avoid the roots with one of its feet, but the other was caught as Dina followed up her attack.

The ground below the Monarch erupted as hundreds of thorn-filled vines flew toward it. The Floor Boss reacted quickly and held out its hand as a lightning bolt descended from the thunderclouds above. The lightning hit the Monarch as its entire body exploded, getting rid of the vines and allowing it to get airborne. Moreover, the lightning had delivered with it a large white halberd that the boss now wielded.

“It is quite powerful,” the Sword Saint commented.

“Yeah, not bad,” Jake did agree. The fact that it was effectively fighting within a giant formation that assisted it sure did wonders. However, its opponent wasn’t simple either.

Dina seemed almost annoyed at it for getting out of her attack. Rather than retreat, she chose to engage the Monarch of the Skies directly as the two clashed in mid-air.

That is when Jake realized something he hadn’t even considered before. Dina was a druid that specialized in manipulating plants, but she was also a dryad. A part human, part plant lifeform. An obvious weakness of any kind of manipulation-based class would always be a lack of whatever they specialized in manipulating. They would try to shore up this weakness by being able to summon some of their element of choice, but this obviously came with some drawbacks and a highly increased resource consumption.

But what happens when bringing the element means bringing your own body? Well, you would have someone like Dina.

The second before she clashed with the Monarch, a sea of vines grew from her arm and speared forward toward the boss. Surprised, the Monarch stopped in its tracks and tried to retreat out of range from the wall of spiky vines, but before it could, the vines were shot out like spears, a few of them managing to stab it in its arms and legs. Sadly for Dina, the breastplate worn by the Monarch meant it avoided most of the damage, but the winner of this brief exchange was still clear.

Before the Monarch could even properly recover, Dina pulled out a staff and pointed it towards it. Jake expected to see her summon root spears or something, but instead, the staff began to glow a green light before it released what looked like a green bolt of lightning.

It was too fast for the Monarch to dodge as it was hit in the shoulder. At the spot where it had been hit, the feathers began to fall off as the flesh began to rot within seconds. Jake's eyes opened wide as she released several more green bolts of lightning while he tried to analyze the nature of her attack.

Meanwhile, the Monarch retaliated with its own lightning, the two magics clashing in mid-air and exploding upon impact in flashes of white and green. After the Monarch failed to block a bolt and found itself hit once more, Jake finally got an understanding.

Willpower-based attack.

This was... rare, but Jake had read about it. What Dina did was release bolts of will-empowered life energy into her foe, that rather than nurture life, carried with it intent to self-destruct. Which it promptly did, resulting in rot setting in and spreading to the surrounding flesh. It was an incredibly insidious type of attack and one that was quite difficult to protect against.

However, in this instance, the Monarch of the Skies did have an advantage due to its significantly increased health pool, which resulted in the wounds healing quickly. Dina also realized this as she

stopped her attack and changed her stance. The staff began to warp as a large blade grew out of its end, transforming it into a scythe.

The two of them flew towards each other once more, and it was clear this fight would transform into a melee battle, which did make Jake a bit worried, considering Dina was mostly a caster. However, it appeared he had once more underestimated her.

Now, there was someone Jake had heard mentioned quite a few times. Nature's Attendant had mentioned this being, and so had Dina, but Jake didn't believe they had ever seen it. Jake was naturally talking about the mysterious Bobo, the Guardian of Dina. He had hoped to see this Guardian during this fight, not realizing... Bobo had been in front of their eyes this entire time.

The large robe that usually covered Dina's entire body was torn to shreds as four spider-like limbs of wood speared out and penetrated through the breastplate of the Monarch. The halberd that had been aimed at Dina was also stopped as several branches grew out and took the blow. This allowed Dina to properly close in, and swinging her scythe, she sent out a crescent wave of green energy that tore into the Monarch, leaving a deep cut of rotting flesh.

Jake could finally see what had been hidden beneath her thick robe and saw a wooden suit of armor covering her entire chest, abdomen, and thighs, stopping just above her knees. It extended nearly all the way to her neck, exposing only her head, arms, and lower legs. It wasn't truly a piece of armor either... it was alive.

Despite being pushed back, the Monarch of the Skies counterattacked as it raised its halberd, making a giant bolt of lightning strike down at Dina. Before it could even hit, a spear of wood was shot out from her armor to absorb the blow, allowing Dina to pursue her foe.

By now, the Monarch seemed to realize it was in a bad position as blood dripped from its chest from several barrel-sized holes, and a large part of its chest was rotting away from the scythe hit earlier. It tried to back away, but Dina pursued with impressive speed as she continued attacking with ranged attacks in the form of wooden spears. Being hit by one of these also wasn't as simple as just taking a hit.

Every wooden spear that penetrated its body bloomed into more spear-like vines that dug into the flesh of the Monarch, and as it kept trying to retreat, Jake saw something frightening. Leaves began to sprout beneath the breastplate of the Monarch as he realized that the hit from her armor – Bobo – had done more than just stabbing: it had planted seeds.

While Jake used poison, Dina did something similar but far scarier in Jake's mind. With her attacks, she implanted almost microscopic seeds that took hold inside the body of her foe. Jake hadn't even noticed it before Dina chose to activate the many seeds she had planted within the Monarch, and damn, did it look scary as thorns and vines began growing out from beneath the feathers of the Monarch as the giant creature screeched in pain.

The Monarch of the Skies still refused to give up as it screeched louder than ever before. The thunderclouds above began to gather as a giant pillar of pure lightning descended, bathing the Monarch in energy and pushing Dina back. Once the light faded, its form was once more revealed, the vines and whatnot burned away, and its entire body crackled with lightning.

Floating above the large island, it had been summoned on, it didn't notice what was about to hit it before it was too late.

Below, the entire island exploded as thousands of meter-thick vines surged upwards, grasping the form of the Monarch. The vines were instantly singed by the powerful lightning, but ten more came to take their place whenever one broke.

Seeing this, Jake realized where they had come from. Those two trees she had fired at the beginning had launched seeds into the island, and vines had slowly grown within while she fought the Monarch. Then, during the fight, she eventually pushed the Monarch back to float just above the island, where her trap had fully germinated and was ready to be activated.

Immobilized, the Monarch of the Skies tried to free itself and called down a lightning storm as a whirlwind surrounded it, cutting away at the vines, but Dina rushed forward unimpeded as her wood armor grew wooden shields to block anything headed her way. The Monarch let out a loud screech as Dina transformed her arm into a long lance of wood that penetrated into its chest. Its screech slowly turned into a scream as Dina's body burned with energy as the vine pulsed with power.

Then, a hundred vines erupted from within the Monarch of the Skies, penetrating through its skin and even its beaked mouth, effectively exploding it from within.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies. 50 Nevermore Points awarded.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies within half an hour of summoning. 25 Nevermore Points awarded.

"Ree," Sylphie commented.

"Yep," Jake agreed with a nod. "Definitely scary."

"Nature magic is notoriously weak offensively, but I must say I find myself impressed by her ability to make use of her skills so effectively," the Fallen King said with admiration.

"Makes me wonder if her being a support type is even true," Jake smiled.

"I only look more forward to her support skills after seeing her personal combat prowess," the Sword Saint said with a nod.

The dryad in question still floated in the air and looked at the dead Monarch of the Skies as the vines growing from its body began to bloom flowers of various colors. She nodded and looked proud of herself as she flew back towards them.

"I did it," she said with a smile as she stopped in front of the Sword Saint.

"That you did," the old man said with his grandfatherly smile. He then looked at her wooden armor with a raised eyebrow. "And am I right to assume that is Bobo?"

"Oh, yeah," Dina nodded as she looked proudly at her armor. Still looking down at it, she nodded a few more times before looking up. "Bobo also says hello to you all. He is a bit shy, though."

"I see, I see," the Sword Saint nodded. "Well, Bobo sure also did a nice job. Tell him that for me, okay?"

Dina smiled and gently hit her armor. "Come on, Bobo... be polite."

Jake also stood off to the side and smiled. Dina was naturally the only one who could hear her-

“Thank... you...”

A deep rumbling voice came from Dina’s chest area as it moved slightly. Jake and everyone stared, surprised for a moment, as Dina looked incredibly proud as she patted the armor gently with a proud look on her face.

“Bobo is full of surprises, it seems,” the old man said, being the first to properly collect his thoughts. “If I may ask... is he permanently attached to you, or can he also act more independently?”

“He can, but he doesn’t like to... we are best together,” Dina answered. “Grandfather gave Bobo to me when I was still small, and he has always been with me. Keeping me safe and helping me fight. He is my best friend.”

Bobo seemed to move a bit at her calling him her best friend, making Dina smile even more.

Jake also couldn’t help but smile at the girl and her scary wooden armor able to grow large thorns capable of tearing nearly anything apart while also offering insane defenses. It was like having an automatic defense system, and from how they fought, Dina’s style was fully capable of taking advantage of Bobo.

Dina’s offensive prowess was also pretty darn impressive. As the King had mentioned, then nature affinity casters tended to be quite weak offensively and in direct combat. Especially so when not in an

environment beneficial to them. Dina managed to overcome the weakness of requiring a good environment by using her own body and even Bobo. She could grow plants of all kinds from her own body, and she was the perfect conduit for her own nature mana. Further amplified by her Bloodline... she was indeed a true monster.

The dead Monarch of the Skies was definitely proof she could fend for herself and didn't need babysitting even on later floors. He still wondered how she would fight something like an elemental that didn't have any life energy and didn't care about physical attacks, but he had a feeling she had tools to handle those too. In fact, he got a feeling she had a lot more to show them over the next many years as they dove further and further into Nevermore.

For now, it was time to move on. While still having small talk, they made their way to the gateway and passed through as they got their 50 Nevermore Points for passing the floor and some extra for achievements. All in all, counting all the achievements and the extra reward from slaying the Monarch of the Skies, this floor had yielded by far the most Nevermore Points.

From one floor, they had gotten 231, which was nearly a doubling of the 234 they had before.

Current Nevermore Points: 465

Jake was satisfied as they stood in the in-between room and had one more gateway available than before. One leading to the first intermitting city layer of Nevermore. After opening another disappointing lockbox of loot, there was no need to delay, as they all promptly moved on and entered the first city.

Chapter 662 - Nevermore: Dead On Arrival

Nevermore was often called the greatest dungeon in the multiverse, but it wasn't just one dungeon. In fact, it was a multitude of dungeons stacked on top of one another, and even if Nevermore broke

conventional rules, it was still classified as a dungeon. However, be it due to fairness from the system or the will of the Wyrmgod himself, every single floor did not count as its own independent” dungeon.”

Instead, a set number of floors in a row would as be classified together, with the five first in C-grade counting as” one dungeon.”

Why did this matter?

Well, for the title, of course.

[Dungeoneer X] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +20 all stats.

Jake’s Dungeoneer title had upgraded to level 10, also known as the” cap” of D-grade. In E-grade, one could get up to level 5, 10 in D-grade, and 15 in C-grade. Jake also knew that every increase in the title from here on out would give +9 to all stats – tripling from the +3 it gave in D-grade.

Anyway, having an upgraded title was nice but not that impactful, and honestly, not something Jake thought much about as he and the others entered the first city floor of Nevermore.

City layers – or city floors - in Nevermore were quite peculiar. Jake had read a bit about them and knew that he shouldn’t expect overly much quite yet for one simple reason: this city layer had only existed for a few years.

Like the floors, these city layers had also been "reset" and "redone" for the new integration. One could still enter the city from the previous era if no one in the party in question was from the ninety-third universe, but if anyone was, they would end up on this layer. This was another reason why many factions had quickly taken some C-grades and pretty much forced them through these first layers of Nevermore. They wanted to establish themselves and claim space on the city floor. Not that many factions had time to arrive and begin to build much of note quite yet.

Even then, it wasn't like the city was completely empty.

Jake and the others walked out of the gateway and found themselves in the middle of a nearly completely empty square. Large stone buildings surrounded them at all times, but they all seemed empty. Jake did notice a few eyes land on them shortly after they appeared, and he looked towards an empty-looking building and spotted a man peeking out towards them.

The man was surprised at being noticed and quickly retreated. Jake didn't bother trying to figure out what the guy wanted, and besides, he had a system message to skim.

You have arrived on the first city floor of Nevermore. You are currently in the northern square.

All violence outside of the arenas is strictly prohibited on all city floors. Challenge Dungeon(s) can be found in the central square. If Nevermore is left and reentered, you will automatically be taken to the latest city floor unlocked.

Short and simple, yet very informative. Like Nevermore City before they entered the dungeon, violence was not allowed, but arenas were supplied. The message also mentioned one of the other important aspects of Nevermore: Challenge Dungeons.

This was the individual aspect of Nevermore. Challenge Dungeons of varying natures that all gave Nevermore Points, just like the main floors. However, Jake had no interest in checking out quite yet. These Challenge Dungeons could be found on every single city floor and were the same throughout. Besides, if he did ever want to go back to this first city floor, he would be able to at any point as one could travel between all the city floors – or leave Nevermore altogether. Because one other big difference between the other floors and a city floor was that one could exit Nevermore from a city floor and reenter again on that same city floor, just like the system message had mentioned. To summarise, city floors were pretty much save points for Nevermore.

Besides that, these city layers primarily functioned as places for parties to replace party members or fill empty group slots if someone happened to die. One could only do floor six onwards with people who had already done the first five, and it wasn't possible to reenter the first five to get someone up to speed, so people really didn't have a choice. This was one of the reasons the arenas were established.

Another reason for these city layers was to stock up on resources without having to leave and come back again. Additionally, people could sell special items unique to Nevermore only within the city layers. While Jake and the others hadn't found any of such special items, he knew one could find tokens that allowed one to travel back to the closest city layer, orbs that released pulses to create maps, and even items granting information on the specific floor one found themselves in.

Finally, factions used these floors for one more thing... time dilation training. One was able to compound time dilation within Nevermore, and the Wyrmgod even provided these chambers for anyone interested. Needless to say, then Jake and the others had no interest in these chambers, and they quite honestly didn't make much sense for people who were actually talented. They were primarily made for people who just wanted to quickly finish their Nevermore dive and get on the Leaderboards, or maybe to sit down and do a crafting session to not delay their party too much before moving onto the next level.

That was pretty much all these City Floors were for. Ah, but they did hold one more interesting thing:

Leaderboards.

“Do we have a reason to linger on this floor for longer than necessary? It appears deserted, and we have no need for additional resources,” the King said, clearly not interested in staying in this city for long.

It made sense. While time dilation was still in effect, it wasn’t as powerful on the earlier floors as on the latter ones. Jake and the others had no idea how much it differentiated, and even the Sword Saint, who had insights into the concept had time, had no way to determine it. To him, time was not dilated at all due to the system-fuckery making time appear “normal” within Nevermore.

“I want to check out the Leaderboards first,” Jake said.

“That does sound worth our time,” the Sword Saint agreed.” Though from my understanding, the Wyrmgod is quite stingy with what information is given out.”

“True, true, but it is better than nothing,” Jake smiled. No one else disagreed with quickly going to check out the Leaderboards, so without further ado, they began walking through the empty city streets. Quite a few buildings were pre-constructed by the Wyrmgod, but even more empty lots were present as factions had yet to claim any land.

The further they moved toward the central square, where the Leaderboards and dungeons could both be found, the more people they also began encountering. All of them were naturally C-grade, but Jake was still taken aback as he noticed something was off: their levels.

While Jake and his party members were all below level 210 and hadn’t even gained any levels yet from the first five floors, Jake saw a slew of people even towards the end of C-grade. He quickly guessed

these were people brought to this floor specifically to establish a presence for whatever faction they represented and weren't actually there to do the floors.

Jake wondered if the Order had boosted some people to the floor yet, but then realized he didn't actually care as they soon enough made their way to the central square, where they finally laid their eyes on the two Leaderboards there.

"A bit lower than I expected," Jake commented as they looked at the first of the Leaderboards.

"It is the average, and considering the many groups that don't aim to accomplish anything but to get the bare minimum while taking their time, it isn't that surprising," the Sword Saint said, with the King and Dina agreeing with him.

Jake still thought it was a bit low.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-5): 226

Of these, 150 were guaranteed just for completing the floors. That meant the average group only got 76 extra points from achievements, bonus objectives, and events. Once more, it had to be noticed this was only groups who qualified for the Leaderboards by having nobody above level 210. If one counted the groups that rushed through with a bunch of people in late-tier C-grade, then the points would have been far higher. A bunch of people at level 300 boosting one lower-leveled native from the ninety-third universe would have demolished the floors quite easily, after all, and gotten all the bonus points for speed.

Looking at the next Leaderboard, Jake was once more a bit surprised.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-5): 553

"Also lower than I expected," Jake once more commented.

"There, I concur," the Sword Saint agreed. They had gotten 465 Nevermore Points, and that had been by rushing through, so to see the top group only earn 88 more points than them was honestly surprising. Then again... considering how long it had been since the integration, it was doubtful any team from the new universe had even been close to reaching the maximum threshold yet. The groups going right now consisted of those with high levels of talent and high confidence, who only cared about raking up points on the later floors.

"Are there no Leaderboards that include the Challenge Dungeons?" the Fallen King asked inquisitively. "Or one that includes bonus points gained from any level-ups?"

"Doesn't seem like it," Jake shrugged.

"As I said... stingy," the Sword Saint smiled and shook his head.

Either way, the Leaderboards were a bit disappointing, and their party of five quickly moved on.

Being at the central square and in the vicinity of any challenge dungeons, they decided to check out the dungeon on this city floor. Yes, dungeon, singular. It appeared there was only a single Challenge

Dungeon on this floor. More would come on later floors, but Jake had still expected to see more than one.

Oh well, at least there would be more on later city floors. All Challenge Dungeons that would eventually become available could be entered from all city floors they encountered, and as they also all had limited attempts, then it was often advised to wait to enter them. Considering one couldn't truly die within the Challenge Dungeon, limited attempts were pretty much a requirement to make sure one couldn't brute force it, and honestly, giving people more than one try was already nice. On a side note, one could leave and enter, and attempts were only considered consumed if one chose to leave in the middle of a challenge or died.

Inspecting the one available dungeon, it appeared to be some kind of arena from the looks of it. Exactly what it was about, they naturally couldn't know, but Jake looked forward to checking it out later on, as some arena battling seemed fun.

Not knowing it, Jake would have his hopes of arena battles fulfilled sooner rather than later as they moved toward the sixth floor.

Now, when it came to how he would feel about these arena battles... that was an entirely different story.

In Nevermore City, activity was buzzing as always. Even during normal times, it was one of the areas in the multiverse with the most traffic, but with the new integration, it had reached a new level. A new era did not only bring with it an age of new geniuses, but the wave of Records it sent echoing through the entire multiverse also benefitted the geniuses that already existed. This was a time of countless talents to compete, and those from the ninety-two other universes gladly rose to the occasion to challenge the newly integrated fighters.

But... even these geniuses still needed someone from the new universe to go with them if they wanted to compete on the new Leaderboards where getting titles was far easier. Finding someone who would fit in the group was hard, especially someone who could keep up with the pace of a multiversal genius. Unless they themselves were supreme geniuses, of course. Or... if they, for some reason, were specially qualified for dealing with Nevermore.

Which was the exact scenario Casper found himself. He had been busy working on New Yalsten with the others and had reached C-grade only a week prior. Shortly after his evolution, he had been contacted by his Patron – the Blightfather – and been given a direct task for the first time since the Tutorial:

Go to Nevermore and be the one party member from the new universe in a group put together by the top brass of the Risen. Casper had expected to go to Nevermore with Priscilla and others from Earth, but when the order came from the Blightfather, he had no choice.

As for who he was then going there with? As far as he could tell, the best the entire Risen faction had.

That day, Casper had arrived at the Risen compound at Nevermore. There, he had promptly been escorted to his four upcoming party members who had already arrived beforehand. Casper would lie if he said he wasn't nervous, as he could feel an aura ahead of him that surpassed his own by quite a margin.

Nevertheless...

Casper entered the room without seeing a need to knock as a woman sitting close to the door looked his way. She was the only one at the entrance, with the others likely in some of the many side rooms.

"The Dungeon Engineer, huh?" she smiled, her fangs showing. She was some kind of Beastfolk Risen.

"That's me," Casper said noncommittally. He wasn't exactly enthusiastic about being there.

"Well, ain't you a peachy one," the woman grinned even more as she jumped off the chair she had been lounging on and went closer. "Hey, I heard that new universes don't have native undead, is that true? Doesn't that mean you are a newborn?"

"No."

"No to you being a newborn or no to no undead exis-"

"Maltrax, leave him be," a voice spoke as a tall man entered the room. The moment he did, Casper felt the entire atmosphere of the room change, and even Lyra within his locket was alarmed. The sheer level of blight energy he emanated... Casper knew who it was instantly.

He was the party leader of their group and the youngest Ghost King within the last billion years. A genius nurtured within the Ghostlands from birth, who had been assessed to have a high chance of reaching godhood even in D-grade. He was, based on all Casper had heard, an absolute monster.

"I was just kidding around; no need to be so serious," the undead beastkin woman said. "Though he does feel a bit too weak to join us, doesn't he?"

"He is an engineer, is he not?" a third voice said as a woman wearing what looked like a wedding dress walked in. Thin semi-transparent cloth seemed to float around her, obscuring her form entirely outside a faintly female outline, with her body giving off intense death energy.

"I am," Casper nodded.

"Still, you should be strong, too," the beastskin complained.

"You're right; I vote for removing me from the group and me going back home," Casper said semi-jokingly.

"Hehe, at least you have some guts," the Ghost King said as his abyss-like eyes stared at Casper. "Name's Azal; a pleasure to meet you... Casper, was it?"

Casper nodded, not surprised the other party didn't really comment on his willingness to just go back home. They both knew that nobody had any say in who was in this group.

Besides, Casper had not been selected for nothing. While Casper did fall behind the usual elites when it came to pure combat prowess, this was Nevermore, not some battlefield. This was a mega-dungeon, and Casper was a dungeon engineer. To be an engineer did not simply mean he was capable of making dungeons... it also allowed him to analyze dungeons when within them. See the "code" behind their functions, and discover things a normal person couldn't, most of it through system assistance.

This advantage became readily apparent immediately upon entering the first floor.

The moment they appeared, Casper didn't delay and knelt down as he placed his palm on the hot sand. The other undead shielded themselves and him from the life-infused sunlight as Casper closed his eyes. Thirty or so seconds later, he opened them again. "Are we going for any hidden events?"

"Are there any easy ones?" the woman in her ghostly wedding dress asked.

"No, not really; they are all time-consuming. Better to just go for the boss right away," Casper shook his head. "Though I would collect those fragments for the bonus objective. There are far more than is needed, and while chances are we would get an achievement for collecting far more than a thousand, I don't believe that worth it either."

"Where is the boss?" Azal asked.

Casper quickly took out a small orb and infused some energy into it before throwing it to the Ghost King. "Should take you straight to it, but for reference, it is straight down and through the planet."

"Distance?" their fifth and final party member asked. He was a three-meter tall and lank abomination with limbs not truly fitting together, and he wore an entirely black cloak, hiding his grotesque body.

Casper did a quick scan before he sent the exact distance from them to the boss. The fabric of the dungeon was so easily readable as they were still only on the first floor.

The lank abomination nodded as spears of bone embedded themselves in the sand all around him. Energy surged as space seemed to warp, and with a nod, he stepped back as Azal entered the formation.

A black abyss opened up beneath him as his body distorted, and he disappeared into the spacial tunnel digging straight through the planet.

At the same time, the ghostly bride had sent out an army of specters to collect Sunlight Fragments, joined by the beastkin woman.

Not even a minute after Azal disappeared – and less than ten minutes after entering the first floor – they got the achievement telling them of the death of the Floor Boss, and within less than an hour, they were off the floor and on to the second.

Casper simply went along with the flow and did his job. He had heard Jake had also entered, and he couldn't help but wonder how his speed compared to his old colleague and friend. Though he did feel a bit sorry for Jake... because he had to be bored out of his mind dealing with these early floors.

Chapter 663 - Nevermore: Impatience & A Witch's Evolution

Floors 1 to 5 had pretty clear goals in mind: determine the dungeon divers' ability to adapt to different environments and handle different enemy types. It also included a good deal of exploration, with a major part of each floor being about finding the exit.

Floors 6 to 10, on the other hand, had none of this. There was no difficult environment to adapt to, no mystery about where one had to go, and no doubts about the objective. These five floors were all about one thing and one thing only: combat. At least on the surface.

Jake and the four others had appeared within the entrance area to a giant colosseum. Giant, in this case, was honestly not enough to describe the sheer size of the place, as it looked more like an entire city constructed in a donut shape with a large open area in the middle. Entering the colosseum, their party was met by a guide who introduced them to the place and, along with the system message about the floor, told them all they had to know.

In order to move on to the next floor, they simply had to win ten battles and thus advance to the next rank. Contrary to earlier floors, floors 6 through 10 were connected, and all shared the same arena theme. In fact, the guide would be the same throughout all these floors as they moved on to larger arenas and colosseums every time they climbed a floor.

This setup did make earning bonus points harder as there weren't as many opportunities for achievements and bonus objectives. On floor six, the bonus objective required them to collect an adequate amount of in-depth information on at least five of their opponents, which was another aspect these floors had that the others didn't: the opportunity to prepare.

It was possible to research your foes before entering the arena with them. They could discover facts about these opponents and their abilities, and as they decided to do the bonus objective on the sixth floor, they got a good idea of the scope. It was so in-depth that they even learned one of their opponents – a giant Kraken-like land monster – had an existing injury caused by a curse that they would be able to exploit. One of the battles was also against a party of five like their own. There the Sword Saint ended up learning two of the party members used to be in a relationship. Without the girl knowing, the guy cheated with the other girl in the party and broke it off, so if they revealed this to them before the fight, it would likely make them fight worse during the actual bout as they were pissed at each other due to relationship drama.

So... yeah. That was a thing. Anyway, Jake and the others didn't really need any of this information and only gathered it for the bonus objective. The floor was also made more annoying by the fact that one could only fight in the arena once a day, and before winning a fight, Jake and the others would have no idea who their next opponent was and who to collect information on. All this resulted in it taking them a bit over a month to do the floor as they had to wait for information brokers and stalk people. All in all, it wasn't a good time. Especially not when they didn't need what they learned at all, as every single fight on the sixth floor was utterly one-sided.

The only interesting thing was the achievements. On the sixth floor, they would get a bonus of between 1 and 6 Nevermore Points every fight based on how much the audience liked it, and from what they learned, this would be the same on floors seven, eight, nine, and ten. This meant one could double the reward for passing every floor just by being entertaining.

Jake and co ended up earning 45 points total for audience satisfaction, which was still pretty good. It turned out that a lot of people loved overpowered people doing overpowered stuff to utterly dominate their foes.

Floors seven, eight, nine, and ten were just more of the same, with the arenas getting bigger, the audience growing, and more points on the line. Floor seven had the same bonus objective of collecting information as floor six, but this time they didn't bother to do the bonus objective but just did their fights as fast as they could, meaning they completed their ten fights and, thus, the seventh floor in only ten days. Potential bonus points per battle had gone from 6 to 7, with Jake and the others doing even better than the sixth floor.

They also learned that there was an achievement that gave the exact same points as the bonus objective for fighting without gathering any information and another for completing the floor in ten days, meaning they had lost points by doing the information gathering on the sixth floor. So, yeah, they weren't gonna do that again.

On floor eight, they decided to test a bit and did the fights solo rather than as a group. No fight so far had been harder than the Monarch of the Skies, so they all easily swept through the battles one by one, completing this floor in only ten days too. They got 78/80 points for audience satisfaction, with the Fallen King and Dina being the only ones to lose points during their solo fights.

The two were – naturally so – bullied for this as they moved on to the ninth floor. Mostly the same as before, with them once more doing the fights solo for extra entertainment value. The only fight of interest here from Jake's point of view was when he faced a party that had pretty interesting synergy and used mixes of water, lightning, and earth magic to lock down and kill him. Not because Jake was in any real danger but because it was his first time trying an instantly-summoned lightning bath.

It was only when they reached the tenth floor that things changed a bit again. This was the final colosseum, and once more, they had ten battles to finish. However, once they had done the tenth battle, they unlocked the option to do a final event round, the same as on the fifth floor. This final battle would be against the current "champions" of the arena and consisted of a full party of humanoids.

Considering the levels of their opponents had increased, they decided to not send anyone solo to take on this final challenge. Not because they doubted that any single one of them could solo this final fight, but because chances are it would take a while, and nobody wanted to wait around before moving on to later floors. Hence why all five of them entered the arena and utterly demolished the poor champions before they all moved on.

The constant one-day waits between fights had annoyed the hell out of Jake. Sylphie and the King also weren't happy. Dina and the Sword Saint took it in strides as the Sword Saint enjoyed taking his time working on his profession by painting in between fights, and Jake learned that Dina had a special spatial storage with an entire garden within that she took her time tending to during their waits.

Jake also got some alchemy in, but that still left Sylphie and the Fallen King. Neither had professions, so all they could do was meditate or work on skills if they wanted to stay productive. Sylphie especially found this downtime difficult, as at least the King had lived for long enough for the wait to not feel that bad, while Sylphie was used to constantly having something to do. Ultimately, she ended up sleeping most of the time while digesting the natural treasures she had eaten.

On the topic of his special puzzle cube that he had gotten as a gift at the Chosen ceremony, he held off on playing with that as he feared he would find it too entertaining. Jake felt confident later floors would have even more downtime or quiet periods considering they had fifty entire years, so he would show patience and play with it when the time was right.

After floor ten was complete, they moved on to their second city layer and had, points-wise, gotten quite the increase.

Nevermore Points: 1512

They had done far more achievements than on the prior floors, as the only true judgment here was how well one fought. There were far fewer hidden points to be found, which was also reflected when they reached the Leaderboards on this floor and compared their score with the current record.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-10): 1650

While they had been 88 behind on floor five, they were now only 138 behind, which means they only lost 50 additional compared to the top team. As for how well they did in comparison to the average party... well, the gap had only widened.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-10): 706

As for this second city layer, well, it was even less populated than the first one by quite a margin. There was simply no reason to stay there, so they quickly moved on and went to floor eleven and onwards.

By now, Jake and company only had one priority: to reach the harder floors as fast as possible. And with that mentality, they truly picked up speed and blazed through floor after floor.

“Is it heretical to want to rip a Chosen apart?” Miranda asked Lillian as they talked within a large tent set up not far outside of the Fort.

“Probably,” Lillian shrugged. “But I would assume it can be forgiven considering the circumstances he put you in.”

“Yeah, let’s go with that,” Miranda smiled. Looking at the map on the table in front of her, she felt pretty damn stressed. After returning to Earth, things had been much more hectic than she would have liked, but honestly, not more than she expected.

One hundred and twenty million slaves. That was what she had to deal with, but at least she had been helped along by one thing: her C-grade evolution. That’s right, after returning from the Chosen ceremony, Miranda had finally chosen to evolve, and damn was she glad she had waited because she had a strong feeling her patience had paid off.

Her profession at least seemed to indicate this:

Court Witch of the Primordial’s Chosen – It is said that behind every influential leader is a court wizard offering advice – or in your case, a court witch. As the foremost confidant of Jake Thayne, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and Harbinger of Primeval Origins, you have taken upon yourself the task of operating as his liaison and right hand. Be it managing his territory, exerting his will upon the world, or simply interpreting and acting out his intent, you will find yourself well-equipped through your diverse set of skills. As your Records blend together with the Chosen and you continue to walk your Path, so shall success follow as you bathe in the shadow of greatness. Be warned that should you lose the confidence of the Primordial’s Chosen, you will not escape unscathed. Stat Bonuses per level: +100 Willpower, +100 Free Points.

This profession was interesting and didn’t feel like a direct upgrade to the Mistress of Haven profession she had in D-grade. It still had many of the same aspects and was still inherently tied to Jake, but it also mixed in more aspects of who Miranda herself was. Just the fact that it was called Court Witch meant it was truly based on her and felt more personal. It had also gone beyond simply being about managing cities and territory, with that restriction of requiring her to defend the city of Haven gone. Something

she was quite relieved about, as the entire Ell'Hakan situation had put her on edge, and it was honestly a miracle – or perhaps the plan of the enemy Chosen – that the city had remained under her control.

Now, after her evolution, she was only required to keep Jake confident in her. Something she had no idea how to do and, for some reason, barely felt she even had to. He cared for so little of what she did as long as she acted within his moral compass and didn't do things to piss him off... heck, she had a feeling she could decide to dedicate the entire budget of the World Council to constructing a base on the moon, and all he would do was shrug and say "cool," while maybe visiting for fun.

One interesting note about this profession was also how it referred to Jake. It put the fact he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and that he was a "Harbinger of Primeval Origins" side by side. That the system chose to do this truly hammered home how impactful his feat of creating the True Royal had been, and the fact that everyone knew it now made the sheer level of Records matter so much more. This detail for the description was one of the reasons she felt confident that evolving after the ceremony counted, as she doubted she would have gotten a profession offering 200 stats per level – only 40 below the theoretical maximum – without it.

As for her class, well, she wouldn't complain about that one either.

Verdant Witch Sister – The Verdant Lagoon lies waiting, ready to listen to your beck and call, ready to consume any who dare stand in your way. Recognized as part of the coven's sisterhood, the Verdant Witches truly view you as one of their own, and your connection to the Verdant Lagoon is more powerful than ever, allowing you to pull on powers from the ethereal domain. As a Verdant Witch, you are a spellcaster focusing on magic rituals and intricate spells, making preparation your key to victory. All who dare intrude upon your domain should tread carefully lest they find themselves swallowed by the Lagoon. Beware that should you lose the trust of the Verdant Witches and be cut off from the Verdant Lagoon, the consequences will be highly unpredictable and potentially fatal. However, if you succeed in your Path, you shall one day eternally claim a part of the Lagoon as your very own. Stat Bonuses per level: +60 Will, +55 Wis, +45 Int, +30 Vit, +20 Per, +50 Free Points.

This class was also far better than she had in any way expected. 260 stats per level was considered really good, even if it wasn't absolutely top-tier.

Miranda didn't have the best profession or class in F-grade, she had average or maybe slightly above average in E-grade, good ones in D-grade, and now pretty excellent ones in C-grade. She knew that compared to someone like Jake, she still fell behind, but with every step, she was slightly closing the gap. One could get far, far more stats in C-grade than all the grades before it combined, even more so in B-grade, A-grade, and S-grade. It was possible to close the gap, with earlier disadvantages – and advantages - in lower grades mattering less and less the further one went.

When it came to the class itself, this one naturally came due to her connection with the Verdant Witches. The fact that they had included her in important meetings, asked for her advice on how to “keep Jake happy” and treated her like more than just a D-grade had led to this being offered. It indicated that she was moving at least a little closer to being considered an equal of the Godqueens. She still had a far way to go, but at least it was something.

As for what the class gave her, it was a bit more complicated. During her time with the witches, Miranda had learned that the Verdant Lagoon was a bit more than simply their divine realm. True, it was also their divine realm, and they had even created it, but the place had grown to resemble something greater. A conceptual existence, almost, that one could call upon. Maybe it was because they were witches, but even if they were “only” Godqueens, they were considered borderline invincible if one dared intrude upon their realm. A verdant witch like Miranda also pulled on the Verdant Lagoon and its mystical powers, allowing her to display feats above what she should actually be capable of, and if she became a god, a part of the Lagoon would come to be within her own divine realm, independent yet linked to the same concept as the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon.

All this is to say that her class was damn good, and Miranda was already working on securing Earth better by making use of it.

Anyway, her evolution was done partly because it was time after the ceremony and partly because she would need it to deal with what was to come. The slaves had not begun arriving yet not only due to Miranda and Lillian stopping it, but also because it took the many factions time to set everything up.

As for why Miranda had stopped it... quite a few reasons. First of all, getting accommodations for over a hundred million people was difficult, especially when one factored in that a lot of them would be lower grades that still needed food and whatnot. Considering they didn't want to treat them badly either, they also needed the housing to be proper.

Then there was convincing the World Council that having them come was fine. Arthur had been receptive so far, but convincing him that bringing over a hundred million slaves wasn't some invasion-level event wasn't easy. She needed him on board to not cause widespread panic.

Oh yeah, and they would also get representatives from the United Tribes coming. They were guests and they would have to provide wholly different kinds of accommodations for them.

Did Miranda mention the issues popping up from the Fallen King effectively abandoning his domain and the Sky Whale being busy dealing with that?

And the growing fanaticism spread by Felix after his return?

Miranda kept staring down at the map of the entire camp they were constructing to receive all the slaves as Lillian pointed something out.

"I heard that quite a few races don't get along together, so would it be an idea to not mix the beastkin, humans, elves, and whatnot? Build natural dividers?"

“Oh... oh yeah, that too,” Miranda nodded. “Lillian, why did I agree to this job again?”

“Because you are ambitious and, even if you don’t want to admit it, greedy for power and influence, and you recognize that riding Lord Thayne’s coattails is beneficial to achieving these goals?”

“Right, right,” Miranda nodded. “Silly me.”

Chapter 664 - Nevermore: Grinding Through The Floors As Competition Tightens

Due to the inability to give out concrete information about the floors of Nevermore, no one even knew how many there were in the C-grade section. Jake and Co naturally also didn’t know, but they could infer based on how slowly the levels of enemies increased. To see the average levels of enemies go up by 1 to 3 per floor was expected, which meant that the “easy” section of Nevermore that they planned on blazing through was much longer than they had initially expected.

Nevertheless, they went through with impressive speed and cleared floor after floor as the levels of their foes slowly increased.

Floor fifteen had a Floor Boss at level 224, with the optional event boss at 235 only.

Floor twenty, level 232 for the Floor Boss, with the event boss only at 240.

Floor twenty-five, Floor Boss level 238, event boss level 245.

Floor thirty, Floor Boss 245, event boss 250.

This seemed like a semi-rapid increase to some, but one had to put it into perspective.

Jake, on his lonesome, had managed to take down the Hive King and Hive Queen, which were both above level 270, so for him to face level 250s, even if they were event bosses, wasn't too difficult as he had also grown stronger since then. The Fallen King also displayed power equal to Jake, the Sword Saint having not needed to get serious yet, and Sylphie and Dina easily doing their jobs.

Some of the floors they encountered could be cheesed, and the challenge it offered circumvented entirely, but on the majority, they just had to face whatever challenge it provided head-on. As they also began encountering floors more like the first ones where a big part of the task was finding the Floor Boss, Jake finally bit the bullet and did his damn job as the resident hunter of the group:

He started tracking.

While sending out seed soldiers or having Jake fly really high up and scout was effective, it was far from the most efficient approach they could take. With that in mind, Jake took out his old tracking skill and got to work.

The first thing he identified was that all Floor Bosses did indeed have unique advantages in the form of increased resources, which was important for the next part. Because they also all had a particular... trait to their energy signature. Once Jake figured this out, things got a lot easier as he no longer had to search only for powerful energy signatures but one particular aspect of a mana signature.

Jake also began to truly embrace his instinctual nature when tracking. He began to trust his intuition more, relying less on physical evidence and more on faint, nearly undetectable traces of auras left behind. His ability to recognize these auras was something he worked on together with the Fallen King, as the Unique Lifeform could often detect “echoes” of presences, but he had no way to properly differentiate them. Jake could.

By floor thirty, Jake had gone from being a shitty hunter in the tracking department to quite a proficient one, which was also reflected by his new tracking skill.

[Traditional Hunter’s Tracking (Uncommon)] - The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind, including both magical and physical ones. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Allows the hunter to more easily distinguish and analyze physical tracks. Adds a bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

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[Bestial Hunter’s Tracking (Epic)] – A hunter tracks his prey with his mind; the beast tracks through instinct. You use both. Grants high proficiency in tracking down prey as long as you know their basic signatures, be they physical or magical ones. Makes it far easier to distinguish different kinds of tracks. Relying on your instincts, you are capable of picking up tracks and clues about your prey that others may be unable to, and while tracking, all your senses can be focused on the act. Adds a noticeable bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

Two skill upgrades later, the Floor Bosses could no longer hide. Not that they tried to, or that if they did, it would have helped, as Jake’s extreme Perception allowed him to track them down even if they made simplistic attempts to obscure their locations.

This ability to track down their targets far quicker sped up the non-linear floors significantly, but even then, it still took them a long time to reach the city floor after floor thirty. Fourteen months and a few days, to be accurate. That was from when they entered Nevermore till they reached floor 30, mind you.

While Jake had not gotten any levels out of the first five floors and only a single level in his profession from the next five, doing twenty more floors with ever-increasing levels over so many months still resulted in some progress.

Jake would not call it fast, considering how long it had taken, but it wasn't terrible either if one took into account how long it could take to level in C-grade.

For his profession, he had ended up netting 4 levels since entering Nevermore – or a bit more than one every four months.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 207 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

With him barely doing any alchemy outside of when they had downtime and him primarily experimenting whenever he did do alchemy, it wasn't that bad, honestly.

Due to the still relatively low level of the enemies he faced and the fact he was doing everything with a party, there had been little that could challenge them so far. Due to that, they got fewer levels. Still, he had gotten a total of six levels in his class, so it wasn't all bad.

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 204 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 209 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

And with that had naturally also come the race levels.

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 205 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 209 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Annoyingly so, despite his progress, this still put Jake below the level 210 limit... as the only one in his party.

[Fallen King – lvl 214]

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk– lvl 222]

[Dryad – lvl 212]

[Human – lvl 211]

It had rapidly become clear that Jake earned less experience than everyone else, with Sylphie leveling up far faster than the others. Jake knew this was partly due to her still “growing” as she was only a juvenile. That, coupled with all the treasures she had consumed throughout their exploration of the many floors, it shouldn’t be that surprising.

Then there was the Fallen King, who was also a monster and could consume natural treasures to gain experience. However, compared to Sylphie, the King was far more fastidious and only consumed very specific items, and the items he did want were often something Sylphie also wanted.

The Sword Saint and Dina outpacing Jake’s leveling speed was simply due to the difference in their Paths. Dina was also part monster, and she could level her race passively, but according to her, it had no impact. As a dryad, her way to level passively included her “taking roots” and sitting still for a few centuries. So, for her to level fast was due to her druidic nature, and her supporting the group with different magical buffs and whatnot still had a tangible impact, even in easier fights.

When it came to the old man, he just didn't have the same demerits as Jake's class, even if he did express that he got more out of duels rather than group battles.

Jake was a bit miffed at finding himself the lowest-leveled individual, but it was made up for by reaching the city layer after the thirtieth floor, where they once more made their way to the Leaderboards.

One thing they had gotten aplenty during this descent was Nevermore Points. The growth in this department had been quite substantial, the last twenty floors nearly increasing their total tenfold.

Nevermore Points: 14622

Honestly, looking at the points made Jake feel a bit silly for even caring about whatever they may have missed on earlier floors. What truly mattered was completing more floors than anyone else to get high scores; the biggest achievements always seemed to come from doing the hardest challenges. The prevalence of these event bosses on every floor before a city meant that unless a group was good at fighting, they would miss out on a lot.

Putting it into perspective, just completing floors 26-30 had earned them 1400 points without any bonus objectives, achievements, events, or anything like that. 1400 was nearly as many as they had made on floors 1-10 total, truly hammering home how much the points on later floors mattered compared to the earlier ones.

As for how this compared to the average? Well, quite favorably.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-30): 5503

Jake wasn't quite sure what to think about this average. It seemed so unbelievably low, but then again, the average was indeed just the average. He did wonder when they would stop seeing a true average, as there simply weren't enough people doing it, but clearly, that wasn't quite yet.

As for why Jake felt better about his level after seeing the Leaderboards... well, it was due to the final one. Had they taken the top spot yet? No, but they were pretty damn close.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-30): 14954

332 Nevermore Points. That was all that separated Jake's party from the current record-holders. One good achievement or event away from claiming the top spot.

Jake had talked to the others, and it probably wasn't actually the same team who had the top score on these floors. Chances are that by floor 30, the people who could get a high score and have also already gone so deep this early in the integration were people like Jake and his group that wanted to reach the later levels as fast as possible to get as many points as they possibly could. Fifty years was a long time, but Jake and company had already burned through a year and three months. No one knew what kind of levels they would encounter later on that potentially had mandatory waiting periods like the arena. Floors 11-30 had all been relatively simple, all just big worlds with different objectives and no big scenarios, meaning they had been allowed to do them relatively quickly. There had only been one partial water level too...

Standing and looking at the Leaderboards, the Sword Saint also noted something.

“Pretty empty here, isn’t it?” the old man spoke while looking around.

They were the only ones standing in the massive square in front of the large Leaderboards, with only empty buildings surrounding them. Well, mostly empty.

“There are a few people around, but they seem to mostly be scouts or something,” Jake shrugged. “All of them are high level too, so they probably don’t expect to be detected.”

“I merely find it peculiar the difference is so stark,” the Sword Saint smiled.

The city after floor twenty-five had been surprisingly populated, far more so than even the ones after floors fifteen and twenty.

“Well... there are only that many C-grades from the new universe, right?” Dina said. “If they are good enough to bring to floor thirty, don’t you want those C-grades to keep going and not settle down?”

“I guess that is possible,” Jake said.

“It is also possible they simply travel back to floor twenty-five. Is it not pointless to perform major constructions and invest in every single city layer when travel between the layers is so easy?” the Fallen King asked.

"They do it for the prestige," the Sword Saint smiled. "To be on a higher floor is a show of power."

"Ree," Sylphie chimed in.

"Good point," Jake nodded as he translated. "Same as how the best birds get the highest nests in the trees and can look down on the worse birds while not getting pooped on."

"That... kind of makes sense?" Dina said, a bit confused.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, offended.

"Yeah, of course you always make sense," Jake smiled as he rubbed her feathers.

"Sure..." Dina muttered, not entirely convinced. Overall their group dynamic had improved over all these months, and Dina had opened up more. She was still pretty shy, but by now, Jake was certain that was pretty much just her personality.

"Let's not delay anymore and proceed to the next floor? Hopefully, the difficulty will begin to spike soon," the Fallen King said, his impatience growing over this period.

"Yeah, let us," Jake agreed. Seeing as there were no complaints, the group proceeded to the next gateway leading toward the next floor. They all shared the hope that things would get harder from here and get offered a proper challenge.

Little did they know that the thirty-first floor would become the first major roadblock for most parties, even the extremely talented ones, as they were about to encounter something quite a bit different than any prior floors.

While Jake and his party were busy diving further and further into Nevermore, they were unaware of the competition that had now begun arriving in Nevermore City. The records they had seen on the Leaderboards on floors five, ten, fifteen, and twenty had all been surpassed already by new parties diving into the dungeon. If it was due to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper entering or simply that the invisible hand of the system was at work, no one knew. All they did know was that a time of competition had truly arrived at Nevermore as pinnacle groups appeared from all over the multiverse one by one.

Yip of Yore's Chosen, Ell'Hakan. The disciple of the former champion of Nevermore in the last era, entering shortly after the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Ghost King Azal. One of the most talented Risen ever seen arriving shortly after.

High Justicar Elevian, entering with the Augur of Hope, Jacob, as the representative from the new universe.

Warlord Davion of Valhal. Entering with a party of supreme elites, his mandatory party member from the new universe, a Runemaiden named Carmen. As simply the person from the new universe they needed to enter, there were few expectations of her, yet the first thing she did after arriving at Nevermore City was enter the arena. A hundred consecutive victories later, she was dragged away by her party to enter the dungeon, little doubt remaining of her skill.

Countless more factions arrived within weeks of each other, many of them not even advertising their participation. It was suspected that nearly all major factions sent several elite groups, with additional groups also arriving from the Order of the Malefic Viper only two weeks after the Chosen had entered, led by the Malefic Dragonkin, Draskil.

Several independently powerful people also made their entrance along with many more parties from major factions. Three additional Unique Lifeforms after the Fallen King were even spotted, two of which hailed from the new universe. The United Tribes appeared to have allied with one of these darlings of the multiverse, making many also consider them contenders for the top spot on the Leaderboards.

When the usual information brokers began to believe no more exceptional groups would appear, a surprise addition few had expected stepped out of one of the public teleporters in in Nevermore City as this particular faction, despite their prominence, did not have a permanent compound at Nevermore.

A party had arrived from the Dao Sect – the organization founded by the Primordial known as the Daofather. They were a faction that rarely even sent people to Nevermore as they preferred to isolate themselves from the rest of the multiverse. They even had a philosophy counterproductive to most norms, as they viewed killing as something to be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Yet they had shown up, and they had shown up in force. The high-level information brokers quickly gathered information on four of the individuals in the group, all of which were personal disciples of gods. Still, when it came to the apparent leader of this group, they had difficulties. They knew he had to be from the new universe, as none of the other four were.

In the few hours this group spent in Nevermore City before entering the dungeon, these information brokers learned only two things about this mysterious leader.

The first was that he was the Chosen of one of the twelve Daolords of the Dao Sect, the Lifesoul Daolord. A true pinnacle god.

Secondly was a name. Not a Daoist title, which the members of the Dao Sect liked to adopt, but an actual name:

Eron.

Chapter 665 - Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth

The thirty-first floor felt different the moment they arrived. They walked out of the gateway and into a large chamber that looked out of some temple, with white pillars lining the walls and a large elevated stone platform in the middle. Towards the other end of the chamber was a massive gate with a glowing rune on it, emanating impressive power. Through his sphere, Jake also felt that outside of these chamber walls, only the void existed, meaning they were definitely not meant to try and go there. Not that he even thought they could, as the walls gave him the feeling they were nigh-indestructible.

However, none of these things explained why this place felt different. The explanation for that came from the mana in the air... rather than being the usual environmental mana, this was not in any way natural. Exchanging a glance with the Fallen King and feeling Sylphie shuffle a bit on his shoulder, they all felt it.

This was the domain of a living being, or perhaps they were even within the body of some creature, though that didn't seem likely considering the void outside the walls. No, chances are, they were in a claimed domain akin to a world formed by a high-grade space mage.

As they all took in the environment, the introduction to the floor appeared.

Welcome to the Thirty-first floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 14622

Staring at the message, one thing instantly sprung to his eyes. This was the first floor without a bonus objective. Perhaps that meant achievements and bonus events were also limited on this floor. Seeing the name, though, Jake felt quite a bit more confident. Labyrinth... Jake was good at labyrinths.

Jake was about to speak but stopped himself as he faintly felt a new presence appear.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome! Oh, I am so excited to have some more visitors! Such esteemed guests too!" a jovial voice echoed as the entire chamber lit up. Lights of all colors of the rainbow lined the walls as an entire light show began, and on the central platform, a figure appeared as space warped.

Jake was instantly put on alert as he observed the being.

Blue skin, two legs, and two arms with a generally humanoid form, making Jake almost mistake them for a blue human. Yet the creature had four eyes on its head, a large mouth, no nose, and instead of hair, short tendrils that slightly wriggled every time the creature spoke grew out of its scalp. A loose-fitting blue robe covered its body, only held in place by a belt, but this did mean Jake couldn't see if the creature had any other peculiar features hidden beneath.

"My name is Minaga, your glorious host. Truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance," the creature spoke with a big smile as he looked at Jake and the others as the entire light show died down. Jake used Identify and was taken aback.

[Minaga – lvl 275]

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this Minaga was more powerful than any C-grade he had ever stood before. Definitely stronger than anything in Nevermore... which did make Jake wonder why he – Jake was pretty sure the creature identified as male - had shown up at the beginning of this floor.

As Jake wondered this, he felt the Fallen King tense up at his side from the creature laying his eyes on him, and as the being spoke... he understood why.

"Oh, a fellow Unique Lifeform? How fun, how fun," this Minaga said as he looked down at the Fallen King for a few moments before shifting his gaze to Jake. "And a C-grade Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Even a Transcendent? Oh, is that a mutated version of Nature's Attendant's Bloodline? Interesting, interesting... but not quite as interesting as you, Sylphian Hawk! Never even heard of your race before! I know Sylphs, but... oh wait, too much information, right? Ha ha!"

"I am beginning to get the feeling you have not shown up before us as an opponent," the Sword Saint spoke as he bowed. "I am Miyamoto."

"Right on!" Minaga said with a grin. "As I said, then I am your host! It is your honor and your privilege to have me let you go through the wonderful labyrinth that I have spent oh-so-long constructing."

"Are you a dungeon master of some kind?" Jake asked curiously. "Do you perhaps work for the Wyrmgod and made this floor for him?"

Based on how this Unique Lifeform spoke, he obviously knew of the outside world, meaning he was likely someone who had existed on the outside before this. Perhaps someone who had just entered Nevermore around the last integration.

"I work with, not for the Wyrmgod, but otherwise, your assessment is correct... Jake, was it?"

"I never told you my name."

"Right, you didn't. Anyway, let's get this show on the road!" the creature said, refusing to elaborate.

"Who are you?" the King asked, refusing to let the topic go.

"I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, but more commonly just known as Minaga. Oh, well, I guess, seeing as you are all pretty influential people, I can give a small hint. I know who you all are, and you know so little about me, so it's only fair. I am the creator of this labyrinth, and I am more than you see before you right now. But most importantly, I like to snack on mana berries," the being said with a grin.

"Very informative," Jake shook his head. "Either way, you seem to know about us, and you are not particularly willing to tell us much about you, but can you at least tell us what we are meant to do here? Seeing as the gate behind you is still shut closed, I assume we must have you open it?"

"Straight to the point! I like it! Unlike Vilastromoz, he never likes getting to the point... unless the point is a poisoned needle he pricks you with, in which case he can be a bit too happy getting to the point," Minaga said as he made an overdramatic sigh. "But you are right. See, I wanted to make this entire thing a bit more interesting, so before you enter my labyrinth, you have a choice to make!"

Opening his arms, the entire room lit up once more as five giant pillars of light descended from nowhere, each of the pillars having a giant floating rune within that corresponded to a word. Jake quickly checked them all from left to right.

Initiate – Apprentice – Adept – Mage – Archmage

"Seeing as we are all smart people, I don't think I have to explain to you what we have there. That's right, it's, of course, different difficulties! A floor with multiple difficulty levels from the very beginning is quite innovative, eh?" Minaga rhetorically asked in a proud tone.

"Naturally, it's a great idea. I came up with it, after all. Alright, alright, it isn't overly original, but you didn't see it on any prior floors, now did you? So, any questions?"

“When you say difficulty level, how exactly does it impact the floor?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Everything,” Minaga smiled. “Size, danger, enemy level, more powerful variants, the bosses, complexity of the labyrinth. It is quite an extensive makeover. Also, it isn’t just this floor. My labyrinth is kind of big, so I decided to just make it take up ten floors to make it more fun.”

Jake frowned a bit at hearing it was ten... wasn’t there meant to be a city layer after floor thirty-fiv-

“You are probably thinking, “but isn’t there a city layer after floor thirty-five?” and you are right that there should be, but you see, I decided to make it a part of the labyrinth! Once more, innovation at its finest. Now, which difficulty do you all want? Do note that you can only lower or increase it by one level every time you enter a new floor.”

There wasn’t really any need to discuss it, was there? Jake quickly exchanged a glance with the others and was about to answer as their “host” spoke once more.

“Actually, why do I even ask? You are, of course, going for the archmage difficulty, right?” Minaga asked as he tilted his head while looking at them. “If you didn’t, that would be pretty darn pathetic considering your party setup. Oh, and also, doing it all on the Archmage difficulty gives the best rewards, so I highly recommend it. Maybe there is even something special at the end if you do it all on the highest difficulty... hint hint.”

“Can’t see why we wouldn’t go for the Archmage difficulty,” Jake shrugged. “It isn’t like Nevermore was particularly challenging before this. Wait, unless choosing the highest difficulty means submerging the entire labyrinth underwater...”

“No worries, no worries, no water theme here,” Minaga shook his head. “You know, I never even liked these water-themed floors? Yet the Wyrmgod insists on having them every damn era for some silly reason. Sure, you can argue it is unfair for aquatic lifeforms that Nevermore doesn’t really cater to them, but it isn’t like the system doesn’t go out of its way to help them deal with the harsh reality of dry land.”

“Well, great. How do we select the difficulty?” Jake asked, glad that at least the Unique Lifeform had some idea of how to design a proper dungeon floor.

“You already have,” Minaga grinned as four of the pillars disappeared, leaving only the final one in place. It lit up with intense light before it exploded in a cascade of multicolored wisps, bathing the chamber. Their host looked damn proud of the display as he smiled at the group.

“With that done, good luck to you all! Ah, and Jake, don’t worry too much about all that Yip of Yore business; I am sure you got it covered! Then again, I will definitely say the exact same thing to Ell’Hakan when he appears and tell him not to worry about you, but don’t let that take away from me encouraging you right now! You dying would also make a bunch of factions sad, especially the Endless Empire, so at least don’t die inside my labyrinth, alright? Dealing with complaints is so annoying,” Minaga said in his usual jovial tone. “Now, let the challenge begin! Don’t get too lost inside, okay?”

With those words, the grand gate behind him opened. Jake stared at the creature while processing what he had just said and his clearly contemporary information. Minaga gave them a final grin and a farewell as he slowly began fading away.

“I’ll be watching with high expectations! Oh, and of course, remember to have fun!”

Seeing as he was gone and the path forward was open, the Fallen King scoffed.

“What an insufferable creature,” the Unique Lifeform complained about the other Unique Lifeform.

“I thought he was kind of funny...” Dina said, a bit unsure.

“This creature is clearly not some random dungeon monster or Floor Boss, and he seems fully aware of what is happening in the outside world in real time,” the Sword Saint mused. “The level of 275 is clearly not accurate either, though he did register to me as truly only at that level.”

“Maybe some kind of cloning skill?” Jake wondered aloud. “Or perhaps summoning of some kind. There could be a lot of explanations. Shit, maybe he just has an earpiece and has someone talking in his ear, telling him what to do and say.”

“I don’t,” the voice of Minaga suddenly echoed through the room.

They all stood silently for a few seconds until it became clear the damn guy had no intentions of saying anything more or being anything other than an echoing voice.

“As I said, absolutely insufferable,” the King once more said.

“Ree?” Sylphie tilted her head.

“Yeah, I also think the comedic timing was pretty good. The Fallen King is just mad this Unique Lifeform is more unique than him,” Jake joked around. “But I do agree it would be fun to prove him wrong.”

“Good luck with that!”

Jake smiled at the encouraging voice as he looked towards the gate leading onwards. “Oh, we won’t need luck.”

“He, he... I think you will. Did I forget to mention one of the more interesting properties of my little labyrinth?”

Something came out of the gate leading into the labyrinth as he said this. A dense blueish mist or perhaps fog entered the room, and Jake frowned as it slowly reached them. Seeing through the fog was incredibly difficult, and Jake found his vision limited to only a few hundred meters ahead of him. And he was the one best off due to his high Perception stat.

The others could barely see a few dozen meters ahead, with even skills getting limited. More than that, Jake felt like the atmosphere was somehow denser. Wanting to test the environment, he tried using One Step, but rather than teleport to the other side of the room, he only moved eight or so meters.

“Not that easy, huh?” Minaga said jokingly. “This is a special something I cooked up to not make this entire labyrinth so easily passed. Space mages are damn annoying and find ways to surpass things, and scouting skills would nullify much of the challenge, so I got rid of them. On, and hey, seeing as none of you seem into that divination stuff, I guess I can share that I even created false flags and whatnot to

make divination actively harmful. I know, I know, my genius once more shines through. Ah, but don't worry, the rooms with fighting in them don't have the mist present, only the hallways."

"Are you going to narrate and keep talking throughout this entire labyrinth?" Jake asked.

"A privilege, is it not?"

"More like an added challenge through constant auditory mental attacks," Jake said jokingly while shaking his head.

"You know, the vast majority of people really avoid saying anything negative aloud as they are afraid I will up the difficulty or because they think I have some other way to screw them over. To clarify, I do. Not that I am actually offended; a bit of banter is what makes the world spin. Besides, if any of you were negatively tangibly affected simply by my talking, then that seems more like a you-problem and less of a me-problem. In which case, I shall simply view the situation as me helping you overcome your weak mentality. Or watch you die. A lot of people that weak-minded usually just die."

"Sure, sure," Jake nodded as he turned and looked at the others through the blue mist. "Let's get going?"

"Let us," the Sword Saint agreed.

None of them wanted to delay more than necessary as they moved into Minaga's Labyrinth through the giant gate. The hall they entered was massive, nearly twenty meters across and forty meters high, with an arced ceiling. Jake watched out for traps as they walked through using his sphere but spotted nothing.

Seeing as it was relatively safe, they picked up the pace and rushed through straight ahead. Rushed, in this case, not actually being that fast, as none of their movement-related skills worked properly. Even just running wasn't as fast as it should be due to the mist. On their way, they encountered several side paths but kept going forward until, soon enough, they met another large magical gate. Studying it, Jake saw that it had four magical seals on it of some kind.

"Oh, what is this? A sealed gate you must pass to keep moving forward? Looks like you will need four keys to unlock it. Where could these keys be? Perhaps some of the side paths you passed earlier lead to rooms that may offer a key, or maybe they lead to dead ends or traps. I guess you will have to go check."

Jake stared at the gate and slowly nodded. All kinds of perception-related abilities were limited. Sylphie even complained about the wind being completely silent. This place was designed to force people to slowly explore each path. Of course... there was one thing Minaga could not address.

Closing his eyes, Jake focused as he took a deep breath. A Pulse of Perception echoed out of his being as he opened his eyes again and smiled.

It was time to take their dear host down a peg.

Chapter 666 - Nevermore: The Devil Is In The Details

"Lucky bunch! Found your way to the first room right off the bat without encountering any dead ends! Now to find the key... if there even is one here!" Minaga said with his usual glee as Jake and company walked out of what looked like a wall of fog and entered a massive chamber. As their host had explained, these large chambers did not have any of the usual mist, and it felt liberating to finally be free of the restrictive environment.

On second thought, merely calling the chamber they had entered massive was a bit fallacious. It was pretty darn humongous and seemed to be at least a good hundred kilometers deep with a width of about two kilometers. This narrowness was heavily used, as what appeared in the distance was a derelict-looking massive castle with plenty of defenses in front of it.

In front of the castle, a dozen rows of ramparts went from wall to wall, with every one of these walls filled with creatures. Taking a deep breath, Jake could practically smell the death energy emanating from the chamber, which made sense considering the enemies he saw on the ramparts.

Using Identity, the theme was pretty damn obvious.

[Skeleton Swordsman – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Spearman– lvl 240]

[Skeleton Marksman – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Mage – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Captain – lvl 245]

“Skeletons, huh,” Jake muttered. “So original.”

He and the others waited for a few seconds, but nothing came. Jake looked at the ceiling of the chamber, wondering if their dear host had decided to leave, but he still felt them being observed. Maybe he didn't talk while they were inside the chambers?

"I assume there is some kind of boss here," the Sword Saint said.

"Let me check real quick," Jake said as he jumped and summoned his wings. He flew all the way to the ceiling in little time and peered past the many ramparts towards the castle. There, standing on a large tower atop the castle, he saw a large skeleton in fine ivory armor surrounded by several Skeleton Captains.

[Skeleton Bonelord – lvl 250]

"Found it, level 250 at the central castle. Likely the one with the key. If not, it should be easy to find if we make it to the castle," Jake said through the golden mark left by the King.

Now, why was Jake so sure the key was there in the room?

Finding the room itself had been pretty simple using his Pulse of Perception. Throughout the last fifteen months in Nevermore, Jake had to use far more Pulses than ever before, allowing him to slowly build up more and more resistance to the point where he could now do it pretty comfortably at regular intervals without getting a headache.

On the way, they avoided dozens of dead-end paths, traps, and hallways that would make you walk in circles for a few hours, if not days, while heading straight for this large one.

However, this wasn't the only room he saw. In fact, Jake spotted four during their run, but this was the only one he had bothered entering, which leads back to the original question... why was he so sure the key was in this room and not any of the prior ones? The answer was easy:

Intuition.

Jake didn't just have his sphere in his arsenal of cheats. He also had all his other totally balanced advantages. His intuition had told him this was the room to check out, so even if Minaga tried to muddy the water by hinting that maybe the key wasn't there, Jake didn't listen.

Looking at the boss in the distance, Jake pulled out his bow and took aim as he began charging an Arcane Powershot. He saw no reason not to rush through this room and move on quickly, and on the way there, he and the others had agreed to do things fast. Jake wanted to get a good opening shot on the boss, and if they had to face every enemy on the floor at once, so be it.

After he had sufficiently charged the attack, Jake let go of the string, releasing an explosion of arcane energy as his arrow of destruction surged forward. Jake had expected it to soar toward the boss and potentially even blow it off the tower, but things did not go as expected. The second the arrow appeared above the first of the many defensive ramparts leading further into the room, a barrier sprung up, making Jake's arrow explode while only leaving the shimmering white wall of energy with a few cracks on it.

Below, on the rampart, Jake saw over fifty Skeleton Mages stand and channel with their staffs, led by a Captain also holding a staff. The barrier extended up from the ramparts but did not cover the gate

leading below, making it quite apparent you were meant to through there and not use ranged attacks from afar. In essence, Minaga wanted to force them into a melee.

“Seems like we will have to go through each rampart individually,” the Sword Saint said, having seen Jake’s failed attack.

“Or continue to bombard the barrier until it breaks,” Jake offered.

“There are too many... it will be faster to just go through directly,” the old man said dismissively.

“I concur with the swordsman; trying to destroy each barrier individually is a waste of time,” the Fallen King agreed. “It isn’t like the alternative will be that more difficult.”

Jake surrendered to their will and put away his bow as he flew downwards to join his party that was already charging the first rampart. When they got close, the mages stopped channeling energy into the barrier to face them in combat as nearly a hundred melee-focused skeletons stood in defensive stances just past the gate.

The two groups clashed. One with hundreds of skeletons twenty to thirty levels above their opponents, and the other three humanoids, a bird, and a Unique Lifeform. The result was as expected.

Bones went flying everywhere as a giant golden hammer was swung sideways into a crowd of skeletons, crescent waves of water cut bones apart and sent limbs flying, arcane explosions bombarded all the skeleton mages as arrows fell from the sky while roots shot up from the ground, making them unable to dodge.

On the second rampart in the distance, nearly a hundred Skeleton Marksmen released a rain of arrows, but the attacks were all met with a green whirlwind that scattered their attack. Without even bothering to make sure they finished off all the skeletons, their party moved forward while staying close to each other to avoid getting ganged up on.

The second rampart met a similar fate, followed by the third and the fourth. For the fifth, the entire wall was torn apart as the Fallen King released a golden beam of energy to blow away all the skeletons guarding it. Jake, not wanting to be outdone, went ham at the sixth one as a fully-charged Arcane Powershot one-shot the Captain of the skeletons while blowing up several more skeletons unlucky enough to stand too close. Joining in on the fun, the Sword Saint went in first on the seventh as he used his Rainblade and released a torrent of slashes, killing dozens of skeletons within a minute while also taking down the Captain. Sylphie and Dina didn't get to take down a rampart solo as Jake, the King, and the Sword Saint all felt competitive while facing the remaining five, going all-out until they finally reached the castle.

With a roar, the Bonelord released its aura as all the remaining skeletons seemed to get some kind of buff. The Captains around the boss also seemed to get stronger as they all jumped off the tower and ran down the side of the castle walls towards Jake and company.

One of them was blasted into the wall by an arrow before it had even gotten a quarter of the way, with a second getting embedded by a substantial wave of force. The Bonelord seemed angry and jumped off the tower, too, as it pulled out a giant axe of bones and began flying at high speed, aiming directly at Dina, who was manipulating a forest of vines to rip apart skeleton soldiers chasing from behind.

It never even got close as the Sword Saint met it mid-air, and after a brief exchange of blows, the Bonelord was forced back with a few cuts on its otherwise pristine armor but was otherwise unharmed. What little injuries it had taken rapidly healed as it released a dense white aura of pure death energy. All around it, the death mana from the many slain skeletons began to gather and empower the Bonelord as it resumed its attack on the old swordsman.

The two of them had a pretty damn ferocious battle for several minutes as the Sword Saint failed to ever get any substantial advantage, even after he made slight use of his boosting skill. Jake ended up joining in as the constant army of skeletons storming out from within the castle started to die down, and Dina handled all those chasing after them from the earlier ramparts. Sylphie and the Fallen King would also soon be done with the Captains and join them.

With Jake and the Sword Saint both, they managed to push back the Bonelord despite it constantly healing and getting empowered for every skeleton that died around them. It was burning through energy at a ludicrous pace as Jake counted himself blowing off the Bonelord's head at least ten times. It kept fighting with its axe and released death affinity attacks and ranged bone spurs, occasionally forcing the two of them on the defensive.

When Sylphie joined them, as the King had the remaining skeletons handled, they finally managed to get the decisive blow, and soon enough, the Bonelord stopped regenerating and died. The second it fell, the wisps of deathly fire burning within the eyes of all the skeletons were also snuffed out as they crumbled like marionettes with their strings cut.

As the body of the Bonelord crumbled to dust, a magical rune floated up from its body before flashing and disappearing. Jake faintly saw that a small tattoo of the same rune had appeared on the back of his hand. Needless to say, this was one of the keys.

"Let's go," Jake said as they rushed out of the room towards where the next key was. As they made it back to the hallway and into it, the disembodied voice of Minaga once more joined them.

"You know, that was pretty damn good! Made it look easy. There was even a key for you! Three more to go, and you can open the gate and continue. You got lucky once, but I shall still wish you luck in having a repeat!"

Rushing out of the second room with the second key in hand, a crumbling volcano, and hundreds of dead elementals of the lava and earth variety in their wake, their dear host spoke again.

"I must say, you are quite a lucky bunch! Straight from one room holding a key into the next! Almost makes me think you found a way to circumvent all my checks and balances and aren't just getting extremely lucky, but that can't be, right? Nah, definitely not, so watch out for traps and find the right path to the next key... if you can!"

"See, something unlikely happening two times is a coincidence, but three times? Now, that is a pattern. Then again, some people are really just that lucky, you know? Even I cannot get around some of the more intangible aspects of this world, and I guess it is entirely possible you merely have increased luck or perhaps some kind of reality-bending skill? Though my mist would stop that... hm... I guess there is also that... Nah, that is too much of an assumption!"

"So, by now, I think we all know this isn't how things are supposed to work, and you clearly found a way to not only be aware of the layout of the labyrinth but also correctly determine which rooms hold keys, which is honestly impressive. See, if you, my dear guests, could do one of these things, that would be one thing, but both? Really? Isn't that a bit too much? This is why designing a perfect dungeon is impossible and why we can't have nice things. Damn Bloodlines and Transcendents ruining everything."

Jake and company were making their way back towards the gate that required the four keys at a brisk pace as they listened to Minaga complain about their group. It had to be noted that he only complained. There was no interference or even direct questions posed to any of them. It was more like he was just voicing his own thoughts while forcing Jake and company to listen.

"Two Bloodlines and one Transcendent... oh yeah, and a Unique Lifeform. I guess I can't rule out some Unique skill that I wasn't able to account for either, but I definitely think it is one of the other three suspects. Now, the swordsman doesn't strike me as the kind to have a skill allowing him to find stuff

easier, much less have a Transcendent skill related to it, so I will temporarily rule him out, which narrows it down to one of two Bloodlines.”

Jake would lie if he thought that Minaga wouldn't figure out what his Bloodline was didn't cross his mind. Even if Minaga didn't figure it out, the Wyrmgod clearly would. Considering they would spend fifty years there... shit; the Wyrmgod probably already had a good idea.

The thing is, Jake didn't want to fuck himself over by getting fewer points than he should have. Additionally, it would feel wrong to fuck over his party members if Jake decided to effectively nerf himself and keep his true capabilities hidden.

“Dina is the granddaughter of Nature's Attendant, so she is a candidate. Assuming she is also capable of communicating with plants the same way he is, I can't really see it being her, though. Of course, it is entirely possible her Bloodline mutated, and she can now communicate with something else I hadn't accounted for, but with her skillset and the serious lack of anything to even converse with, I am inclined to rule her out. Which leaves us with Jake.”

Jake kept quiet as he was inclined to hear what the guy thought his Bloodline was about.

“Based on everything publicly displayed so far, it appears to be related to presences. I also have my own pet theory that your Origin-manipulation is at least partly rooted in your Bloodline, so that strengthens the presence-related Bloodline theory. This initially made me guess that maybe your Bloodline allows you to also detect presences far more easily, and by using that, you would be able to locate rooms that contained presences... the thing is, how would that help you navigate the hallways? Pick the rooms with keys out from those without? Well, of course, it wouldn't, so that leaves a few possibilities. It either isn't your Bloodline, your Bloodline is quite a bit different than anyone had estimated, or it really isn't you but one of your other party members.”

“What do you think the answer is?” Jake asked.

“That it is you and that the current information of what your Bloodline is capable of is severely limited, making it far more powerful than anyone truly knows. Well, anyone besides the Malefic Viper. To make someone at a low grade their Chosen, they have to have something very special about them, and I am willing to bet your Bloodline is just that special.”

Jake was silent for a moment as he wondered aloud. “Which begs the question... what will be your response?”

“Now...oh... oh wait! You think that I think you are cheating and unhappy with that? True, true; I am a bit miffed, but to say I am unhappy? Far from it! You break my labyrinth all you want and use any advantage you can possibly get! Go ham; that is what you are in Nevermore for, isn't it? To truly let loose. Don't worry about me sharing details about your Bloodline either. I am a strict believer in confidentiality! Only me and the Wyrmgod are aware of anything happening here, and none of us are sharing.”

“I guess that is a little comforting,” Jake said, not entirely sure if he believed him.

“Besides, Jake... do you really think this is the first time I have encountered anything like this? Even if you can perfectly navigate the labyrinth, that doesn't mean this will be a cakewalk. I made this place to challenge everyone and to do that, I had to consider a lot of things. Many potential guests have vast skill sets, including Transcendents and Bloodlines. Can I make a perfect labyrinth? No, but I can try. The devil is in the details, and trust me, I am very detail-orientated. So keep having fun, and keep breaking stuff. I'll be watching with glee. Okay, I might complain a bit, but don't take it to heart!”

Jake shook his head, and he and his party finally appeared before the gate leading forward. Lifting his hand, the tattoos on his hand began glowing as they all flew off it straight towards the gate. The four runes all began glowing before merging together... and the second they did, the entire door turned red.

All of the runes began warping as they formed four words.

Demon Seal Don't Open.

The door slammed open, and all the mist in the hallway was pushed away as a torrent of flames spewed out, forcing Jake and the others to jump back. Behind the door was a swirling portal, and as Jake was still trying to figure out what was going on, two large claws grabbed the sides of the now-open door.

"I did tell you... the devil is in the details."

An aura rushed out of the portal as a five-meter-tall creature pulled itself out of the gate, and Jake barely had time to use Identify as it attacked.

[Demon Lord – lvl 270]

Chapter 667 - Nevermore: Demon Lord

Jake was blasted backward as he blocked with a barrier of stable arcane mana. A torrent of flames bellowed out from the Demon Lord, obscuring its form even as it walked forward. As the one closest to the gate, Jake had taken the brunt of it, but he had reacted quickly due to his danger sense, not truly taking any damage.

A wall of roots shot up from the ground just after Jake got shot back, but a blast of deep red flames removed it instantly. Everyone retreated back to Jake as the Demon Lord walked through the burning wall of vines, properly revealing its form for the first time.

As Jake had initially seen, it was about five meters tall and had rock-like outgrowths on its skin; all of them were cracked with red energy pulsing beneath. It carried a large sword that looked like it was made of stone with red glowing veins of lava running through it and otherwise didn't have any equipment, its bottom side covered with a loin cloth of sorts. The demon's entire body released a constant stream of heat energy, and its form burned perpetually. If its skin was red due to the fire or it was just its usual skin tone, Jake didn't know. Its head looked vaguely humanoid with two large curled horns like that of a goat, and it had two burning red eyes that stared down the party in front of it.

There was no doubt about it... this was the strongest foe they had faced in Nevermore so far. That entire difficulty-setting thing allowed them to encounter opponents worth fighting far sooner than expected; this Demon Lord was proof of that.

Jake grinned as the Demon Lord also assessed the five of them. The Demon Lord sneered as it spoke in a deep voice, its words infused with Willpower.

"Kneel."

That command became the starting shot as their entire party moved in unison. The Demon Lord legitimately seemed taken by surprise at their immediate response, but it still managed to react. A blast of force blasted it in the side, making the demon stumble slightly as it blocked a blow from the Sword Saint, roaring at the water mixed into his attacks.

Jake shot an arrow toward the demon's ankle to try and limit its movements, but it managed to shift its stance and do an upward slash, sending out a massive wave of fire that sent the Sword Saint retreating.

Just as it was about to do a follow-up, a green hawk barreled into it from behind, Sylphie having turned herself into wind earlier to get around the demon.

Sylphie managed to punch a hole in the demon's backside from the impact but still found herself on the defensive as the wound released a blast of fire, and the blood that dripped down the demon's body burned like lava.

Dina also finally released a proper attack as a massive spear of wood shot towards the Demon Lord, forcing it to block with the flat side of its large blade. The impact still sent it skirting backward and gave Jake and the King an opportunity to each land a ranged blow in the form of a golden blast of force and an arrow. As the demon stumbled, the Sword Saint got close and cut its leg, aiming to sever the tendons on its ankles. Assuming it had any.

The Demon Lord roared and slammed its sword into the ground with both hands. A massive blast of fire exploded out from its body, forcing them all to disengage. When the Demon Lord's form was revealed again, it looked calmer. It also seemed to have truly realized it was surrounded by powerful people. It regarded them for a moment before grunting.

"Very well."

It squeezed the handle of its sword, and the stone-like sword cracked. Stone slowly fell away, revealing a pulsing orange blade of metal that released heat powerful enough to make Jake activate Scales of the Malefic Viper just to be on the safe side. Dina also responded quickly and sent out green waves of energy toward each of them, resulting in a faint glowing green barrier covering their bodies. Jake instantly felt the temperature lower and gave Dina a nod as they prepared to reengage the demon.

The demon swung its empowered blade toward the people in front of it and sent out a crescent wave of flames. A golden magic barrier met the flames, and Jake jumped back as he began charging his Arcane

Powershot. The Sword Saint stormed forward after the King dispelled the barrier, and together with Sylphie, the two of them engaged their opponent in a melee. The Fallen King also began charging some magic of his own as Dina retreated back and stood beside Jake as she also began preparing a spell of her own.

Aware of what they were doing, the Demon Lord wanted to stop them, but the Sword Saint wouldn't allow it. He activated his boosting skill properly for the first time since entering Nevermore, and Sylphie soon followed suit as the Demon Lord got more and more aggressive. They both needed to avoid the sword at all costs, and Jake saw that Dina's protection spell wouldn't last much longer against the intense fire energy.

Luckily it didn't have to.

Jake was ready and sent the mental go-ahead to the Fallen King. The Unique Lifeform reacted instantly as two massive golden chains erupted from his hands and flew straight toward the Demon Lord. The demon tried to avoid them, but just then, thorned roots shot up from the ground and entrapped its feet, allowing the chains to hit.

Less than a quarter of a second later, an arcane explosion was released as an Arcane Powershot shot through the air, releasing a devastating trail of destruction. The Demon Lord roared as it blocked with one of its arms, not able to raise its blade in time.

Despite the power of Jake's attack, the Demon Lord managed to partly block the hit. Its arm had a huge chunk of flesh blown off, revealing the obsidian-like bone beneath, but the Demon Lord also borrowed the momentum from the impact to retreat. The Sword Saint still managed to give chase, and using his Rainblade, he did an upwards cut aimed straight at where Jake had also just hit. Once more, the Demon Lord was ready to respond, but the Fallen King yanked the golden chains, making the demon fail to dodge and allowing the Sword Saint to land a solid cut. Even then, the arm was not fully severed; the sword stopped by the bone, only cutting halfway through.

Just as Jake feared their attack had failed, a green bullet swept through the hallway. The arm was hit straight on, and in an explosion of fire, blood, and bone, the lower arm of the Demon Lord was severed just below the elbow.

Sylphie materialized not far from Jake, a few of her feathers burned despite her ethereal form when attacking the demon. Jake had already pulled out another arrow and was prepared to continue his attack when the Demon Lord once more erupted in crimson flames. The golden chains of the Fallen King rapidly melted away, and the demon retreated back, but it was once more caught by Dina attempting to immobilize it. The Fallen King also didn't take its chain being melted lightly as the Unique Lifeform flew forward, his ivory claw now glowing golden.

Jake, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie also gave chase as the Demon King took blow after blow. Its body was honestly ridiculously tough, its metallic bones so durable that causing any proper damage was difficult. Dina had to soon focus solely on protecting them from the extreme heat aura from the Demon Lord.

The demon's sword was still by far the most dangerous thing. Due to overconfidence in his barrier, the Fallen King had attempted to get close and land a solid blow, believing his defenses would hold up. This was proven not to be the case when the King was slammed in the chest, the barrier breaking, and the Fallen King being sent flying several kilometers down the hallway. The Sword Saint also failed to respond in time at one time when the large Demon Lord used the severed bone on its hand to stab him in the shoulder, leaving a nasty burning wound.

They all felt pressured, but the situation was still under control. Yet the Demon Lord didn't seem afraid in any way, just annoyed. It fought valiantly, but it was slower than any one of them besides Dina and the Fallen King, so it failed to do a lot of damage that Dina couldn't quickly handle. The Sword Saint also managed to nullify many of the major fire attacks, though it did look like his own blows utilizing the concept of rain failed to do much. Nevertheless, the wounds accumulated on the Demon Lord, and considering its missing hand, it was only a matter of time.

At least, they thought it was. Sure, they had considered the Demon Lord had some hidden tricks, but what it did next was still surprising.

Swinging the blade widely, a wave of fire was sent out, making Jake and the others momentarily retreat like always. Usually, when this happened, it just gave Jake time to charge up an attack, but this time the Demon Lord changed its behavior entirely.

Rather than keep attacking, it straightened its back and scoffed.

“Pathetic... this body,” the Demon Lord said as it frowned deeply before turning to the five of them. “You are worthy adversaries. We will meet again.”

With its one remaining hand, the Demon Lord stuck the sword into the ground, and a pentagram-shaped magic circle appeared beneath its feet. Jake reacted quickly and fired an arrow, but a red barrier covered the demon, and before anyone else could attack, a red flash of light brought the Demon Lord away.

What the fuck? Jake cursed internally at the fucking thing just running away. He was about to yell at their host when a system message popped up.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Demon Lord during your first encounter. 250 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, so at least they got a bunch of points for it. Jake still didn’t feel satisfied.

“Should we have gone all-out using boosting skills and everything?” he questioned aloud.

"I... I don't think that would work. That was a Demon Lord, after all," Dina said, shaking her head.

The four of them turned to look at Dina, with even Sylphie, who had landed on Jake's shoulder, tilting her head.

Dina seemed to get what they wanted, as she explained. "That is a Demon Lord, a very particular subspecies of the demon race. Demon Lords are notoriously difficult to kill, and they are even able to resurrect if slain. These are not true resurrections but more like their remnant energy regathers, and an entirely new creature with a new Truesoul is born in its place, though at a slightly lower level in most cases. Due to this, many just seal away Demon Lords instead. In the end, time kills everything that is not a god, no matter how tricky they may be."

"Oh," Jake said, wondering why he had never heard about them before while also thinking that sounded kind of similar to some of the fiction he used to read before the system. "Do they also have inherent knowledge like True Royals?"

"A little, but it is very limited, so for one to be able to speak is already proof it has lived for a pretty long time, and even if all Demon Lords are born C-grade at minimum, being halfway to B-grade may mean it has gained those levels itself. Demon Lords are also usually born through large-scale sacrificial rituals, which means they usually have subordinates... this one was alone and weakened after being sealed in for a long time," Dina shook her head.

"I see," Jake nodded. Its comment about its body being pathetic was likely genuine. They hadn't faced the Demon Lord at full power.

"Does that mean that even if we killed this Demon Lord, it would only be temporary? That we would face it again later on?" the Sword Saint asked.

“Well... usually they take at least a decade or so to resurrect, so probably not?” Dina said, a bit unsure.

“Wait, if they can keep resurrecting, doesn’t that mean whenever a Demon Lord is spawned, there will always be one more in the multiverse?” Jake questioned.

“They can still die permanently dependent on the way they are killed, and the amount of times they resurrect is still limited. The problem is that you can’t really know how many resurrections a particular Demon Lord has left, hence why most prefer to seal them,” Dina once more explained.

“Definitely going for the kill next time either way,” Jake said, getting a nod from the Sword Saint and a screech of agreement from Sylphie.

“I believe I can make its death quite a bit more permanent than usual,” the King shared. “As long as you shatter the soul enough, the regathering of energy should at least be slowed down enough for it to take millennia for any new Demon Lord to emerge if what you explained is correct.”

“Aight,” Jake said approvingly. “Now, let’s check what was behind that damn gate.”

During the fight, they had traveled several kilometers down the hallway as more space helped them avoid the large sweeping fire attacks. Now with the Demon Lord gone, they could rush back down the hall and finally see what had been behind the gate requiring four damn keys.

Making it there, they first saw that the portal was gone, and behind it was a relatively small chamber, barely wider than the normal hallway. On the other side of this small chamber was the gateway leading onto the next floor, making Jake and the others feel pretty relieved.

“So, at least this was the right way,” Jake smiled.

“No, it wasn’t,” Minaga chimed in.

“Clearly was. I see the gateway right there,” Jake shrugged.

“I guess it depends on your definition of what the right way is. This was technically one of the ways you could take, but not really the one most are expected to take, so to call it the right way isn’t entirely accurate.”

“This seemed like the most straightforward way, though. Humor me, if you will. What was the other way we could have gone?” Jake asked, partly to have the Unique Lifeform divulge more information about the labyrinth and partly because he was genuinely curious.

“See, if you had done any of the other rooms that you so quickly avoided, you would have known that there was a second way into this room that wasn’t through the gate that would also unleash the Demon Lord. The friendlies in these mystical rooms you so adamantly avoided would have told you that through the efforts of a cult of demon-worshippers, a Demon Lord has been summoned. They would then have led you to a mage who could use the four keys to instead teleport you to that central platform right there.”

A spotlight appeared from nothingness in the middle of the room, highlighting a slightly elevated stone platform with several patterns carved into it.

“I am trying to tell a story here, too, you know? Not the best story, maybe, but I am trying. Granted, I care more about the mechanics of an experience over the background story, but I still put in effort, so you will learn this lore if you want to or not!”

“Fine, fine,” Jake said, not wanting to argue. “But do tell me, since you keep insisting we did it wrong... would the other way have given more Nevermore Points? Would it have been faster?”

“...”

“How do you even make audible silence? That makes no sen-“

“Would you look at that? The entire first layer of the labyrinth is now collapsing after you so haphazardly released the Demon Lord! Hurry into the gateway before it is too late!”

Jake was about to respond to what he thought was an obvious joke as the ceiling began to crack, and in the hallway behind them, the entire thing began to collapse in on itself.

“Fucking hell,” Jake cursed as he and the others charged forward.

“Did you find it necessary to annoy him??” the Sword Saint said as they reached the gateway.

“In my defense, I think he is genuinely enjoying this,” Jake smiled as they entered the gateway and moved onto the first in-between room of Minaga’s Labyrinth.

Chapter 668 - Nevermore: \U0022Seriously? Again?\U0022

Going through the gateway leading out of the thirty-first floor, Jake wasn’t exactly sure what he had expected. Considering the uniqueness of these next ten floors and Minaga being the one in charge, it wasn’t even sure there would be an in-between room. There was one, but it wasn’t at all what Jake had predicted.

All the prior in-between rooms had consisted of three gates – one they exit from, one leading to the next floor, and one to exit Nevermore. Besides that, there was a place for lockboxes to spawn... and that was it. They were barebones and functional, with it clearly being meant to just be a room you quickly went through.

As for Minaga’s version of an in-between room?

“This is nice,” Dina said just as they arrived, and she looked around.

“Certainly a relaxing atmosphere,” the Sword Saint agreed.

What they had walked into looked like the lounge of a five-star hotel. Red carpets covered the floor, a large open bar, a sitting area with lounge chairs, an elevated platform that looked to be made out of wood already with a lockbox on it, and generally, this entire hall was just a big and welcoming space. In Jake’s sphere, he even saw that there were several more rooms, including five bedrooms with attached bathrooms, with each of these bedrooms also having a “crafting room” attached. Based on the void

behind those doors, Jake guessed that the room changed based on who entered. Finally, Jake saw a fucking open-air bath. Did they need an open-air bath? They didn't, but it was there.

"Minaga is truly an evil mastermind," Jake said with respect. "Trying to make the parties attempting the labyrinth waste time in these in-between rooms and thus have less time doing the actual dungeon."

"Now that is just mean," Minaga said in a fake sulking tone.

"Sure, sure," Jake smiled. Just then, they also got a bunch of system messages making Jake smile even more.

Thirty-first floor completed. 310 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor in less than a day (24 hours). 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor without any party member taking damage from any trap. 300 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor without interacting with any friendly creatures. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor while only entering a maximum of four challenge rooms. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

The achievements were just rolling in as they got far more points than on any floor prior. Jake did find it a bit odd there wasn't a single mention of the fact they had chosen the Archmage difficulty, but it was also entirely possible that the reward would come at a later point.

"Certainly a lot of points," the Sword Saint said, satisfied.

"We may have taken the top spot if there was a Leaderboard after the thirty-first floor," Jake said with a smile.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched as she flew over to the lockbox in the room.

"Yeah, I guess you can open it," Jake said, hearing Sylphie excited to see what was inside. Many of the rewards they had gotten had turned out to be natural treasures or even raw materials their party could use, and most of it had thus also been consumed by Sylphie. It was only natural she was excited about opening each and every lockbox now.

Poking the box with her talon, it opened, and from within, a small shield-looking item floated out. It was no more than ten centimeters tall and had a heater shield design with a glowing flame symbol carved into it. The entire thing looked to be made of gold, except for the orange glowing flame symbol. Jake used Identify and raised an eyebrow at the description.

[Greater Firebane Talisman (Ancient)] – Infuse power into the talisman and grant significantly increased resistance to all fire affinity attacks for one hour (60 minutes) to you and all nearby party members. Has

limited charges, and once the charges are used up, the talisman will break. This item cannot be used outside of Nevermore and will cease to exist if brought out for too long. Charges remaining: 3

“Very clearly an item offered for either a later environment or a rematch with the Demon Lord. Perhaps both, considering it has a total of three charges,” the Fallen King voiced his thoughts.

“It would be good against the Demon Lord,” Dina agreed, having been the one to primarily deal with it. “The passive fire aura was quite powerful even for a level 270 Demon Lord, and if the next time we encounter the demon, it is even stronger, then I am not sure I would be able to properly fight it off.”

“Then we will have to simply deal with it ourselves,” the Fallen King said a bit dismissively.

Jake kind of agreed. While having Dina help with it was nice, Jake still had his scales, and if he used Arcane Awakening at full power, the passive shield from that, so he should be fine. The King was also good, leaving her only with Sylphie and the Sword Saint, but they could also take care of themselves.

“In either case, can you carry it, Dina?” Jake asked.

“Me?” she asked, a bit taken aback.

“Well, you are the support, and you seem good at judging when to use it,” Jake smiled encouragingly.

"I find it admirable," the King said, making Jake nod approvingly before he promptly stopped as the King followed up. "I find it admirable that Jake recognizes he would have forgotten about the item's existence ten seconds after putting it in his spatial storage, so he gave it to someone else."

"Hey, that ain't fair," Jake fought back.

"There... there was that compass on the twenty-fourth floor..." Dina muttered.

"Ree!" Sylphie valiantly came to Jake's defense.

"Yeah, Sylphie is right. We didn't need it, so who cares?" he said, knowing it was a losing battle.

"Chances are we could also proceed without this Firebane Talisman, but not using it strikes me as wasteful, seeing as it cannot even be brought out of Nevermore," the Sword Saint piled on.

"So I gave it to Dina, case closed," Jake said as he did the number one strategy to get out of trouble: misdirect.

"Hey, Minaga, I have a question. If you are willing to answer, that is."

"It is pretty hard to know if I am going to answer before you ask the question," Minaga answered with a hint of snark.

“Sorry, sorry. I do love the break room, by the way. I wanted to ask about the time-based achievement we got. More accurately, how they work. 500 points seem like a lot, but at the same time, few would have a chance to do it that fast, so is the achievement for doing it within a day the only one?” Jake asked, wanting to fish for some information.

“Well, there is one that gives 100 points for doing it in less than a week, 200 points for less than five days, 350 points for less than three days, and finally, 500 points for less than a day. Congratulations, you got the best one there, but you did miss out on other achievements!”

“I see,” Jake nodded. “Just to ask... was it possible to kill the Demon Lord during our first encounter?”

“Naturally, it was possible... same as you could have attacked me in the opening room if you so desired. Not saying doing either would have done you any good, but it was an option,” Minaga said in his usual cheerful voice. “Now, enjoy the break room and relax! At least try out the free bar.”

Minaga was gone again, and while Jake did want to move on quickly, he kind of got the feeling keeping Minaga happy would do him good. That some eccentric dungeon master was part of Nevermore, a transformed World Wonder, and that you had to keep the weird guy happy to not get fucked over was admittedly a bit weird... but what can you do about it? Seeing as Minaga made the entire thirty-first floor collapse behind them was kind of proof Minaga could actually influence the dungeon if he so wanted, even if the collapse had just been a joke.

In that sense, it was also a bit comforting that he had done nothing to mess with Jake. He could have easily scrambled the hallways, switched the locations of rooms with keys, reassigned which monsters had keys, and a slew of other things, but he had done none of it. So while Jake didn't think Minaga would outright work against him, it seemed silly to risk it, so he bit the bullet and sat down at the bar.

Looking at all the flasks on display, he extended a string of mana and picked out a few that seemed interesting. Dina and the Sword Saint walked over to join him as Jake began just mixing stuff at random, making different drinks. He had about a ninety-percent failure rate, but he did manage to make some stuff that at least didn't make him reek. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also allowed him to sense the general level of alcohol within each bottle. This was mainly important to make sure Sylphie didn't have any, as she was still too young to drink. Dina also didn't like alcohol, so they went to the section with non-alcoholic drinks.

"Why do you inferior lifeforms even consume these things?" the Fallen King asked, clearly just jealous he was the only one who couldn't enjoy Jake's mixing skills.

"Because we can, and some of them are tasty," Jake smiled. "I could ask you the same about consuming natural treasures. You have eaten literal rocks."

"They were precious gemstones containing soul--"

"Shiny rocks, then," Jake grinned.

The five of them stayed in this in-between room longer than they had planned, thoroughly falling for Minaga's trick. Then again, perhaps it was good for them to have a mental reset, and Jake had a strong feeling that was what these rooms were designed for. The five of them had not even dealt with the oppressive mist for a full day, but being within it just for a few hours was suffocating. Without Jake's sphere or other things to help you find your way, Jake could see others spend months just walking in a fog.

Yeah, he could see why someone would need a drink and a nice soak in the open-air bath after that.

Jake and company still only stayed for a few hours as they checked out the local amenities before moving on to the thirty-second floor.

Walking through the gateway, they found themselves in a pretty similar room to the one on the thirty-first. A few seconds after they appeared, the description of the floor once more popped up too.

Welcome to the Thirty-second floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 2)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 16682

The first thing Jake noticed was the name of the floor. To just call it part two was honestly lazy, and he would have expected more of Minaga. Alas, Jake would let it go in an act of benevolence.

As expected, on the central platform of the room, Minaga once more popped into existence, though he didn't bother with the light show this time around.

"Hello there! Long time no see," Minaga said in his usual joking tone. "I guess we all know what we are doing here. Are you going to be pathetic disappointments to all of the gods that blessed you and be the saddest excuse for a Unique Lifeform I have ever seen, or are you going to keep going at the Archmage difficulty? You can totally downgrade if you want to act like little-"

"Same difficulty," Jake waved him off.

"Surprising," Minaga said in a deadpan tone.

"Say," the Sword Saint began, "the first time around, you mentioned that one could increase or decrease the difficulty by one at the start of every floor. Does that mean there is a difficulty above Archmage we can increase it to?"

Jake looked at the Sword Saint and gave him a mental thumbs up. He hadn't even considered that.

"That is a very good question," Minaga said with a smile. "But no, there is not. I should probably change the wording in the initial briefing, huh? Well, good catch either way!"

Achievement earned: Ask Minaga a good question. 1 Nevermore Points earned.

The system announcement surprised all of them as Jake stared at the Unique Lifeform. "Really?"

"Are you complaining?" Minaga asked teasingly. "Can't take them back, but I can make sure you won't get any more."

"Nope, definitely not complaining, just surprised," Jake quickly backtracked.

"Oh, then no worries, no worries," Minaga waved him off. "Now for the second thing we have to deal with..."

Minaga stood on the platform with his usual smile as he seemed to be waiting for something. Jake exchanged a glance with the others, but none had any idea what the hell he wanted them to do. After nearly ten seconds of awkward silence, Minaga scratched his chin.

"Nothing?"

"What did you expect?" Jake asked.

"Well, I just said it was an option to attack me, so... you know," Minaga shrugged.

“But you also said it wouldn’t necessarily do us any good, and I have a strong feeling it will end badly if we did attack,” Jake pointed out.

“Oh, it definitely would have. But you also didn’t attack because we are becoming friends, and it would feel bad to attack me, right?”

“Oh, definitely that also,” Jake agreed.

“I knew we had built a good rapport,” Minaga smiled. “Now go forth and conquer the second part of my labyrinth! This one will be different; I can promise you that!”

With that, Minaga was gone again. The five of them exchanged glances as the large gate leading into the labyrinth began opening. As it opened, the familiar fog once more came out, and without hesitation, Jake and the others made their way inside. Releasing a Pulse of Perception, Jake scanned what was ahead of them, and on a cursory glance, it looked mostly the same, except he saw humanoid figures actually walking in some of the halls.

Jake also spotted one other thing. Only about a hundred meters into the hallway. A lone humanoid figure was sitting on the ground and leaning against the wall. Jake shared his findings, and they quickly made it to this lone figure.

They couldn’t see if they were human or not, as the person was fully covered in metallic armor that now had red scars all over it and several melted pieces. The moment they got close, the armored person lazily turned their head.

“You... were you the ones who released that monster?” a strained male voice came out. Jake used Identify and was kind of surprised by the level being the same as the Demon Lord.

[Knight of Light’s Dawn – lvl 270]

“He is dying,” Dina shared through their link. Considering she said it with such certainty, Jake saw no reason to doubt her and, thus, no reason to lie.

“If you are talking about the Demon Lord, then yes,” Jake answered. “But accidentally.”

“Curse you... curse all of you!” the Knight man said as he tried to stand up, but he stumbled and fell to the ground instantly as he stopped moving.

“Dead,” the Fallen King said.

“Not entirely,” the Sword Saint frowned as the corpse began leaking dark energy. An energy that was familiar to Jake.

A curse manifested from the corpse of the Knight. It took a vaguely humanoid form as the monster lifted one of its arms and pointed at their party.

“Absolve yourselves!”

The curse exploded outwards from the body and towards them as a bonus objective finally appeared before their eyes.

Bonus objective gained: Slay the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner to dispel the curse.

Yet just as the curse was about to invade their bodies, Jake took out Eternal Hunger. The curse energy trying to attack instantly stopped as his katar released a pulse of energy, and without even having the slightest chance to resist, every single speck of energy released was absorbed by his weapon.

“Not bad,” Jake said, seeing that Eternal Hunger had quite liked the curse. High-quality curse, but a bit lacking in the energy department. At least none of them had been affected at all, so that was nice.

“Seriously? Again?” the exasperated voice of Minaga echoed. “I am trying to teach you about consequences here.”

Jake shrugged. “Should have had a better curse.”

Chapter 669 - Nevermore: Ritual In The Rain

Even if they didn’t have to do the bonus objective to dispel the curse, they still wanted to kill this Prime Summoner, as it would no doubt reward extra Nevermore Points. Jake couldn’t really say he felt sorry about breaking whatever scenario Minaga had planned, though he could see what their host had been going for.

If they had done the first part without freeing the Demon Lord but had instead gotten help to teleport here, they would have met this Knight who was tasked with guarding the gate. He would then tell them about rumors of cultists recently appearing further into the labyrinth and task them with slaying the Prime Summoner because he feared that this cultist was trying to free the Demon Lord.

Jake and company had instead freed the Demon Lord themselves, and the Demon Lord had attacked and killed the Knight. Seeing them as intruders, the Knight would use a curse to make Jake and the others kill this Prime Summoner instead of merely asking them to do it. The curse would only have resulted in slightly lower overall resource pools and evil whispers from the dead Knight, admonishing them for their crimes and screaming at them to kill the Prime Summoner, so it would have been more annoying than impactful.

Now, back in the original story where Jake and company didn't free the Demon Lord. What would have happened when they finally reached the Prime Summoner was that they would find her just as she was about to succeed. Luckily, they would have arrived just in time – no matter if they had spent an hour or a year walking the hallways – and would naturally best the evil Prime Summoner. However, just as she was about to die, she would sacrifice herself to still release the Demon Lord.

One might ask why Jake knew all this? Well...

"Then, when the Demon Lord is summoned, a magical circle will appear at the entrance of the room, and the formation mage who helped you in the first part will appear together with the Knight. The Knight will engage the Demon Lord, and they will have a totally epic battle! The Knight of Light's Dawn versus the evil Demon Lord! Sadly the Knight is no match. He will tell you to run, and the mage will assist in teleporting you away into another part of the labyrinth. Sure, you would also be able to join the Knight and fight the Demon Lord as you did before and then have the demon teleport away again if you wanted to do that, and that would give an achievement, but I definitely find the first scenario way more fun. Ah, but the Knight would still die, having overused his boosting skill during the fight. This always happens... well, unless you knock the Knight out before he can use it. That has happened, but he stays back to protect this part of the labyrinth anyway, so it doesn't do much in later parts... though that again rewards an achievement."

Minaga had decided that while their party rushed through the hallways, he would narrate the entire story they had missed and really go into detail about the different scenarios they were now locked out of. Jake wouldn't exactly call the story good or original, and Minaga did also interject with clarifications that the story was written solely to set up good challenges and not actually to tell some exciting story. Though... even if he did say this, Minaga also seemed overly interested in sharing his so-called "bad" story.

Besides an even more talkative Minaga, the thirty-second floor was quite similar to the thirty-first, with the biggest difference being that the hallways were no longer empty of life. Patrols of cultists wandered about, which usually wouldn't be that much of a challenge, except that they had to fight them within the fog. Perceiving your surroundings and moving about was made more difficult, but at least this also affected the cultists as both sides struggled.

These cultists usually patrolled around in groups of three to seven, with their levels being around level 240. Jake had identified three types of cultists so far.

[Demonic Cultist Flameblade – lvl 242]

These were the usual fire types, and all acted like fanboys of the Demon Lord. They had similar skills, and their identical weapons all looked like replicas of the Demon Lord's sword. They were pretty easy to deal with overall, as their blades all lit up and made them easily locatable, even within the fog.

[Demonic Cultist Caulerizer – lvl 241]

Fire healers. Somehow their fire was able to mend injuries, really bending the definition of cauterize to straight up make it healing. They could also do some offensive fire magic, making them double as mages. Individually they were very squishy, and Sylphie, in particular, liked killing them as she broke through the defenders.

This brings us to the last type of enemy.

[Demonic Cultist Bulwark – lvl 242]

These were pretty standard defensive warriors wielding large shields, though they did also have the entire fire theme by making barriers of fire, and they could even release torrents of fire from their spiky shields. Usually, these Bulwarks worked hand in hand with the Cauterizers, but due to the small size of the groups, every encounter was too one-sided to truly get into insight into their synergy. These patrols were clearly just made to put the people exploring on their toes, and Minaga also shared some other reasons.

“Thematically, the patrols are to signify that the demonic cult has claimed this entire part of the labyrinth as their own. Mechanically, it is to combat a very obvious strategy many groups would have no doubt made use of on the prior floor: divide and conquer. While a lot of Perception-related abilities are blocked, blocking everything that allows party members to locate and keep track of one another is simply not feasible, and I wouldn’t want to even if I could. So, in order to make splitting up less safe, I introduced these patrols into the hallways. Sure, for a team like yours, you could still split up, but for the average party – even those capable of doing the labyrinth on Archmage difficulty – it would be incredibly dangerous and a risk they didn’t wanna take. It isn’t like a normal group can send their healer running around solo and expect them to return unscathed.”

“That does actually make perfect sense,” Jake said as they walked away from another patrol they had just killed.

“However, it is also to communicate to the challengers when they are closing in on this Prime Summoner,” the Sword Saint stated.

Jake had already pretty much confirmed this through his Pulses of Perception, and the Sword Saint had also easily figured it out. The patrols all came from somewhere, and by backtracking their paths, one would get closer and closer to the headquarters of these demonic summoners.

Of course, it wasn't entirely that simple. Some groups came from other rooms not containing the Prime Summoner, and some even purposefully tried to lead Jake and company into traps, but with Jake in the lead, they kept their course straight and rapidly made progress toward the Prime Summoner. At the edge of his most recent Pulse of Perception, he saw a room bigger than any before on this floor, so he felt pretty confident it was there. Extremely confident, actually, as he also applied his improved tracking skills and, despite the fog, vaguely got the feeling that the strongest source of demonic energy was in that direction. This was definitely helped along by his Bloodline-empowered intuition too.

Minaga had also clearly noticed this as he made a few snide comments here and there. Their group had already decided to replicate what they did on the prior floor and not bother with all the optional rooms. The only potentially optional thing they would do was to kill this Prime Summoner for the bonus points. Was it possible that skipping this step would reward some kind of achievement? Sure, but it was equally possible it would just result in them missing out on points.

Soon enough, they reached their destination. This was an even larger room than any they had encountered before, and as on the prior floor, the fog dispersed as they walked through the fog wall and entered. Instantly as they set foot inside the room, Jake's danger sense reacted.

Several Demonic Cultist Flameblades descended upon them, but an expanded golden barrier from the King sent them all stumbling back. Jake pulled out his bow and sent one of them flying even further back as the Sword Saint, Dina, and Sylphie also released their own attacks, making quick work of their welcome party.

Needless to say, this would not be a stealth mission. The design of this massive room reminded Jake of an old temple, but it was so large that towards the back of this temple, a large cathedral sat. Jake used his tracking skill quickly, and without the fog, it was clear as day.

“Prime Summoner is in the cathedral,” Jake shared with the party.

“Let’s make haste and quickly dispose of the trash before getting there,” the Fallen King said as he rose into the air. The large temple hall was filled with cultists, and Jake spotted at least a few thousand, though it had to be noted that the vast majority of them were truly in the trash mob category. In fact, more than ninety percent had barely reached C-grade.

[Demonic Cultist – lvl 201]

The races of these cultists varied widely. Beastfolk, humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes, and a bunch of more exotic humanoid races Jake didn’t know. All of them burned with fanaticism and gladly picked up arms against the evil invaders, all spurred on by some of the higher-leveled cultists among them.

Just then, a massive projected head of a woman wearing a mask appeared in the sky.

“Lord Gubrothas has already informed me of your meddling, outsiders. For daring to lift a hand against his honored lord, the only true recompense is death. Rejoice, as your souls will be used to fuel my ascension. Attack, my faithful!” the lunatic woman yelled.

The group of fanatics was thrown into a frenzy as Jake and the others prepared to fight, but as they were about to step forward, the Sword Saint spoke.

“Would you allow me?” asked the Sword Saint as he walked forward. “This place seems fitting for something I have been waiting to reveal.”

“Go right ahead,” Jake said, wondering what the old man wanted to show them.

He smiled as he drew his blade, and his aura spiked. Toward the ceiling of the room, rain clouds appeared out of nowhere as a light drizzle fell upon the entire hall. The Sword Saint charged forward into a crowd of Demonic Cultist Flameblades and Bulwarks, moving away from the rest of the party.

Sylphie was about to take flight, but Jake lifted his hand and gently pushed her down on his shoulder. “Let the old man have his fun.” The Fallen King also summoned a golden barrier to cover them and block the rain, as well as any wayward attacks.

They had times like these on prior floors where they allowed one of them to have a bit of a solo show. It was a way to not make them too bored and a chance to show off their skills. Jake and the others thus stood back and observed the Sword Saint engage an entire army of cultists in melee as they stood back near the entrance of the hall.

He had fully activated his boosting skill and expertly dodged every single attack as the rain fell down all around him, soaking the floor of the temple and creating puddles everywhere. The rain weakened all of the fire affinity fighters, and after a few minutes of the Sword Saint just cutting down cultist after cultist, the big boss made her appearance.

From the cathedral, the Prime Summoner stepped out together with two actual demons. Jake checked them all from afar to see if the old man could still deal with them.

[Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner – lvl 260]

[Demon Guardian – lvl 255]

It would be tight, but Jake had confidence. The Sword Saint was incredibly well-versed against opponents like these. They were humanoid, used fire affinity abilities, and the primary foe was a caster. Jake had seen him fight large beasts and struggle, but against other humanoids, he was an absolute monster.

Jake also noticed something else was off. The movements of his opponents were slow... too slow. Somehow, the rain seemed to stick to them and make their movements slower, making Jake consider if perhaps the Sword Saint had gotten inspiration from the underwater level or something. However, what Dina said next dispelled that thought.

“Time... every raindrop is infused with the concept of time,” Dina said with astonishment.

Taken aback, Jake reassessed the situation. He always scanned the environment but hadn’t bothered checking out the individual raindrops. Upon doing so, he realized Dina was right. Every single raindrop contained a bit of time energy. Individually, it was meaningless, but as the rain accumulated, it would rapidly build up and have a noticeable effect. But... the energy expenditure had to be utterly insane doing it, and checking the Sword Saint, Jake did notice some sweat mixed in with the raindrops. He was truly straining himself just to keep up the massive chamber-spanning domain.

Things got worse as the two Demon Guardians properly joined the brawl, and the Prime Summoner began doing some magic in the background. The regular cultists had never truly joined the fight, but now all grouped around the Summoner as she raised her hands to the sky.

“Loyal subjects... today is the day we ascend!”

She yelled loudly as a giant magical circle appeared, spanning a huge section of the chamber. All of the regular cultists began chanting, and the energy level in the room began rising as the Prime Summoner’s aura grew.

Jake had read enough about rituals to know what this was. He was about to tell the King to dispel the barrier and have them join the fight before the ritual could complete, but before he could, the Sword Saint spoke through their telepathic mark.

“Jake, I remember you being curious about my mythical rarity skill. Well, formerly mythical, now legendary,” the Sword Saint asked, making Jake stop.

Opening his eyes wide, Jake sent a mental confirmation.

“I would advise you to strengthen the barrier, Fallen King. This attack is indiscriminate,” he added. The King reacted as he infused the barrier around them with his golden energy, and Dina also assisted as she put a green membrane around it to strengthen it further.

Retreating from his foes, the Sword Saint took a deep breath as he shifted his stance and kneeled down while holding the blade with the tip of the blade resting against the floor like he was about to do an upwards sweep.

Then, it happened. The raindrops falling all over the massive chamber stopped moving in mid-air as they simply floated there. An incredibly intense aura erupted from the Sword Saint, and Jake saw the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner react with panic as all of the raindrops began moving backward in time, the puddles on the floor starting to slowly drip upwards.

“What is-“ the Summoner began, but she was cut off.

The Sword Saint raised his blade in one fluid motion as the rain followed suit.

“Rain of Time: Reversal.”

Rain reversed in time as every droplet that had fallen became a small blade piercing the clouds above. The entire chamber rumbled as the ground was torn up, an area of several square kilometers seemingly lifting off the ground as heavenly destruction sundered the hall. Within less than a second, every single raindrop had been sent flying back to the clouds above.

Raindrops, each only containing enough energy to lightly injure a peak E-grade or early D-grade... but when there were millions, the result was devastating.

Jake was taken aback by the attack, but what happened next was almost as ludicrous. The Sword Saint raised his blade, and the rainclouds above descended upon him like a whirlwind, the energy entering his body as Jake slowly felt the old man be revitalized. Not only had he reversed the raindrops... he had returned a large amount of the resources he had spent on the skill.

Looking out at the chamber, the chaos had finally started dying down, and the scene of the Sword Saint's devastation was revealed. The entire terrain was filled with small pencil-sized holes all over, and in the center of it all knelt the Prime Summoner, blood running down her lips. The two demons also still lived, standing at her sides.

As for the weaker cultists... not a single one remained. Only a few sparse but heavily injured Flameblades, Cauterizers, and Guardians were spread here and there.

"You... you ruined everything! I was to ascend!" the Prime Summoner screamed, her ritual having failed with the deaths of thousands of her subjects and the circle itself being utterly torn apart.

"Yeah, well, tough shit," Jake said as the King had long dispelled the barrier, and he had walked over and joined the Sword Saint.

"I... I will kill you all!" she screamed as her body erupted in power, and the two Demon Guardians both bulked up.

Anyway, skipping the boring part, the group walked towards the cathedral to check what was in there ten minutes later, leaving only corpses in their wake. Jake even got a level, and they all got a nice achievement when the Prime Summoner died.

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Bonus Objective Completed: Defeat the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner before she can carry out her ascension ritual. 250 Nevermore Points earned.

All in all, good stuff.

Seeing the achievement of not allowing the ritual to happen, Jake was glad they had stopped it, though he also wanted to see what would have happened if they had allowed her to do it. As for why they were headed towards the cathedral... well, Jake had spotted something interesting there. Or, more accurately, someone interesting.

Chapter 670 - Nevermore: Two Old Men

The cathedral had, amazingly so, not at all been affected by the attack from the Sword Saint. It was maybe protected by some magical barrier, or perhaps the construction was indeed durable enough to handle his weird reversal of the rain.

This meant that the interior was also spotless and bereft of damage. It was also entirely empty, save for a hidden cellar dungeon with no obvious entrance. Jake managed to sniff out how to enter through his sphere, and they found a secret door opened by someone pulling on a lantern hanging from a pillar. Yes, Minaga was that cliché.

"Do you believe this individual will be a foe?" the Sword Saint asked as they walked down the newly revealed stairs.

"I doubt it. The dude is in chains and in a sealed room, so unless they are really shitty hosts, then I would assume it is a prisoner," Jake answered.

Even if he didn't share it, Jake did have an idea who this person could be based on the stories Minaga had shared. Upon entering the hidden prisoner dungeon, his suspicions were pretty much confirmed as he saw an old disheveled man chained to a wall within a sealed-in red barrier.

[Old Royal Mage – lvl 250]

Again, a very original name from Minaga. At least the Demon Lord had a name based on what the Prime Summoner said.

After they entered the room, the old mage also seemed to notice them, but he didn't even look up.

"Just kill me already... I will never betray my comrades!" he said in a valiant tone.

Jake wanted to praise Minaga for his wonderful dialogue, but the Sword Saint spoke first. "We are not with the demonic cult, but those who have come to slay them."

The old man looked up and laid his eyes on them. "Truly? I feared all was lost when the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas was released from the seal that we of the Mage Court laid down five hundred years ago. In an attempt to help the citizens, I came here to try and stop the Prime Summoner from assisting the evil

Demon Lord Gubrothas regain his former strength, but I was too late and was instead captured. Tell me, did you succeed in stopping her from ascending to a Prime Consort of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas?"

Who the hell just goes on a tirade like that after one reassurance we are the good guys!? Jake wanted to scream, but the old swordsman stayed in character.

"Her foul ritual was ended by my blade, and the cultists slain for their evil acts," he said in a serious tone.

"Good, good... did the Knight of Light's Dawn join you? He was said to have guarded the entrance to this labyrinth, and I fear the worst if he encountered the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas. Even if the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas was weakened... tell me, is he safe?" the Old Royal Mage asked.

Does he really have to refer to the Demon Lord as "evil Demon Lord Gubrothas" every time? Jake questioned as he kept his mouth shut.

"Sadly, the Knight valiantly fought the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas but failed to stop him. With his dying breath, he tasked us with stopping the Prime Summoner. That we found you here is simply a blessed happenstance," the Sword Saint said in a comforting tone. "Please, allow us to free you."

The Royal Mage nodded, and Jake and the others proceeded to dismantle the barrier and free the mage from his chains. Jake was primarily interested in the magic circle they had used for the prison. The chains served as energy-sappers and made the person too weak to use their physical strength to rip themselves free, while the formation drained their resource at all times, making them even weaker in all other aspects. However, Jake believed the most important function was the formation's ability to disrupt energy movements, even within the body of the affected person. It acted almost like a neurotoxin, making Jake very curious.

As the two old men once more spoke, Jake subtly disassembled the entire prison cell and stored it away, including the chains on the wall and floor tiles the magical circle had been carved on.

"Thank you, thank you, oh valiant heroes. Please, with the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas now freed, he must be stopped, but I fear he has already managed to reach his castle deep within the labyrinth. I... I wish we could seal him once more, but I am too weak. Heroes, do you believe yourselves capable of facing the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas? That you can bring peace and justice?" the Royal Mage asked in his usual dramatic and severe tone.

"That is a quest we would take upon ourselves with honor," the Sword Saint nodded.

"I cannot express my gratitude enough, heroes," the old mage said with a big smile. "Allow me to assist you in your quest."

The old man made a magical seal with his hands and summoned a small golden stone with magical scripts on it that Jake promptly Identified.

[Anti-Demon Sword-Sealing Stone (Unique)] – A stone created by the Old Royal Mage capable of temporarily weakening the Demon Lord by sealing in his sword. The duration of the seal is one minute (60 seconds). This item cannot be used outside of Nevermore and will cease to exist if brought out for too long. Will break upon usage.

"In an attempt to assist the Knight of Light's Dawn, I created this Sealing Stone, but sadly I could never use it... please, would you take it instead? Use it to slay the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas?" the Old Royal Mage asked as he held up the stone.

To Jake's surprise, the Sword Saint shook his hand as he closed the hands of the Old Royal Mage around the stone. "No, this quest is ours alone, and we shall slay the Demon Lord using our own power. We have already encountered him once, and the last time, he cowardly fled. I thank you for the offer, but your job is done, and you can rest. We will handle the rest."

"Truly?" the old mage asked in disbelief. "The evil Demon Lord Gubrothas is not easily bested... even if you faced him once, he will be far stronger when you face him in his domain."

"No matter where or when, he shall fall to us. Evil shall never prevail; I swear my life on that," the Sword Saint said.

"Very well, I shall respect your conviction, and once more, I thank you, heroes," the old man bowed deeply.

Achievement earned: Locate and free the Old Royal Mage and reject the Anti-Demon Sword-Sealing Stone. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

So that's why he rejected it... bonus points. Yay, Jake thought, giving a mental thumb up to the Sword Saint.

The old mage seemed to be deep in thought for a moment before he smiled at them. "Even without the seal, allow me to assist you in reaching the deeper parts. We have a stronghold that should still hold due to formations of old laid down by the court. It is close to the next entryway leading further into the demon's domain."

Jake instantly caught on and sent a mental negative to the Sword Saint. Chances are this stronghold would be within a room and thus make them lose out on an achievement for doing the minimum number of rooms possible.

"Once more, I thank you for the offer, but we wish to scour the halls to truly wipe out the foul cultists that still wander them," the Sword Saint said in a solemn tone.

"I understand," the mage said with a nod. "In that case, all I can give you is my well-wishes. Go forth and be the arbiters of justice."

"That we shall," the Sword Saint nodded and bowed as he turned around and began walking out of the cathedral. Jake looked at the old mage for a second before mimicking the actions of the Sword Saint and also bowing as he followed after. Everyone except for the Fallen King did a small bow, with even Sylphie trying it.

Following the Sword Saint out of the cathedral and back towards the hallway, Jake gave the old man a questioning look.

"I did theater back in my school days," the old man revealed. "It has been... hm, must be a century since then? How time flies..."

"Old fart," Jake snorted jokingly, the old man just smiling in response.

They didn't need to talk much more as they made their way back into the hallway, and Jake once more proceeded with guiding the group towards the exit. With commentary, of course.

"Such a missed opportunity. You should have just teleported with the Old Royal Mage. Even if you didn't want to wait for him to recover, Jake could have just handed him a mana potion to get him up to speed. It would have been faster by a lot, and you would have been able to see the cool stronghold and even interact with all the people who live there. There are a bunch of individuals with very interesting information, including a former member of the cult, an old nobleman, and the squire of the Knight of Light's Dawn, that died at the beginning of this floor. Who knows, maybe they would even give you some reward for slaying the Prime Summoner? At the very least, you would have seen them all react to the Old Royal Mage reuniting with old friends. It would have been really touching. His granddaughter would even be there and hand you all these small flower crowns to wear for freeing her grandpa..."

"Or, we could get the bonus achievement points by only doing the minimum amount of rooms," Jake countered.

"Well, considering the room with the Prime Summoner was only for the bonus objective, you could have skipped that too."

"Yeah, but seeing as it is the bonus objective, and coupled with the points for freeing the Old Royal Mage, I'm gonna bet it has at least equal or more points, especially with the two achievements we just got. Oh yeah, and the experience was also pretty worth it," Jake said with a light smile as he turned to the group. "Patrol ahead on the right, two-point-five kilometers."

The Fallen King and Sylphie responded as they picked up speed and went ahead of the group to clean up the patrol.

"Why do I get the feeling you said that out loud and not through telepathy just to annoy me?" Minaga asked.

"I have no idea why you would possibly think that," Jake said before he looked at the Sword Saint and Dina. "We should reach the end in about thirty minutes, just got eleven left turns and eight right turns before we reach the final room."

"You are definitely doing it on purpose."

"All in your imagination," Jake shrugged. Soon the Fallen King and Sylphie rejoined them as they passed through the place where the two of them had utterly slaughtered the patrol.

From there on out, it was just a rush to the final room with the gateway in it. This room was also filled with cultists and even had a level 255 Cultist Leader who ended up being weaker than the Prime Summoner. Or maybe he would have been stronger if the guy had managed to finish his large-scale ritual, but they promptly killed him before the guy had a chance to. Without further ado, they entered the gateway to finish off the thirty-second floor even faster than they did the thirty-first.

Thirty-second floor completed. 320 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor in less than a day (24 hours). 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor without allowing the Demonic Cultists to perform any of their planned rituals. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor without receiving assistance from any friendly creatures. 350 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor while only entering a maximum of two challenge rooms. 300 Nevermore Points earned.

Appearing in the in-between lounge, Jake admired all the achievements just rolling in.

"We managed to stop all the rituals?" Dina asked, a bit confused. "That seemed... too easy? There were only those two..."

"No, there were not only two, there was a total of nine rituals going on across this entire labyrinth, but even the slowest one – besides the two mandatory ones you did – would take around a full day to complete. Honestly, I am questioning why I even decided it was a good idea to add an achievement for not allowing any rituals to go off while also having one to complete it in under a day. Seems a bit like an unnecessary double reward... oh well, what can you do about it? I guess you did interrupt two rituals, so it wasn't like it was totally free," Minaga answered Dina.

"Oh... thank you for telling me," Dina said with a small bow.

"See, Jake? That is how you treat an all-powerful dungeon master who wields your fate in his hands," Minaga took a jab at Jake.

"Noted and ignored," Jake smiled. "Though I have an even more important question than Dina."

"...what?"

"Are the drinks in the bar different in this in-between room from the ones before?"

"... yeah, they are... why?"

"Any recommendations?" Jake asked genuinely. "I didn't do that well last time. I reckoned you would have some good recipes."

"Mixing Ualberry Juice and... actually, get over there and let me guide you. As an alchemist, you should be able to properly mix drinks at least. It can't be worse than last time. That was a damn atrocity," Minaga said, oddly engaged.

"Sir, yes, sir," Jake said as he popped over to the bar. The next two hours were spent with Jake getting guided by Minaga on how to mix some banger drinks, and he learned a lot about different foodstuffs of the multiverse.

Sylphie also opened the lockbox in the room as he was working at the bar, and inside, they found a staff suited for a mage. A fire mage, more specifically, as the staff gave off intense fire affinity energy. This made Dina visibly upset with the thought of getting it, so they decided to just decide by random chance, with the Fallen King eventually winning.

They had primarily chosen to relax a bit in the in-between room because the Sword Saint needed to fully get back in top condition after using his Rain of Time and boosting skills. That Jake got a lesson in drink mixing was just a bonus.

After resting, they entered the next floor as usual and once more appeared in a pretty much identical room to the thirty-first and thirty-second floors. And as was also customary, they got their usual welcome message.

Welcome to the Thirty-third floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 3)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Free at least a quarter (25%) of the prisoners trapped on the thirty-third floor (0%).

Current progress: Prisoners freed (0%). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 19203

Minaga appeared in all his glory with a huge grin on his face while they were all reading the description of this floor.

"Hello again!" Minaga said with a big smile.

"Hello again indeed," Jake smiled. "Will this floor be different from the last two?"

"Oh... this floor is truly special... because this time, your cheating skills won't give you any big advantage; I can promise you that!" Minaga said, full of confidence. "Oh, and I already set the difficulty to Archmage again. If you have any complaints, voice them in 3... 2... 1. Okay, it is set now."

"No complaints about the difficulty," Jake said with a shrug. "But not sure I believe the first part."

"You will... oh, you will!" Minaga said with maniacal laughter as he disappeared from the room, and his voice echoed as the door in the distance began glowing red as it opened.

"Do tell me... how are you going to cheat this time around, huh!?"