

Hunter 681

Chapter 681 - Nevermore: Evil Demon Lord Gubrothas

A sudden burst of heat hit Jake as he stepped out of the gateway and appeared on the thirty-fifth floor. One thing was already different about this floor from any of those prior: there was no difficulty selection with Minaga. Instead, they had appeared already within the Demon Lord's castle.

Before anything else, Jake released a Pulse of Perception to get a lay of the land. What he saw was probably the smallest floor they had encountered so far.

The entire floor was just one unrealistically giant castle. It consisted of three different sections of note: the massive central throne room, a large circular hallway surrounding it, and three towers that each had hallways extending from the large circular hallway. Jake also spotted a certain someone hidden in a room pretty much right next to where they appeared.

As Jake was still looking through the mental map from his Pulse, they got the usual welcome message to the floor.

Welcome to the Thirty-Fifth floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Demon Lord's Castle)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Slay the three Tower Demons (0/3)

Current progress: Tower Demons (0/3). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 23123

Minaga had even bothered to name this floor and didn't just call it part five. Using his mental map, it was easy to spot all three Tower Demons, as each was within their respective towers. Moreover, each Tower Demon seemed to be guarding something, and Jake couldn't help but make the connection between the three Secret Scrolls and the three towers.

Speaking of the secret scrolls.

A small pedestal was right in front of them where they appeared. All three Secret Scrolls were stacked on top of each other, with a letter placed on top of them all.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she shuffled a bit on his shoulder, uncomfortable with the heavy fire affinity in the air.

"Yeah, sure," Jake agreed. Sylphie released a small gust of wind that made the letter fly over to him, and they all looked at Jake as he cleared his voice and read it aloud.

"Dear heroes.

I hope you all have arrived at the Demon Lord's castle safely, and I hope this letter reached you in time. Throughout the years of plotting to take down the Demon Lord, I managed to obtain the schematics of the Demon Lord's castle and memorize them, and I wish to share my findings with you. For now, avoid the central throne room and, instead, head to the three outer towers. You must defeat the three Tower Demons atop each tower and gain access to each Sealstone up there. These Sealstones are attuned to the artifacts, and you need to read out the incarnation written on each corresponding Secret Scroll. Remember to read the correct phrase to sabotage the artifacts of the Demon Lord. If you read the other one, you may accidentally empower the Demon Lord, making beating Gubrothas nearly impossible.

May you succeed in your quest for righteousness.

- Second Mistress."

Jake finished reading it, and just as he did, they heard shuffling footsteps and the sound of something impacting the tiled floors. Out of a small hidden room walked the old demon, now with a cane in hand, as he shuffled in their direction.

"Heroes! I could not help but hear you read the letter from the Second Mistress, and I came out as soon as I could. I am glad to see you arrived at the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas' castle in one piece. You even managed to obtain all three Secret Scrolls! Truly impressive," the old demon smiled at them.

Things were as expected, and Jake smiled at the old demon. "I found your message at your old residence. Say, how did you manage to find a secret entrance to the castle? Could you not have told us about it?"

"I wanted to, but there was limited time to make use of the opening, and the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas found the flaw in the defenses right after I managed to sneak inside. Also, it may have interfered with your quest to obtain the Secret Scrolls. In the end, we all made it here safely and are united in our goal of ending the menace that is the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, so there truly is no need to discuss this. Instead, we should focus on the task at hand," the old demon said.

"I think Jake is right... this demon is clearly not actually here to help us," Dina said through the golden mark.

If even the sheltered Dina noticed how off the demon was, it was pretty damn obvious. However...

"Indeed we should. You heard the letter from the Second Mistress. What say you? How do you think we should approach this?" Jake asked the demon.

"Sabotaging the artifacts of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas is naturally imperative to ensuring his defeat. Of course, if you are truly confident in your victory, then you can simply choose to face the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas without weakening him first. However, not using the scrolls would be incredibly risky," the demon said, looking deep in thought.

"We want to do what will give us the highest chance of bringing the evil Demon Lord to justice," Jake said, trying to sound as heroic as he could.

"In that case, may I be allowed to offer my assistance as best I can?" the old demon asked.

Here we go, Jake thought.

"Of course, but in what way?" Jake questioned.

The demon looked at them all suspiciously for no damn reason as he spoke. "Could you lend me the Secret Scrolls? I want to ensure their authenticity."

"Oh, no problem," Jake readily agreed but then seemed to back down as he turned to the party. "No complaints, right?"

"He has only helped us so far. No need to be suspicious," the Sword Saint said with a smile.

"My apologies; you can never be too safe," Jake said, bowing slightly to the old demon.

"No need to worry," the demon said as Jake handed him all the scrolls. His eyes were full of greed as the demon showed acting talent on par with the average child actor as he received the scrolls and smiled creepily as he spoke once more.

"Now I just need to do a quick ritual to confirm they are real if that is alright with you all, right? I may need your slight assistance," the old demon asked.

"Sure, sure," Jake nodded as he watched the old demon draw a damn pentagram, nearly identical to the one the Demon Lord had made when he teleported away during their first encounter. His insight into magic circles also instantly let him know it was a teleportation circle of some kind, and Dina also looked

to have a hard time holding herself back from commenting on how obvious what the demon was doing was.

Nevertheless, both Dina and Jake poured in a bit of mana as the old demon was not strong enough to do the ritual himself. Then, suddenly, to the surprise of absolutely everyone, the secret scrolls were all teleported away as the old demon began laughing maniacally.

“You fools! You fell for my deceit, and I have now managed to get the Secret Scrolls into the hands of the three Tower Demons! They shall now read the incantations to empower the artifacts, and unless you manage to kill them all and get back the Secret Scrolls to then read the other incantation and sabotage the artifacts of the Demon Lord, you are all doomed! Muhahahaha!”

Jake barely held himself back from facepalming as he tried to act shocked. He didn’t succeed.

“Oh nooo,” Jake muttered. “What will we do now?”

“You can do nothing but defeat the Tower Demons and reverse the process! Just because you can recover the scrolls and read the incantation to sabotage the artifacts and reverse any empowering doesn’t mean you will be able to accomplish it! Of course, you can also face the Demon Lord in his strongest state possible in an impossible battle that you would only ever be able to overcome if you true talents sitting at the peak of the multiverse! And it isn’t like you have any methods to escape the castle and return to where you came and then reenter the castle and choose to go for the Tower Demons the second time around should you choose to face the Demon Lord at full power!”

“We were truly bamboozled,” Jake kept muttering. I think you should take a look at

“Of course you were! The designs of the glorious Demon Lord are beyond your comprehension! Now that I have accomplished my goal, the Demon Lord will take over the entire multiverse, and unless you manage to somehow kill the Demon Lord in his empowered state or go and slay the three Tower Demons and recover the Secret Scro-“

“May I kill him already?” the Fallen King practically begged.

“Sure.”

“Go ahead.”

“Please do.”

“Ree.”

In the next instant, a blast of force blew off the head of the old demon as he fell over backward, dead. He had barely been C-grade and was honestly so weak it wasn’t even worth mentioning. They stared at the corpse for a while as Jake sighed.

“So...”

“We proceed as planned. Let us face this Demon Lord with all of his power and ignore these Tower Demons,” the Fallen King said. “Perhaps we can hunt them down for the bonus objective after slaying the Demon Lord for a higher overall reward.”

“Eh, I don’t think that will be necessary. Video game logic dictates they will join the Demon Lord fight anyway, so we should get the bonus objective done no matter what,” Jake shrugged.

“What do you mean?” the Sword Saint questioned.

Jake chuckled. “Come on. Three mini-bosses, each guarding a method to empower the final boss? What do you think will happen when you ignore them and allow them to fully empower the boss? Of course they will join in on the fight in a second phase of sorts.”

“Hm, do you believe it wise to make assumptions based on Earth’s video game industry?” the old man asked.

“One hundred percent,” Jake said, fully serious.

“Very well,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Alright, final planning time. The general layout of the room is...”

Jake proceeded to explain what he had seen and what they could expect. They already had assumptions, but based on the size of the Demon Lord's arena, they would adapt. Luckily for them, the throne room was utterly massive. It was a giant hall more than ten kilometers across, with four giant pillars around a hundred meters in diameter surrounding a large throne in the middle. Right above the throne, suspended by large meter-thick chains extending from the four pillars, hung a red crystal pulsing with energy. It was shaped like a heart – the anatomic kind – and Jake had a good idea that it was one of the artifacts mentioned, the Demon Lord's Heart.

On the throne beneath it naturally sat the Demon Lord.

After their strategizing, the group all got ready. Standing in front of the large gate, Dina summoned her staff and spoke an incantation as they were all surrounded by a green aura. Sylphie also followed suit, and a green gust of wind blew through them, making Jake feel slightly lighter as Sylphie told them the wind was now on their side.

"Let's go," Jake smiled as he raised his foot and kicked the giant gate leading into the throne room. It slammed open as the Demon Lord in the distance sat bored on his throne, resting his head on his knuckle.

"At last, you arrive," the Demon Lord spoke, not bothering to get up. The arm they had severed was naturally fully regrown, and the Demon Lord was clearly in peak condition. Rather than only wearing a loincloth, he now had a full set of black plate armor covering his entire body, with pulsing lava-like lines running through it. The only exposed red skin was his hands and head, as rather than a helm, he wore a crown that looked to be made of black metallic thorns.

"For too long, I was sealed. Trapped with only my own thoughts within a space of nothingness. It put many things into perspective, and I realized that I had been too lenient on those beneath me. Why had they never come to free me? Why had the pathetic woman who dared call herself my Prime Consort merely sat back and waited? Well, I guess I cannot complain too much. She did manage to breathe new life into some old keepsakes," the Demon Lord said, as momentarily the heart-shaped crystal, sword leaning against the throne, armor, and crown flashed with energy, indicating their empowered state.

The Fallen King had already begun floating to the right as Jake began moving to the left, the Sword Saint walking forward with Dina behind him as Sylphie prepared to take to the air.

“It took you fools to free me...” the Demon Lord sighed as he stood up from his throne. “I guess I should thank you. So let me give due compensation. Not just for freeing me, but to pay you five back for our last encounter.”

He reached out and grasped his sword, not even looking at what Jake and the others were doing as he did his monologue.

“Rejoice. My gift to you all is that you will be remembered. Remembered as the heroes who valiantly dared meet me in combat. Now, let it be known!”

The entire throne room seemed to shake as the Demon Lord’s Heart – the giant crystal – began to glow intensely and release a red sheen that nearly set the air ablaze.

“You face Demon Lord Gubrothas. Prove your worth.”

He had barely managed to say this as two explosions sounded out. From one direction, a blast of pink-purple energy soared through the air, surrounding a fully charged Arcane Powershot with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. From the other, a golden beam was released by the Fallen King, tearing up the ground as it passed.

The Demon Lord seemed surprised but still reacted far faster than in their last fight. He chose to block the golden beam with his sword, as he raised a hand and summoned a flaming sigil to try and stop Jake's Powershot. Neither attempt to block succeeded.

Two large explosions erupted as the attacks arrived at the same time, bathing the Demon Lord in the destructive energies of Jake's arcane affinity and the powerful force magic of the Fallen King. With a roar, the Demon King released a massive shockwave of fire from his body, revealing a body now filled with marks and burns, with the hand he used to block Jake's blow thoroughly torn up, bone showing. He looked to be about to talk again as the real attack arrived.

There was no sound as a green line cut through the throne room. The Demon Lord stood with both hands out to his side and had been far from prepared to respond as a green wing cut halfway through his neck, the head only staying on because he managed to slightly lean as it arrived...

Only for an old man to teleport right up to him and swing his blade for the uncut side of the Demon Lord's neck. The demon's eyes opened wide as the Rainblade prepared to decapitate him, his own attempt to dodge Sylphie making him lean into the Sword Saint's strike. At the very last moment, he roared as another blast of flame was released, but a dense green barrier covered the Sword Saint's body as Dina stood with her staff raised right behind him.

The demon's attempt had failed as the attack landed, and the large head of the Demon Lord was sent flying in a spray of rain and blood.

It flew a few meters into the air as the Sword Saint was forced to block as the Demon Lord's headless body swung his weapon. The blast of fire hit the old man, but Dina's barrier still managed to block it, only forcing him to retreat back ten meters.

A red tentacle of pure red energy shot up from the severed neck of the Demon Lord and dragged it back in place, the Demon Lord's Heart thrumming with energy above as it seemed to dim slightly.

The Demon Lord's unfocused eyes refocused as his head was back on, and the rest of his body also rapidly healed.

"Crystal above is feeding him energy," Jake established.

"You..." the Demon Lord said in an angry tone.

Jake, readying another arrow, smiled. On the one hand, it would have been funny to instantly kill the big boss with their opening strike, but on the other...

He did want to see what the big evil Demon Lord Gubrothas could do.

At the very least, they had taught the fucker to stop monologuing like an idiot and pay attention to his opponents charging up attacks.

Chapter 682: Nevermore: A Broken-Hearted Demon Lord

It was a good attempt, but ultimately they failed to finish the fight immediately. They had hoped to at least leave a debilitating injury even if they failed the kill, but even that had failed. Not that they had completely wasted their time.

Even if the Demon Lord was still standing, reattaching a head and healing his body was not cheap. The crystal above had lost noteworthy power from their opening attack, and that was honestly good enough as it had given them some good info.

From their brief exchange, it was also clear the Demon Lord was stronger and faster than during their last encounter. He was now fully recovered, not to mention his new armor that their opening attack had not managed to damage in any meaningful way. They had gone for the neck with the expectation that the armor would not be easily overcome.

However, even if the boss had grown... Jake was fully confident they could handle anything the boss could throw at them.

One also had to remember that they had also grown a few levels since the last fight, primarily due to the thirty-third floor and the gauntlet of demons.

Anyway. If the first strike fails, try and try again.

Golden shockwaves rumbled from one side of the large throne room as the Fallen King let loose, releasing a barrage of interlaced blows. The Demon Lord scoffed and made a wide swing using both hands, releasing a crescent inferno, burning away the Unique Lifeform's attack... but also leaving him open from behind. An arrow struck the demon right in his mid-section, exploding upon the armor, slightly throwing off his balance.

Sylphie descended from above as a whirlwind fell upon him, cutting away like a meat grinder. Annoyed, the Demon Lord stomped, making fire erupt from the ground all around him, but the wind refused to let up.

Right as the flames from the stomp subsided, an old man dove through the hurricane, the wind simply passing harmlessly over his body. He aimed for the leg of the boss, who tried to kick him in response, but the foot was thoroughly stuck as a semi-burnt vine slithered up from the broken floor and held him down.

The sword struck true, cutting across the armor, leaving a thin slit but failing to fully penetrate.

“Armor slightly above the predicted level of durability,” the Sword Saint communicated through the golden mark.

Retreating, the old man got out of range from the follow-up strike from the demon as they both went out of the green whirlwind. Sylphie materialized with the boss out of her attack, not wanting to waste more energy than necessary as she kept herself safe.

The Sword Saint prepared to attack again as the Fallen King flew closer to join him. Sylphie also prepared to dive down from above as Jake aimed elsewhere. Rather than target the Demon Lord, he went for the giant floating crystal above the boss’ head, wings springing from his back as he approached it.

While the four others kept the Demon Lord busy, Jake would address the giant artifact. This was one of the strategies they had discussed already, and Jake quickly closed in on the Demon Lord’s Heart. The heat it gave off was intense, but Jake coated himself in scales and managed to get right up to it. As expected, then a barrier sprung up the moment he did, but Jake had come prepared.

Summoning his Blackpoint Blade, he stabbed forward. The special void-attuned blade impacted the barrier and, with a solid push, pierced through, allowing Jake to embed his arm. As it entered the barrier, he had to grit his teeth from the sheer heat sealed within. The scales began to slowly turn red,

and his flesh burned, but he managed to dismiss his katar, and with his arm pushed in all the way to his shoulder, he laid his hands on the actual Heart.

His hand began turning red, but luckily his legendary gloves empowered with Scales allowed him to hold on as he activated Touch of the Malefic Viper. He deployed the tried and tested strategy of just corrupting the living hell out of any energy source a boss used. It had worked against the Great White Stag, and he believed it would work here.

Below, the Demon Lord was pressed by the four people attacking, but he instantly noticed when Jake used Touch, confirming corrupting the Heart was a good idea. The demon's head whipped up as he allowed the Sword Saint to hit him, but he only roared as he jumped.

Or at least he tried to.

He had barely left the ground as a blast of force sent him flying off-course, missing Jake. Mid-air, the demon still released a wave of flames towards Jake, but a wall of roots speared up from the ground, blocking the fire completely.

Before the boss could even land, a green gust swept him up and sent him flying down toward the far end of the room. The King followed up, with the Sword Saint also joining in as crescent water blades, green wind blasts, and waves of force kept the demon at bay as Dina assured nothing the Demon Lord tried would reach Jake.

A heavy thumping noise came from the Demon Lord's Heart as it resisted Jake's infusion of energy, and he felt himself be connected to it and the vast amounts of fire affinity energy sealed within. As the Prime Consort said, the energy had accumulated for a long time. Even if the Demon Lord had absorbed some of it to heal himself – both to recover after being sealed and deal with the wounds their party had just given him – there was still so much left.

The heat intensified as the Heart tried to fight him off, but it was a losing battle. Touch of the Malefic Viper slowly took hold as wisps of dark green energy slithered into the artifact, and small veins of dark green began pulsing around Jake's hand as they began to mar the Heart's surface.

In the distance, the Demon Lord tried what it could, but the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint were going all out, having even partially activated their boosting skills to ensure the Demon Lord couldn't do anything. They had not fully activated their boosting skills yet, but they were running. Due to the Demon Lord focusing more on trying to get to Jake, they managed to land several worthwhile blows, but the Heart was still able to deliver energy despite Jake corrupting it.

Jake also knew he couldn't stop, or the corruption would be burned away. Purified by the flames. What energy the Demon Lord got was already purified, as only parts of the Heart had been corrupted so far. Given enough time, the corruption would reach a threshold where it could spread on its own, and when that happened, nothing the Demon Lord could do would be able to reverse the process. Even now, Jake could feel the connection between the Demon Lord and Heart waver. Yeah, Jake would only need a good minute mo-

"You wish to destroy the Heart!?" the Demon Lord roared as he released a large blast of fire, making everyone retreat for a moment. "Then I shall grant you your wish. I no longer need it."

The demon raised its hand in the direction of the Heart and grasped. Jake's danger sense went into overdrive as he tore his arm away from the Demon Lord's Heart and pushed off the barrier to launch himself backward right as it shattered.

For a moment, the entire world turned red. Jake was the first to get hit by the inferno as he crossed his arms in front of him and conjured a stable arcane barrier. It melted near-instantly, and Jake was prepared to take the hit as he suddenly felt as if a light breeze had hit him from behind. A green glow

surrounded him, followed by an odd orange sigil flashing from his body. As it did, he instantly felt the effects of the fire lessen significantly.

“Used Greater Firebane Talisman,” Dina spoke through the link. Yep, Jake had definitely forgotten they even had that reward from the thirty-first floor, but an hour of increased fire resistance was more than welcome.

Jake refocused and adjusted to the changed color palette of the throne room as everything was burning. Dina stood, giving off an intense aura as she held the flames at bay around Jake, the Sword Saint, and herself, while Sylphie and the Fallen King attacked the Demon Lord again, seemingly not caring much about the fire. The Fallen King, due to his barrier, and Sylphie, as she had also activated her overpowered defensive skill: Green Shield. He was pretty sure that wasn’t the actual name, but that is what she called it.

“One artifact down,” Jake sent encouragingly through the mark.

“The Demon Lord powered up after its destruction,” the Fallen King responded. “Likely due to the more favorable environment.”

This was all within expectations based on what the “people” they had met on the prior floors said. And while they did not have a direct counter to the overwhelming fire affinity domain, they did have one way to alleviate it.

The Sword Saint raised his sword towards the sky. What looked like clouds began to condense, unbothered by the flames. Rain began to fall as the drops evaporated long before they reached the ground, but rather than make the entire throne room into one big steam chamber, it was all absorbed back into the cloud as a new cycle began.

Jake took out his bow and winced as he held it. His right hand and entire arm were burnt to a crisp, flesh and bone showing at places, making it painful and difficult to hold the bow properly. Still, he soldiered through the pain and nocked an arrow to help Sylphie and the Fallen King.

Unblemished Arrows also worked wonders allowing his arrow to not be destroyed by the environment, and the pain in his arm proved short-lived. Dina pointed her staff at Jake and fired a green bolt of lightning at it, and the spot where it hit new flesh instantly began to grow as his arm regenerated in real-time from the infusion of life energy.

His arrows found purchase as the Demon Lord failed to dodge as he was preoccupied with the Fallen King, allowing the stable arrow to pierce the demon's cheek. He winced and unleashed his anger on the Fallen King, swinging faster than before and launching the Unique Lifeform backward.

Now only Sylphie was in melee with the Demon Lord. The Sword Saint had to focus on keeping the cycle of rainfall going, and if Dina stopped protecting them from the exploded Heart, they would all be in trouble. While the rain didn't look to do much at first glance, Jake felt the environmental fire mana rapidly weaken in intensity and the temperature drop. The Heart had finite energy, and even if the Demon Lord had unleashed it all at once, it would still run out of power if they kept this up.

The Demon Lord knew this and switched his target to the Sword Saint. With the Fallen King out of the way, Sylphie didn't stand a chance at stopping the large boss. With a wide swing, a massive wave of fire was sent out toward the Sword Saint. Dina conjured a green barrier, but it failed to block, and in the end, the Sword Saint had to jump back while releasing his own Rainblade slash into the flames to avoid getting injured.

Instantly, the raincloud began to shrink, making the Sword Saint raise his katana again to try and keep it going. Jake used One Step to try and cross the hall quickly, but the range was severely limited due to the fire domain, so he wasn't able to assist as the Demon Lord closed in on the old man.

In the end, the Sword Saint had to abandon what he was doing as the Demon Lord jumped while smashing his sword down toward the old man. Shifting his stance, the Sword Saint met the edge of the massive burning sword with his own and somehow managed to slightly divert its path, making it slam down beside the Sword Saint instead of right on top of him.

The blast from the impact still sent the old man reeling back, his robe burning. Above, the raincloud soon dispersed as the Demon Lord gave chase towards the Sword Saint. He managed to dodge and parry a few blows by diverting their paths, but the difference in sheer power was too big.

With an upwards slash, the Sword Saint was sent airborne, and a follow-up slash sent him tumbling, flying through the air with the upper portion of his robe burned off, seared flesh showing beneath. Luckily, Jake managed to get close before the Demon Lord could continue to attack further.

Jake released a Descending Dark Arcane Fang as he stabbed the demon, but the boss shifted his stance, making the katar hit armor, which it just skirted across, leaving a shallow cut. With a grin, the boss attempted to grab Jake, but he vaulted over the hand as he stabbed it once with his other weapon.

Annoyed, the Demon Lord focused on Jake, buying time for Dina to assist the Sword Saint and Sylphie and the Fallen King to stabilize. Sylphie had flown far up in the air and started their backup plan if the Sword Saint failed to address the heat.

A large whirlwind appeared towards the ceiling as a hurricane was born. The heat was rapidly being dragged in, lessening the pressure on everyone and ever-so-slightly weakening the Demon Lord himself. Jake kept staying close to the boss as the Fallen King summoned two golden hammers, which he promptly slammed into the side of the Demon Lord.

Cutting attacks seemed to have little effect due to the armor... but blunt force still did a good job as the boss slid across the floor from the impact, tearing up half-melted stone tiles in his path as a slight trickle of blood ran down his lip.

Up above, Sylphie had created a potent whirlwind that sucked in all of the flames spread out across the room, and as the Demon Lord stood up, he stared at the hawk for a moment.

“So be it, have it your way,” the Demon Lord said, standing tall as his aura subtly changed.

The crown of metallic thorns – another of the artifacts - began to light up as the Demon Lord spoke once more.

“You fight valiantly... but you seem to have forgotten. I am a Demon Lord, not a mere brute,” he said, spreading out his arms. As he did this, three large pentagrams appeared in the throne room, spread out towards the edges.

In the center of each circle, a demon more than four meters tall appeared. All three had slender bodies and were armored from top to bottom, not showing a single inch of flesh anywhere. Each also held a staff with a burning brazier at its end and a shield in the other hand. The three of them did not have any legs but simply floated slightly off the ground.

Jake threw one of the three a glance, already knowing what he was looking at.

[Tower Demon – lvl 260]

Each summoning circle flashed again as the Tower Demons raised their staffs, as four more demons appeared around them.

[Tower Guardian – lvl 250]

Each of these also gave off quite potent auras. They wore various pieces of equipment, making it clear that these three Tower Demons had essentially appeared with full parties.

Suddenly the fight had turned from Jake and company winning by teaming up to being thoroughly outnumbered. What is more... the Demon Lord broke one of the usual video game rules:

He didn't enter a passive state while the party was dealing with the adds.

Fortunately, they had somewhat planned for this.

"Now, the time of your doom approaches," the Demon Lord said as he raised his sword toward the sky. He was prepared to swing down and release a blast toward the Sword Saint and Dina as Jake appeared before him once more.

"Oh no, you don't," Jake grinned, kicking the arm of the demon, throwing off his aim.

His party spread out as Dina and the Sword Saint headed for one Tower Demon, the King another, and a green whirlwind the third.

That left Jake standing alone before the Demon Lord, who looked at him and scoffed. “You mean to face me alone, pathetic human?”

Jake grinned as he took a stance and infused his voice with Willpower, and activated Pride of the Malefic Viper to mentally attack the boss.

“I should ask you the same... you mean to face me alone, pathetic demon?”

For a moment, the Demon Lord just stared, making Jake wonder if his taunt had failed. Then, it was as if the large demon’s eyes were set ablaze as he roared and attacked, his entire body erupting in flames of anger.

Never mind... taunt succesful.

Chapter 683: Nevermore: Big Wind Meet Go Big Bang

Dealing with adds – short for additional or enemies that one had to fight alongside the boss - in any kind of encounter was always a bit annoying. In most cases, the boss would enter some charge-up phase during the fight with the adds, and Jake had kind of expected this to be the case during their planning. This turned out not to be the case, with Jake having the sneaking suspicion it was due to them allowing the artifacts to be empowered.

Yeah, that seemed like something Minaga would do. If they were sabotaged, the Demon Lord would be unable to summon anything. If they did nothing, the boss would channel the spell or something to

summon the Tower Demons, immobilizing himself for a while, and if they empowered him, they would have to face the boss and his minions all at the same time.

Alas, it was not entirely unexpected, so they had planned on taking advantage of one of their party's unique traits: individual excellence. Each of them could fight exceptionally well on their own, which is why they spread up with one person heading for a Tower Demon each. Dina would rotate and assist all three of them, but seeing as the Sword Saint was the most injured, she started out by helping him. If any person managed to kill their Tower Demon, they would then help the others.

It was a good plan with just one problem: the Demon Lord himself.

If he was also in full fighting condition, it would be a nightmare battling him alongside a Tower Demon, much less a Tower Demon with its four Guardians.

That is where Jake came in.

As shown with the Sword Saint earlier, no one could fight the Demon Lord alone and keep him preoccupied. No one but Jake. If there was one thing he was good at, beyond anyone else there, it was dealing with a foe far more powerful than himself. He didn't need to win... just buy time while keeping the Demon Lord focused on him as the four others killed the Tower Demons.

That is why he went straight to taunting. While repeatedly proving himself a threat and dealing damage was one way to keep the Demon Lord on his ass, constant insults and attempted "attacks" using Pride also did wonders. In fact, it maybe worked a bit too well.

"HOW DARE YOU!?" the Demon Lord roared as he slammed his sword into the ground, exploding the area around him. Jake had already stepped down and teleported out of range, but the demon was relentless.

"How dare you ask if I dare!?" Jake yelled in response.

Several swift swings aimed to decapitate Jake as he dodged in between them, never allowing himself to be caught in any combo. His boosting skill was already active at the offensive 50%, as that also increased Agility, his most important stat at the moment.

"You!" the boss groaned as several magic circles appeared around him, the crown glowing as magic manifested. The casting had only taken a brief moment, and several flamethrowers were released in Jake's direction in concert with the demon's charge.

"Yes, you!"

Jake met the boss in his charge. A quick barrier of stable arcane mana was enough to slightly divert some flames, opening a path for Jake to dodge. As he slid under the legs of his opponent, he managed to wrap a string of arcane mana around it that he swiftly pulled on.

The demon was only slightly yanked before cutting the mana rope, but the action alone clearly annoyed him. Seemingly keeping his cool – as much as a Demon Lord on fire could – he shifted his stance slightly.

"For your insolence... death."

Jake's danger sense reacted as he barely managed to avoid the stab going straight for him. Still mid-dodge, the angle of the blade shifted, the direction changing in an attempt to bisect him. Using his katars, he managed to block and redirect the momentum to launch himself back. Yet just as he thought he was safe, the boss pointed a finger in his direction.

Crossing his katars in front of his chest, he blocked as a small red beam was fired out. It had no physical impact as it hit his katars, but Jake instantly felt both weapons heat up to a ridiculous degree, burning his palms even through the gloves.

Focusing, he had Eternal Hunger react as it was momentarily bathed in a shadowy aura; the heat instantly consumed, and just in time, too, as he dodged another beam, followed by a wide swing from the Demon Lord.

Not as easy as I thought, but...

"I am still waiting over here," Jake said as he bent his back to dodge, looking like he was going for the world record in limbo. "When is that death coming?"

He didn't get a response as the boss kept up its rapid attacks. They were a lot faster than before, the demon no longer going for massive damage but just catching out Jake. It was waiting for him to make a mistake or take him by surprise with an otherwise unseen move.

Sadly for the dear demon, it had chosen the worst opponent imaginable. Granted, the Demon Lord was a lot more powerful than Jake, and in a one versus one, he would have to fight far differently and take significant risks, but if all he had to do was buy time, this was easy enough. If things did get a bit too hairy, he still had Eternal Shadow too.

No, for now, he was just happy with building up Hunting Momentum. His one annoyance was that none of the poison he had infused into the Demon Lord had managed to stick. The internal fire energy had simply burned it away too quickly.

As the fight went on, Jake even began to land a few minor counterattacks. Not with the intent to do damage, mind you. He just wanted to keep the Demon Lord mad at him. The taunts also did wonders.

"I think my death is late? Still can't find it. I guess the deliverer is just incompetent..."

The angry demon roared in response, as Jake just grinned. He didn't have time to look at what was happening elsewhere in the throne room, but he believed that his party was doing their jobs just fine.

Sylphie didn't like Horny Red Guy, and she definitely didn't like Horny Red Guy's house. Sylphie was smart, so she, of course, knew that no one needed their house to be that hot and she also knew how rude it was to make it super hot when inviting friends. Even if Sylphie & Friends were not really guests, she still thought it was super rude to anyone who did just come to visit.

At least she had managed to help make the house less hot, even if it had made Horny Red Guy super mad. But that was okay because Horny Red Guy was one of the baddies, and making baddies mad was good.

She was a bit worried about Uncle when he wanted to touch the big red glowy thing, especially when it began burning him, but she had to follow the plan. Sylphie was the best at following plans, after all. Plans were good; Slashy Saint said that many times. Slashy Saint was also pretty smart – not as smart as Sylphie – but probably a bit smarter than Uncle. Uncle wasn't very smart, after all.

He hadn't even used his Smelly Pot to defeat the baddies yet.

Then again, saving your secret weapon was kind of smart. Sylphie saved her own, but that was mainly because using her secret move made her very tired, and she didn't want to nap right now. Not before she was done following the brilliant plan made up by Sylphie & Friends to kill the Tower Guy. Tower Guy wasn't actually a tower, but Flower Lady also didn't look like a tree despite smelling of one, so Sylphie knew sometimes things weren't as they appeared.

Tower Guy was still super tower-like, though, as he didn't care much about Sylphie's wind. Sylphie also had to fight the Tower Guy with four other baddies, so she knew she had to be careful. She tried her way as she ensured the baddies couldn't go anywhere to help the Horny Red Guy who was fighting Uncle. It also helped make her invisible when the big tornado was there, so it was definitely smart to use.

The Tower Guy was not nice. He used his fire stick to shoot stuff at Sylphie, and all of the other baddies also tried to stop her from flying around. They were not super fast like her, but they slowly began to ruin her wind, which was rude. In fact, Sylphie had deduced that all these red guys were rude.

Sylphie tried a bunch of stuff, but the Tower Guy was too tower-like and made all of Sylphie's attacks not as good as Sylphie would have liked. The other baddies also worked together, and one of them even healed her attacks, which was even more rude than the ones ruining her wind. She thought really hard, and without using her super secret skill, she decided to still use one she didn't like that much because it was super-duper hard to use. But at least the Tower Guy stood still, so maybe it would work. That was one of the good things about towers.

Flying even faster than before, Sylphie began to make herself more windy. At the same time, she also summoned another wind that was even more windy than her usual winds. She wanted these winds to be as windy as they possibly could. It got so windy that the baddies decided to try and stop Sylphie, not

knowing that was dumb. They were definitely not as smart as Uncle or the other members of Sylphie & Friends, as they all knew that when Sylphie made herself into a super wind while making another super wind, they had to go away.

The wind got faster and faster, tiring Sylphie out a bit, but she had to do it for her kinda super skill to work. Then, the wind – not her own super winds, the big wind that was everywhere – told her that her two winds were windy enough. That was good; that meant Sylphie could do the Big Bang.

Sylphie focused super hard as she flew away from the baddies while also pushing away the other super wind. Then, she made herself and the super wind turn around. Sylphie didn't like the skill because it was so hard to use, but Big Wind Meet Go Big Bang was good. The real name was super boring, though.

[Sylphian Storm Convergence (Legendary)]

The Sword Saint struggled a bit with the pain as he stayed on the defensive as Dina healed him up. It was difficult to accept, but he was the least durable member of their party, and the matchup of fire affinity and his own water was a bit of a double-edged sword. While his rain-based attacks were incredibly effective, he was also very susceptible to fire-based attacks, which is how he got into his current predicament of needing quite a lot of healing. The Demon Lord was simply too powerful for him to face alone due to the large sweeping attacks and their area of effect.

Fighting the Tower Demon and the four demons alongside it was a reprieve, especially considering he had Dina help him. As he was healed and began to feel better, Miyamoto went on the offensive, targeting down the fire healer in the group of summoned demons. Dina assisted him by restricting two Guardians, allowing him to land several blows before he had to disengage due to the Tower Demon. The demon in question was capable of summoning fire beasts of some sort and, using its brazier staff, released barrages of fireballs constantly.

Nevertheless, after he pushed his boosting skill a bit further, they firmly had the upper hand. As the sole group of two, they were meant to quickly finish the Tower Demon to go and assist the others. Miyamoto was especially worried about Jake, who had to face the Demon Lord on his lonesome.

Using Rainblade on full power, he cut an arm off one of the demons as he turned and pointed his sword at the healer. Droplets appeared in a line as he used his Erosion Stab. Time slightly warped as he lunged, and even through a barrier, the head of the demon was pierced. Before any of the other demons could assist, he pivoted and beheaded the first of the demons. He was about to get struck from behind as vines shot up and pushed away two demons while simultaneously blocking a blast of fire from the Tower Demon.

Just as he was about to move in and strike another demon, a powerful gust of wind swept through the entire throne room, buffeted and warped by the large pillars.

Miyamoto couldn't help but throw what was happening a glance. Despite the pillars, he had a clear line of sight. What he saw looked like two giant swirling waves flying around the demons, the swirling winds looking like they were trapped within a larger tornado. One of them gave off the aura of Sylphie herself, and the other was controlled by her, flying opposite – almost mirrored – to her own movements.

Then, she changed direction. The entire tornado expanded as these two waves went their opposite directions before Sylphie promptly turned in the air and began flying directly back toward the demons trapped in the middle of it all. The other massive wave-like gust of wind once more mirrored her movements.

Like two oceans meeting, the winds clashed. For a moment, it felt as if all of the air in the entire chamber had been sucked out, and even the brazier of the Tower Demon before the Sword Saint was momentarily extinguished.

Then, just as the air had all gathered, it exploded outwards in a flash of green lightning that forced all of them to put up defenses. At least the Sword Saint momentarily thought he had to until he remembered her words. The lightning actively avoided any of Sylphie's party members, as they, according to her, were "wind friends," so her wind wouldn't hurt them. That apparently also extended to this green lightning.

Sylphie's attack had momentarily made them all stop in their movements, and the Sword Saint threw one more glance to see the aftermath. What he saw was a giant crack formed across the entire back wall, floor, and even ceiling right where the two massive waves of wind had clashed... two demons, now cut in four, laying alongside the fissure, both cut in two from head to groin as they had stood right where the clash took place.

Even the Tower Demon had lost an arm as it had failed to move away in time. Miyamoto had barely taken in the sight when the green wind descended on the Tower Demon once more. Despite having just landed a massive blow, she instantly resumed her attack.

Shaking his head, the Sword Saint flashed a smirk.

A bit embarrassing to see myself outdone by such a young one... and I even have help, he thought to himself. Taking a deep breath, he shifted his stance slightly as his boosting skill fully activated, and the rain descended from above, defying the fiery environment.

The demon screamed as the Fallen King crushed it against the wall as he tore the legs off another with a Golden Claw. Finally, he had broken the formation of the annoying demons, but before he could finish off his target, the Tower Demon lunged forward, swinging its staff.

Contrary to the others, this Tower Demon happily engaged in melee. Not that the Fallen King found this unfortunate, as he gladly proved his defenses were superior as he summoned a rectangular golden barrier to block as he pushed on it, the golden energy still connected to him.

Annoyingly, it allowed the demon to get some distance, even without its legs. Spreading his aura, the Fallen King faintly put pressure on them all as he directly attacked their souls. He felt their relative fragility and gladly took advantage.

Turning his attention back to the demon embedded in the wall, the King showed no mercy. A charged beam fired towards his stuck opponent, blasting a hole in the wall as the entire torso of the demon was blown to smithereens. Just as he prepared to attack again, the wind swept past.

The Fallen King felt the Sylphian's power as it proved its dominance over the demons. An acceptable display of power by the party member he had been the most skeptical about, but her rapid growth and power had won him over. Though perhaps it was to be expected. She was a creation of the little hunter, after all. Considering the power of the Cosmic Worm and the True Royal...

How could his firstborn possibly be weak?

Chapter 684: Nevermore: Third Phase

Jake ignored all the happenings around him for the most part, though it was a bit distracting with the flashing golden lights, giant raincloud, and what sounded like a category-five tornado. The Demon Lord also clearly noticed his summoned help was being pressured and was several times about to go help one of the Tower Demons, forcing Jake to pull the big guy's attention back on him.

"You dare try and run away!?" Jake yelled as the Demon Lord took a single step in the direction of the Sword Saint. Enraged, the boss attacked, but he still seemed a bit distracted by all the other fights. Jake easily dodged the blow, but the boss only did a lazy follow-up as Jake felt himself lose his opponent's attention.

Perhaps I was a bit too relaxed offensively, Jake surmised.

If that was the case...

Charging forward, Jake took advantage of the Demon Lord being partly distracted. With full power, he thrust both katars into the chest of the Demon Lord, sending the demon skirting back from the impact. His blow did little, and yet he charged in again as the annoyed boss tried to swipe him away. Jake grinned as the hand approached as he made his move.

Jake jumped straight up with Eternal Hunger aimed at the Demon Lord's one eye. At the same time, another version of himself simply took a step forward and placed a hand glowing dark green on the armored chest of the demon. As expected, his opponent went for the version of Jake aiming for its head, the Jake below even obscured from vision by his jumping clone.

At the very last moment, the jumping version stabbed toward the hand trying to grab him, as the Demon Lord happily took that trade. Two katars penetrated flesh in exchange for grabbing the annoying human that had pestered and insulted him? Why would he not go for that?

"I got yo-"

The moment the boss closed his hand, Jake turned into black mist. Confused, the Demon Lord tried to figure out what was going on, as it was only then he seemed to notice the other Jake standing with a hand on his armor.

It took the Demon Lord a moment to act as he just stared at Jake, looking back up at him with a grin on his face.

"Blind as a bat," Jake said, not even bothering to infuse his voice with Willpower. He didn't need Pride to make this taunt work.

The demon's expression warped as he roared, Jake already jumping back as he landed and teleported even further away. Right as he landed, the Demon Lord charged, swinging his blade widely, making Jake once more go fully on the defensive.

"Actually, that was rude. Bats aren't even blind," Jake muttered as he dodged a large swing, closing in and briefly touching the same spot as before as Touch activated once more.

In an attempt to crush him, the Demon Lord summoned a giant seal of fire above himself and brought it all down, exploding an area nearly fifty meters in diameter. Jake had already teleported away, and the moment the flames subsided, he stepped down once more and teleported into melee, dodged under a punch, and once more gave the boss a poke with Touch.

"Yeah, you are worse than a bat. Wait, do you even know what bats are? Probably not. You don't strike me as the clever sort," Jake kept talking as he dodged attack after attack.

"Silence, you pathetic vermin!" the Demon Lord roared as he quite literally breathed fire.

"Wow, yeah, that is nearly correct; some do classify bats as vermin. Some also call them flying rats. Or mice. Not sure. Either way, good job; I am proud of you," Jake said in a mocking tone.

"I said silence!" the boss said, slamming his sword into the floor, sending tiles and fire flying everywhere. Jake had already jumped and protected himself with an arcane barrier as he prepared himself for the next blow.

"Silence? Nah, I don't think so. Unless you want to start by listening to me first?" Jake grinned. The Demon Lord stabbed toward Jake, but he once more used Eternal Shadow to split himself as his two versions dodged to either side of the wide blade.

The demon looked momentarily confused at seeing him split in two and failed to respond as Jake landed his next blow. This one was purely mental in nature.

"Could you-" the real Jake said as he kicked the Demon Lord in the face for no real damage.

"-be nice-" his Eternal Shadow followed up as he kicked the other chin.

Angry, the boss went for the real Jake, and as he tried to grab him, Jake used the Demon Lord's own chin as a stepping stone to activate One Step.

"-and stop-" Jake said just as he teleported away.

The Eternal Shadow didn't have time to finish as the Demon Lord summoned a magic circle and blasted the clone away, leaving only the real Jake. Rather than attack again, Jake just stood there and stared at the Demon Lord as the boss seemed to be waiting for something. After nearly two full seconds, the boss groaned.

"What did you dare attempt to ask me?"

"Oh, not telling you now when you so rudely interrupted," Jake said, acting extremely offended. "Calling yourself a Demon Lord and having the manners of a common... wait, what is the name of a really low-tier demon vermin? Actually, never mind, let's just use that."

"Use what?"

Jake smiled. "Your new name. Rather than call yourself Demon Lord... I shall henceforth refer to you as Demon Vermin."

The Demon Lord – or Demon Vermin - flinched, but the taunting seemed to no longer be as effective as he didn't attack in a rage anymore. Jake also understood why. At the other side of the room, the final Tower Guardian was about to be torn apart as the Sword Saint and Dina proved themselves the slowest at killing their assigned enemies. With Sylphie and the Fallen King joining, the cleanup was swift, and the boss knew it.

He knew he would soon face their full party again.

They seemed to have entered a lull as Jake took the chance to properly catch his breath and allow what minor burns he had suffered to fully heal. He was lucky that his Hunting Momentum gave him some leeway to take minor damage because completely avoiding everything had been impossible.

From behind Jake, his party all approached. They looked a bit worse for wear but were otherwise still fine. He did see they had all used their boosting skills to some extent, which put them on a timer.

"Everyone is good?" Jake asked through the golden mark.

"Acceptable, but mana has been dropping fast," the King answered.

"Better than ten minutes ago," the Sword Saint said, now at least healed.

"Fine," Dina answered shortly.

"Ree," Sylphie explained, making Jake know that she was also a bit low on resources but otherwise fine.

"The three towers have fallen... my castle is in shambles," the Demon Lord said, having once more entered his scripted boss-dialogue portion of the encounter. He turned his gaze towards the party as Jake knew they were about to enter the third phase of this boss fight. "You have ruined everything. As such... I shall ruin you in return."

"Go!" Jake said, his danger sense warning him. He pulled out his bow, and the four others all attacked instantly as the Demon Lord's armor began shining and expanding, covering his entire body as he raised his sword high.

"Behold..."

The sword began to shine bright red as it seemed to resonate with the entire hall. The four massive pillars around the throne room then suddenly began to shake as spiderweb cracks appeared all over them, each pulsing with energy.

"Ruination."

Four pillars exploded as each released an inferno upon their destruction. The ceiling began crumbling, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was about to happen.

"The fucker is bringing down the entire castle," Jake cursed.

"No," Dina said with a resolute voice. "We will end it here."

Jake felt her determination and grinned. "Then let's fucking go. No holding back."

Nobody knew what the next phase of this fight was supposed to be, and they didn't see any need to. All of their boosting skills activated at full power, Jake gladly pushing his Arcane Awakening to the maximum 60%. They all powered up significantly, but one more than the others.

Dina's body erupted with power as her aura rapidly spiked. Bobo, her living armor, grew to cover even more parts of her body and changed shape to resemble a dress filled with glowing green rune scripts. The small outgrowths on her head rapidly grew into large wooden antlers. Even her vine hair grew in length as more and more flowers bloomed upon it. She even grew a few centimeters as she transformed.

Lifting her staff, she slammed it into the ground.

"Nature, heed my call."

A green fissure spread from the impact of the staff as the entire floor erupted. Thousands of vines speared up from nothingness. The collapsing pillars were suddenly reinforced as a network of vines invaded them, stitching together the collapsing stone. These vines were teeming with pure life, capable of fighting off the heat.

As fast as the collapse of the castle had begun, Dina had stopped it dead in its tracks. The Demon Lord stared with confusion at the transformed Dina as she pointed her staff at the boss, his eyes barely visible through the helmet that now covered his head.

A massive trunk erupted from the ground and smashed into the demon, sending him flying as he smashed into the wall at the far end of the hall. Before he had time to extract himself, the entire wall behind him exploded as hundreds of thick vines wrapped themselves around him, aiming to crush his body.

Fortunately – at least in Jake’s eyes – the Demon Lord would not fall that easily. An orange glow came from within the mass of vines as a large cut was made, burning a path. Out of this path walked the Demon Lord, fully covered in his black armor and holding his large sword. The crown had seemingly merged with the armor, and Jake felt the boss was stronger than ever.

What is more, the fire affinity mana in the air had rapidly decreased. But it was not gone. Instead, the Demon Lord had absorbed it through his body and into his sword. It appeared that even within collapsing the castle, the boss had still powered up fully.

However, even if he had gotten stronger, their group had also used their own boosting skills. Jake observed the boss walking towards them as he observed the armor closely. He smiled as his suspicions were affirmed, and he relayed his plan.

They were on board.

No more holding back now.

“Your pathetic attempt to-”

He didn’t manage to get further as a giant golden hammer descended from above, smashing him into the ground and forcing him down on his knee. A tornado descended from above right after, increasing the pressure further as Jake released a Powershot aimed straight for the chest of the Demon Lord. The arrow exploded on impact, leaving a mark a bit bigger than usual. That was the last confirmation Jake needed.

The Sword Saint stormed forward too, and in a single instant, he released a dozen of minor slashes all across the armor, leaving small knicks here and there. Their attack had done little damage as the Demon Lord smashed his fist into the ground, momentarily summoning a giant formation all around him as the crown shone bright red.

A fiery explosion erupted, but the combination of a green wind and pure nature affinity mana heavily weakened the blow, allowing the Fallen King and Sword Saint to not even bother retreating as both attacked. Jake coated several arrows with his blood – to use a specific type of poison in mind he didn't have a good version of – and began to let loose arrow after arrow, aiming at the same spot on the Demon Lord's armor every time.

Seeing his first attack had failed primarily due to Dina, the boss quickly directed his anger toward her. She seemed ready for his charge, and so was the King, which is why they were taken by surprise when the Demon Lord didn't go after her physically. Instead, he pointed his sword her way as it shot forward, piercing straight for her chest.

Dina hastily erected a barrier of roots as Bobo also reacted and formed a shield of green life-filled wood. The sword pierced both barriers before exploding, sending a burning Dina flying through the air. For a moment, Jake was worried, but with a green flash, the fire was all extinguished, and her slightly burned form emerged.

The thrown sword from the demon wasn't just idle after it exploded. Rather than return, it seemed to take on a life of its own, flying straight toward Jake as the boss controlled it somehow. Without his sword, the Demon Lord had lost his most potent offensive measure, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. With both fists raised, he began punching, showing the skill of a talented pugilist as he pressured both the Sword Saint and Fallen King.

He also began to use even more fire magic, even if it was clear this was not his forte. Jake kept going with his ranged attacks, and the Demon Lord ignored him for the most part, as none of his arrows managed to do any worthwhile damage. At least not in the eyes of the boss.

The improved full-body armor truly made the Demon Lord into a living fortress, with their attacks doing limited damage. The only good thing was that blunt damage still proved effective, making the Fallen King their primary damage dealer as he pummelled the demon over and over again with giant golden hammers. The Sword Saint went for precise cuts around the joints of the armor, but even that proved nearly impossible. Slashing damage simply wasn't cutting it.

Even the Fallen King had issues getting through, and Jake had to try and get potshots off in between dodging the flying flaming sword that had an annoying tendency to explode whenever it got close to him. Luckily, Dina rejoined and began to help assist Jake and the others, though it proved difficult for her to handle the sword. That is where Sylphie came in. She had difficulty doing much to the Demon Lord, but the flying sword? That she could handle, as she began to throw it around the room with massive gusts of wind, pretty much nullifying it. Even when the Demon Lord wanted to recall it, Sylphie kept it away, primarily by using the large pillars to hide it behind.

Even so, as the battle dragged on, their party didn't do a significant amount of noticeable damage to the Demon Lord. In fact, he seemed to slowly be getting the upper hand. Their resources were dwindling faster than his health pool, their boosting skills couldn't be sustained forever, and the Sword Saint even had to drink a health potion after getting hit by the boss and having his one arm get pretty fucked up.

Not that it was a problem... because they had a strategy. Minutes passed as a status quo was established, with them all primarily defending as Jake kept just shooting his seemingly useless arrows. Sylphie and Dina focused solely on making sure no one was injured further, with Dina nullifying the demon's magic, with Sylphie handling the flying sword.

This kept going a bit longer, but soon enough, Jake got a gut feeling, and his skill also confirmed it. It's enough now.

It was time to finish this.

Without hesitation, he spoke through the golden mark.

"Now."

Chapter 685: Nevermore: Evil Demon Sword Gubrothas

"Now."

Instantly, their entire party shifted their movements. The Sword Saint retreated back as Sylphie summoned a tornado that completely sealed the movements of the sword. At the same time, roots appeared from below and slithered up the legs of the boss as the Fallen King threw out two chains, catching both arms of the Demon Lord. In an instant, the boss had its movement entirely sealed. They all knew he could break out within a second... but they wouldn't give him a second.

Jake dismissed his bow as he used One Step and appeared right in front of the boss, both katars already out. Eternal Hunger stabbed forward against the otherwise impenetrable armor, but the expected did not happen. He felt the surprise of the Demon Lord as the katar managed to penetrate the armor by several centimeters. It was only now that the boss noticed what Jake had been doing. The spot he had used Touch of the Malefic Viper on during their one-versus-one had turned into an even darker shade than anywhere else, and his repeated poisoned arrow had only made it worse. Jake had used a type of poison he hadn't really ever used before:

Corrosive poison.

Ever-so-slowly, Jake had made that spot of the armor brittle and weak. Weak enough for his weapons to penetrate through. For a brief moment, Jake made eye contact with the Demon Lord as he flashed a smile and punched with the other hand with the Blackpoint Blade, pouring in all of his Hunting

Momentum. The katar shot forward with his full power as a huge section of armor shattered, the blade penetrating all the way to the handle.

Not done yet.

The enchantment of the Blackpoint Blade activated as an explosion resounded within the armor, sending blood and metal flying, Jake having just opened a bucket-sized hole in the Demon Lord's chest and sending cracks forming all across the armor. What's more... Jake was just the armor-breaker.

Pulling his katar out of the demon's body, Jake ducked as an old man materialized right behind him, a hand on the handle of his sword, ready to draw. His entire aura began to change as a pressure descended upon the half-ruined throne room, one that even gave Jake pause and reminded him of the duel he had with the Sword Saint way back in the Treasure Hunt.

And like back then, the old man also began to change. His features softened, his hair grew, and his muscles got toned as his entire body was revitalized. In an instant, the Sword Saint had gone from an old man to someone in his prime, and in that same instant, he drew his blade.

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

Jake felt the flash pass over him as the entire world seemed to freeze for a moment. There was no big explosion but simply a slash that left wayward raindrops in its wake. The second the swing was over, the Sword Saint rapidly aged, returning to normal.

In the distance, a loud crack was heard. Two of the massive pillars in front of them began to fall apart once more as a fine line had been cut straight through them, and just as Jake heard the crack, he was hit by a shower of blood from the Demon Lord.

Then, he saw the top part of the torso begin to slowly slide to one side. With the armor of the Demon Lord broken and his movements still sealed, the boss had been utterly incapable of defending himself, resulting in him being bisected right above his stomach. Even the arms had a deep cut into the armor, though even the Transcendent skill had failed to fully cut through, truly showing how utterly ridiculous the armor was.

However, even as the fight seemed over, Jake did not let his guard down. None of them did. Because they still hadn't gotten any notification.

The shining red flames in the Demon Lord's eyes had been extinguished, but Jake still felt power radiate from his body.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, using the golden mark as Jake's eyes opened wide. Luckily for them, they had all spent enough time with her to know what her warning meant as they, in concert, retreated from the "corpse" of the Demon Lord.

From afar, the sword of the Demon Lord pierced through one of the pillars as it shot straight for the boss. It slammed down onto the corpse, releasing a massive explosion. Fire bathed the entire room as Dina put up a defensive barrier, with Jake staring through the flames to see what was happening.

He saw the sword stab straight into the armor as it began melting and getting absorbed by the sword. The metal crown also began to shine brightly as it floated up and merged with the handle. Within less than a second, the entire armor was reduced to nothing, and the only thing left was the Demon Lord's body which swiftly turned to an odd red energy that was promptly dragged into the handle, where a red

gem appeared, looking eerily like an eye. Coupled with the already absorbed energy from the broken Heart of the Demon Lord, every single artifact had now combined.

More than that, the merged sword now gave off the aura of the Demon Lord. However, it was far weaker, and Jake instantly knew what was about to happen as arcane mana began to gather in his hands.

"I lost... but I shall return! Reborn stronger than ever!" the voice of the Demon Lord echoed from the sword as a magic circle appeared around it.

"Not gonna happen," Jake yelled, his voice infused with the Willpower and Pride of the Malefic Viper as he unleashed the arcane mana to disrupt the teleportation.

He was not the only one, either.

A green wind also swept through the circle from Sylphie, a crescent wave of water was sent out by the Sword Saint, and an odd golden beam was released by the Fallen King, that one aimed at the sword itself. Dina had been the one who was most prepared as she pointed her staff, and a large green magical circle seemed to superimpose itself upon the Demon Lord's.

"NO!" the boss screamed as the teleportation circle was utterly broken apart. The sword was also slightly destabilized, but it seemed that even if teleportation was not an option, the Demon Lord refused to surrender. Shooting upwards, the sword tried to escape, but this was when Dina's move to not allow the castle to collapse came in handy.

While the sword could get through the ceiling at some point, it couldn't just strike through. Dina also made it even harder as she sent forth an army of vines trying to snatch up the merged artifact, with Sylphie easily catching up with her high speed.

With her there, the wind became the enemy of the Demon Lord. A tornado was summoned that began to drag the blade downwards, and when the Fallen King also joined, he summoned more large chains of golden force. As the sword struggled, the Fallen King restricted it with chains using one hand and created a barrier all around it with the other. The Demon Lord within the sword seemed to realize escape was not possible right away, but they all knew the demon was looking for a chance to escape, likely even gathering energy within the blade for an attempt.

Floating down to the ground with the sealed-in sword, the Demon Lord could still speak.

"You may be able to keep me trapped for now... but so what? I will return once more. With my soul sealed within the sword, the moment my body has regenerated through my innate power as a Demon Lord, your lives shall be mine and the final resistance to my rule slaughtered. And there is nothing you can do," the boss said.

"Are you so sure about that?" Jake asked while walking forward with Eternal Hunger in his hand.

As he walked, he began to slowly change the shape of the weapon. Changing the shape of the mythical weapon wasn't practical mid-combat due to how long it took and how the weapon required a period to stabilize, but with the sealed Demon Lord, that wasn't an issue. He allowed it to turn all smudgy, looking almost like a black ferrofluid that stuck to his arm.

"I do not fear your pathetic threats. Release me, and I shall swear that our next encounter will truly be our last," the Demon Lord semi-threatened, semi-promised.

“No... no, I don’t think we will,” Jake smiled as he looked at the Fallen King. The Unique Lifeform nodded with recognition.

While the Demon Lord transforming into a sword was not part of the plan, they did make a strategy for what would happen when the Demon Lord” died.” They knew some energy would remain, and they had even expected the demon would try and resurrect again in some way by safekeeping parts of its soul somehow.

Too bad for the Demon Lord; it faced two monsters. One wielding a weapon capable of absorbing all kinds of energies. Eternal Hunger would consume any energy it could, the curse never able to be truly sated. Considering it also consumed the souls of those killed, it was the perfect weapon to truly kill a Demon Lord.

When a Demon Lord died, its Truesoul would disperse, leaving behind just energy and a shattered soul embedded within that energy. Based on what Dina said, The unique Demon Lord energy was something no one truly knew how to control or manipulate. All they knew was that given enough time, a new Demon Lord would spawn somewhere in the relative vicinity of where one died. Sometimes it was as far away as on the other side of a planet, and other times it would be right where the original died. With this knowledge, it was only natural Demon Lords such as the boss had found some ways to influence their resurrection, and the Demon Lord entering the sword right before he truly died was clearly one such method.

Jake theorized Gubrothas would flee somewhere else before using some special method unique to him to reforge his body. A good plan that had only failed to take into account that the party he faced had a Unique Lifeform specialized in soul magic and Jake wielding his mythical weapon that loved eating souls and energy.

The Fallen King laid his claw on the blade on the sword as Dina assisted with keeping it sealed in his stead. Golden light erupted as a shockwave of soul magic went through the sword as the voice of the Demon Lord echoed.

“You... you dare try to extinguish my soul!? You will fail, and as your power wanes, I shall escape.”

He was probably right on that one. The Demon Lord was quite hard to fully get rid of. Breaking the sword wasn't an option either, as with the demon inside, it was still a bound weapon and a powerful artifact, making Jake's Alchemical Flame useless as that only worked on passive objects. The Fallen King truly would lose the battle of attrition as the Demon Lord could consume energy to fight off the Unique Lifeform till the King had to stop due to overusing his boosting skill.

That is where Jake came in. Kneeling down, Jake placed his hand on the gem of the sword as Eternal Hunger slowly took shape, almost using the Demon Lord's sword as a mold. Dark energy began to emanate from the mythical weapon as the metal formed a hand, grasping around the Demon Lord gem.

Jake took a deep breath and closed his eyes. This was not something he had tried before... but he knew he could do it. He did not even hear when the Demon Lord taunted him as he truly connected himself to Eternal Hunger. Resonated himself with it.

In his mind's eye, the curse manifested. At first, it was an undefined mass of pure curse energy, but it soon gathered and took shape as his Eternal Shadow manifested. In the real world, his entire body momentarily gave off curse energy as his figure was superimposed with the Eternal Shadow.

“Go,” he spoke to himself. His other self. The Eternal Shadow slightly shifted before it turned into black energy that drilled into the blade through Eternal Hunger.

“I told you, tha- WHAT IS-”

In an instant, the entire sword turned black and began to emanate dark smoke as the red light in the gem faded. Cracks formed all over the merged artifact, and all Jake heard was the echoing screams of the Demon Lord within his mind as the entire sword shattered, broken pieces of metal devoid of energy falling to the ground.

Kill message: *You have slain [Demon Lord – lvl 270] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level*

’ DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 217 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

’ DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 218 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

’ DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 214 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

With a slight nudge, Eternal Hunger began to once more warp into a katar as Jake stood up. Everyone looked at him, especially the Fallen King giving off an incredulous vibe.

“You did not need my assistance,” the Unique Lifeform spoke.

"Thought I would," Jake smirked, looking at the mythical weapon slowly warping and reforming in his hand.

"That weapon of yours is a disaster waiting to happen. I felt the pure gluttony emanating from it. An unstoppable desire that can never be satisfied," the Fallen King said.

"It's a Sin weapon, isn't it?" Dina asked, getting a nod from Jake. "My grandfather spoke of them. They are rare and powerful but often avoided due to their tendency to negatively influence the wielder. But... I have never heard of one taking on a human shape like that. Another trait they tend to have is also how uncontrollable they are, so how did you manage to direct it into the Demon Lord's sword, much less have it take that shape?"

Jake didn't feel like sharing his entire story about his other self – sim-Jake – who had become one with the weapon, so he just smiled. "Its instinct is to hunt, and I offered a feast."

Dina frowned. "That does not explain the shape..."

"Let's just say we have a close connection."

"It was also too efficient... almost like it had a mind of its own. No, not quite a mind... but close?" Dina muttered.

"Let's leave it at that," the Sword Saint said as he smiled. He looked at the broken pieces of metal on the ground and patted Jake on the shoulder. "Good job."

Jake smiled. "You too."

He had to admit, things had gone far more smoothly than he could have ever predicted. The original plan had been for the Fallen King and Dina to gather all the energy of the Demon Lord right after he died before it had time to spread. The King would shatter the Demon Lord's soul, with Jake potentially helping with Gaze. Using Eternal Hunger, Jake would then slowly absorb all the energy, along with the soul fragments.

What had instead happened was Jake connecting Eternal Hunger with the sword the Demon Lord had sealed himself within. He had pushed in the curse energy through the mythical weapon, which had manifested as his Eternal Shadow. The Eternal Shadow had then effectively entered the "space" the Demon Lord resided in within the sword, slain him, and devoured every single speck of energy in the merged artifact.

All within a second.

Jake knew what set his Sin curse apart from any others. Usually, a Sin curse was just one singular desire. All Eternal Hunger had been about was eating. But Jake's curse had warped. Sin-Jake had introduced another element:

Instinct.

Proper instinct. Jake's own instinct. It was merged with him, after all. This meant that contrary to what the textbooks said about Sin curses, Jake's version would follow his own will.

In some ways, sealing himself within an item had been the worst thing the Demon Lord could do against Eternal Hunger. It allowed the curse to face him directly – a curse holding energy far above what a C-grade could possibly face.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she had also flown down and landed on top of Jake's head.

"Yeah, I think that is a good idea," Jake smiled.

Looking at their party, they all looked worse for wear. Jake also knew that the instant they released all their boosting skills, they would all be tired as fuck. Also, they had something important to do:

Celebrate.

And Jake knew just the place as he released a Pulse of Perception and saw a formerly hidden gateway had been revealed.

"Drinks are on me when we get to the lounge," Jake smiled.

"I thought they were provided freely?" the Sword Saint asked, looking genuinely confused.

"Exactly," Jake grinned.

Soon after, they all made their way to the gateway that led to the in-between room. It was time to see their rewards for this floor and relax before heading onto Minaga's city floor.

Chapter 686: Nevermore: A Healthy Team Dynamic

The thirty-fifth floor had been the first one to truly push their party. It had also been the most fun, in Jake's opinion.

After they all entered the in-between room, the boosting skills were deactivated one by one as Jake tossed himself in one of the lounge chairs. The others also sat down, with the King even stopping his usual levitation to sit on a large chair. They would all need a good while to fully recover, and they had already agreed to stay in the room until they were all back in peak condition. Even if the next floor was a city floor, this place was just safer.

Jake closed his eyes and relaxed a bit as he waited for the system message to appear. It didn't take that long before he saw the notifications, but when he saw them, he couldn't help but frown.

Only two?

How was that possible? Jake instantly checked them and saw that the first one was the expected basic one.

Thirty-fifth floor completed. 350 Nevermore Points earned.

Some-fucking-how, they had only managed to get a single achievement, and he felt kind of pissed before he even read it.

Achievement earned: Kill the fully empowered Demon Lord Gubrothas along with all three Tower Demons within five hours without any party members dying. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, Jake was totally fine with just getting one achievement after reading the one they had gotten. It seemed like the system or Minaga or whatever managing these achievements had just decided to throw them all together into one massive achievement.

5000 Nevermore Points was more than they had earned on any prior floor by a significant margin and were a more than twenty-percent increase in overall points just from that one achievement.

“A good windfall,” the Sword Saint smiled, having also read the achievement.

“Satisfactory indeed,” the Fallen King agreed.

“Ree!” Sylphie also screeched gladly. Being the smart bird she was, she knew big numbers were good.

“I wonder how this will affect later floors?” Dina questioned out loud. “Clearly, the Demon Lord was set up to appear on one of the later five floors for one final fight.”

“Good question,” Jake said. “Man, if only there was someone who really loved telling us about the great story he has been spinning up. Someone who has been surprisingly silent for a while now, not having a single comment during the entire boss fight.”

“Hey, I just didn’t wanna distract you from the big fight with the Demon Lord. Imagine if a comment of mine made you lose your focus, and it ended in your death? That would be silly, wouldn’t it? Can you imagine the number of complaints I would get if that actually happened? Definitely not worth the hassle,” Minaga reappeared. Well, he did not really reappear. Jake knew he had been watching all along as he usually did.

“Why do I get the feeling that has happened before?” Jake mused with a smirk.

“No comment. Anyway, thoughts on the big boss fight?”

“Pretty good,” Jake admitted. The Demon Lord had been strong and not as “gimmicky” as Jake had feared. “You needed to be good in many different areas to win, but I have a really hard time seeing barely any parties beating it. The Tower Demons being summoned with full parties is pretty brutal, especially if you have a more classic setup. I guess the healer and tank can handle the boss, but the three damage dealers having to handle a Tower Demon each is a tall order. Not to mention the final phase where the Demon Lord felt near-invincible with his armor on full power. I can see him outlasting many groups simply due to how damn durable he was. Especially if they don’t have any good methods to address the Demon Lord’s Heart.”

“The end part, too,” Dina chimed in. “Without knowledge of rituals or soul magic, killing the Demon Lord and not allowing him to escape seems impossible. Maybe you could seal him due to his weakened state, but...”

“It wasn’t meant to be easy or even beatable by any parties that could consider themselves in any way average. That is also why you got the escape talismans as rewards for floor thirty-four. You only get those if you unlock the possibility to face the Demon Lord with empowered artifacts, so you get the chance to reset and try again without empowering the artifacts. Something a lot of parties have done, mind you. Overestimating your own abilities is quite a normal thing for young C-grade geniuses, and I do recognize that the difficulty spike was quite severe,” Minaga explained. “Not to mention the difficulty of fully killing the Demon Lord after he merges with the sword. The most common method is a big formation that drains the energy of the artifact over time, but that isn’t very effective or fast. My sample size is also pretty pathetic... but hey, I would say you guys – courtesy of an overpowered mythical weapon – probably set the kill time record from sword stage to death.”

“So, to summarize, we are just damn awesome?” Jake grinned.

“Duh. Not to toot your horns, but you all are a top-of-the-line party. If you were not, there is no way you would have beaten this,” Minaga acknowledged.

Jake just smiled as he leaned back a bit further and relaxed.

“How about the impact on later floors? It sounds like killing the Demon Lord outright is not entirely out of expectations,” the Sword Saint asked as he took a seat at the bar and grabbed a bottle.

“If you hadn’t killed the Demon Lord here, who is to say what it would mean for the later floors? What I can say is that it is a requirement to perform the most rewarding achievement available within my labyrinth later on. It will be the most rewarding by quite a margin, too. Let’s just say that the five thousand from the Demon Lord is far from the highest a single achievement can give,” Minaga answered.

“Man, and here I had hoped that it would at least throw you off your game a little,” Jake smiled.

“Because you kill a boss that is designed to be killable? No, what throws me off my game is people using Bloodlines or Transcendence skills to screw up everything and ruin all my hard work. Not that I dislike these two by default. The swordsman’s use of his Transcendence skill in the boss fight is how I expect them to be used. What you do is just willfully ruining my labyrinths,” Minaga said, clearly still salty about Jake ruining the exploration on prior floors. Jake also felt something else...

“So what you are telling me that the labyrinth will make a return on floor thirty-six, ripe for my exploitation?” Jake grinned.

“I did not tell you that, no. And if that is the case, you will find out yourself when you arrive. Even if it was a labyrinth again – which I am totally not saying it will be – that doesn’t mean it is as easily exploited as the ones before.”

“You have said that several times before, and yet we always end up with you complaining about how I broke something of yours again,” Jake shot back.

“Time will tell.”

“Indeed it will,” Jake nodded with a smile.

“Now... want some nice lore bits as you relax? Facing the Demon Lord didn’t just have to be done by your party, you know... if you did things differently, you could have brought many helpful allies along,” Minaga teased.

"In a bit," Jake said as he saw looked at the pedestal with loot.

"Oh, fair, get the rewards first. But... lore time afterward?"

"Sure," Jake shrugged.

"Great. Enjoy your loot; it should be useful."

Jake sure hoped it would be. Rather than just have Sylphie fly over and unlock the boxes, they all went together. There was not just one box but three this time around. Two of them were small, with one large box. The large one was even bigger than a mini-fridge, and Jake kind of wanted to open it first, but with permission from the others, he started with one of the smaller boxes.

He opened it and instantly felt the odd energy spread throughout the room. It was familiar, and they all recognized it as slightly familiar to the Demon Lord's signature. Which made sense considering the item that floated up. It was a small fist-sized version of the large artifact Jake had corrupted, though Jake wasn't sure it was the same kind of item after using Identify.

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

"No fire affinity mentioned?" Jake questioned. He didn't feel the slightest tinge of fire energy either.

“Not all Demon Lords have the fire affinity, though it is the most common,” Dina explained. “And to find a Crystalized Heart... I heard that some talented ritualists can transform a Demon Lord into one. They are incredibly valuable artifacts to all demons and warlocks.”

“Let us give it to the hunter, then I am sure we will see him birth some primeval Demon Lord within a few centuries,” the Fallen King said. Jake was about to protest as the Sword Saint looked at Dina.

“Can Demon Lords be female?”

“Yeah,” Dina nodded.

“Then I guess that is a possibility,” the old man nodded.

“Ree?”

“No!” Jake protested as he looked at the green bird. “You are not getting a new little sister, I am not taking that damn heart, and I am definitely not going to make some Demon Lord.”

The Sword Saint smiled teasingly at him. “Then who else wants it?”

Nobody said anything. The Fallen King was disinterested, Sylphie said it looked gross, it did not fit Dina's Path, and the Sword Saint had nothing to use it for. In the end, Jake did end up grumbling as he tentatively took the damn thing.

"If all else fails, you can give it to your succubus mistress; I am sure she will appreciate it," the Sword Saint tried to comfort him.

"I don't have any mistresses..." Jake muttered.

"Sure you don't," the old man smiled and chuckled.

"Let's just open another damn box," Jake grumbled as he went straight for the larger of the two remaining lockboxes. It was quickly opened and out came a metal box without a lid. This time, Jake did feel the expected wave of fire affinity energy after opening a box. Looking at what was inside, he saw a dozen black metal ingots.

[Obsidian Hellfire Ingot (Legendary)] – An Obsidian Hellfire Ingot. This metal is incredibly hot to the touch and has a supreme mana conductivity towards any fire affinity mana. Its innate properties also grant this metal high natural resilience to all types of attacks. Limited alchemical uses.

Jake would classify this as another dud. None of them were blacksmiths, and Jake couldn't really come up with anything to use these ingots for. Not that it was a bad reward... this was the kind of metal the armor of the Demon Lord was made with. Potentially the sword too.

“Anyone want this?” he asked.

Silence all around for a moment before Dina spoke up a bit shyly. “I... I can maybe use them?”

“Oh?” Jake said, surprised.

“I... have a plant that can maybe absorb them, but not sure,” she said, clearly uncomfortable asking for it. Probably because this was one of the first actually valuable items they had found.

“Take it then,” Jake shrugged. He already knew the three others didn’t care.

“Alright,” Dina relented, storing away all the ingots. Jake did know that their way of distributing loot was different from the norm. Dina knew it too, as she had apparently been taught how loot distribution usually worked before going to Nevermore, and was a bit surprised when Jake and the others went and broke the conventions she had learned.

It was considered pretty standard that crafting materials would be sold if no one needed them badly, or the materials were so rare they were impossible to get your hands on under normal circumstances. Any profit would then be split. Even if someone got the materials, it was usually expected they would compensate the others, either by paying a fair market price or giving up something else. Their laissez-faire approach to loot distribution, where they just gave it out semi-randomly if someone wanted it, not really caring about “fairness,” had thus come as a bit of a surprise to Dina.

They did still follow some norms. Such as the norm to give loot to the people who truly needed anything, as that would help everyone clear more floors. Case-in-point? The reward from the final lockbox.

[Supreme Firebane Ring (Legendary)] – A ring crafted for an incredibly talented knight that was slain by the Demon Lord before he was able to reach his prime. Passively grants the user resistance to all fire-based attacks. This effect can be further amplified by infusing mana into the ring, also extending it to affect all their energy. Enchantments: +600 Toughness, +600 Vitality, +500 Willpower. Supreme Firebane.

Requirements: lvl 230+ in any humanoid race.

A certain old man in their party could surely use this item. Something Jake and everyone else knew as he grinned.

“Hey, old man, you should just take this. You kind of lost your cool during the fight with the Demon Lord, so hopefully, this can help you chill if we meet more fire affinity opponents,” Jake said teasingly.

“Indeed... much of your offensive prowess seemed to evaporate before the flames of the Demon Lord,” the Fallen King even chimed in, Jake feeling oddly proud of the Unique Lifeform for his joke.

“In the heat, you just couldn’t cut it,” Jake piled on. “I hoped you would have rained on the Demon Lord’s parade a bit more.”

Dina looked confused for a second before smiling.

“Ah! I understand now!” she said before thinking deeply for a moment. Looking full of inspiration, she grinned at the Sword Saint. “They are giving you heat for your performance.”

“Good one, but I think we should lay off flaming him for now,” Jake grinned, damn proud of his party. Only Sylphie didn’t join in, but she had a good reason not to. She was busy trying to open a bottle with some kind of juice at the bar counter, sad there was no snack for her among the lockboxes.

“I do not even fully understand the last one... but I guess I do feel the burn,” the Sword Saint chuckled, taking it in strides. They didn’t even need to argue as he picked up the ring. Sadly, he couldn’t use it yet due to the high level requirement, but he should reach level 230 soon enough.

“What a healthy team dynamic. Now that you are all done bullying the old swordsman like you bullied that poor Demon Lord with your constant insults, wanna hear some lore about why the Demon Lord got so offended by these insults?” Minaga asked.

“I didn’t bully him; I just deployed a tactic taught to me by a master to keep the attention of the boss on me by speaking constantly,” Jake smiled. “I call it the Minaga stratagem.”

“That is just hurtful... anyway, to the lore. Remember that Old Royal Mage? Yeah, he could have helped you during this encounter if you had...”

Jake relaxed as he listened to the Unique Lifeform happily explain a bunch of scenarios, some of them so silly Jake doubted if they were real – such as one where a party member became the Prime Consort and would be able to sneak in and land a sneak attack – but knowing Minaga, it was probably real.

The others also just recovered, with everyone staying in the lounge. Even the Fallen King chose to not leave for one of the rooms, tolerating Minaga. The Sword Saint was busy infusing energy into the self-repair enchantment of his robe that had been burnt, and Dina once more tended to her hidden garden.

Time slowly passed as they all rapidly approached being back in prime condition. Soon, it was time to check out the city floor, though they didn't really plan on doing that much there. They did have some things to check, such as how many of the solo dungeons there now were. Of course, there was one thing they wanted to know more than anything...

Had they finally claimed that top spot on the Leaderboards?

Chapter 687: Nevermore: Minaga's City Floor

Jake and company had visited many city floors before and knew what to expect. Except, this was not a normal city floor. This one was made by Minaga, and the Unique Lifeform had already warned them this place would be special. A special floor made by a special guy.

Upon their immediate arrival, Jake did not see what was so different. At first glance, it looked just like a usual city. As long as you ignored the fact that Jake spotted at least a dozen statues of Minaga just from where they entered, and the general architecture reminded him a bit of that mage area he had visited to buy his current bracers.

As usual, the system messages also appeared, inviting them to the floor.

You have arrived on Minaga's City Floor of Nevermore.

All violence outside of the arenas is strictly prohibited on all city floors, including this unique City Floor. 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.

Nothing really seemed off... but then he saw the next part.

Due to the nature of Minaga's City Floor, you cannot proceed to floor thirty-six immediately. In order to proceed, you must pay the toll at the city gates. Minaga's City Floor uses the currency known as Minaga Coins. Minaga Coins can be earned by selling items through brokers in the many stores spread throughout the city. Normal Credits can be used to pay for other goods through the stores or between non-residents of the floor. Minaga Coins cannot be traded between dungeoneers. All party members must pay their own toll.

The toll to enter the next floor is determined based on your level upon entering this floor the first time.

"Hm, this is quite the curveball," the Sword Saint muttered as he read the description.

"Yeah..." Dina nodded.

"This is definitely something," Jake commented. "But what exactly is the point of this? It wants us to sell items to some stores? And we can only buy stuff using Credits... is this some kind of money sink created to battle Credit inflation by forcing us to spend money on getting a currency that is useless to us outside of paying some toll?"

"I find the lack of trade-ability of these coins a severe oversight. What exactly is one meant to sell? I can see the hunter sell his potions, and perhaps the Dryad sell her herbs and such, but why would the Sylphian or I have any goods these brokers are willing to buy?" the Fallen King complained.

Jake was about to propose maybe someone could just leave Nevermore and bring a bunch of valuable stuff to sell... but then he saw the next message.

Main objective: Pay the toll to move onto the thirty-sixth floor.

Bonus objectives: Do not leave Nevermore before paying the toll.

Current progress: Pay the Toll. Do not leave Nevermore.

Note: This floor has no hidden objectives, achievements, or events.

Current Nevermore Points: 28473

Reading it, Jake saw the bonus objective. They were not allowed to leave this place, so even if one wanted to get help from outside, it wouldn't work. Jake thought for a second before sighing.

"Worst comes to worst; I am sure we can scrounge stuff together. I quite frankly have a shitload of valuable stuff hidden away from the ceremony," Jake shook his head.

“Hm, I guess that is an option,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Won’t work,” a voice spoke from ahead of them as a figure teleported in from outside of Jake’s Sphere of Perception. Instantly, he was put on guard as Jake felt the aura of the person in front of them, and he used Identify, going for a full scan.

[Human – lvl 349 – Minor Blessing of Alcradia]

He was at the peak of C-grade... nearly B-grade. Jake knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if it came down to a fight, he would not stand a chance. Luckily, a fight was not even on the table. They were on a city floor, and the guy showed no hostility.

“What do you mean it won’t work?” Jake asked. “And who are you? Sorry, but I do find it a bit suspicious when a random person just teleports right in front of me after listening in on my conversations.”

“Apologies,” the man said as he bowed. “I am but a mere worker from a subsidiary of the Golden Road Emporium, and I serve the merchant god Alcradia. As for why it won’t work... anything that the brokers here buy must be from Nevermore.”

“Huh,” Jake nodded. “And why did you feel the need to teleport over to volunteer this information?”

“My job here is to keep track of individuals of note entering the floor, and I teleported over because I was informed of a change on the central Leaderboards. Seeing as your party had just appeared, I put two and two together,” the man said, bowing once more. “Congratulations on taking the point lead.”

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched.

“I agree with her,” Jake said. “Spoilers aren’t nice. We wanted to go and see that ourselves.”

“I apolo-“

“Rather than apologies, divulge the real reason you are here,” Jake shook his head. “Actually, let me guess. Seeing as everything you can trade for Minaga Coins has to be from Nevermore, you are here to buy some valuable items we have that can be exchanged.”

The merchant smiled. “I will not deny that. The Demon Lord on the highest difficulty offers quite the rewards if a party such as yours beats it.”

“Not interested, but thanks for the info,” Jake shrugged as he motioned for them to keep moving.

“Wait, are you sure you don’t want a guide?” the peak C-grade asked, still acting nice. “There are still some things to learn. If any of you are crafters, you can-“

"I assume everything made on this floor counts as "from Nevermore" even if the creation uses materials from the outside," Jake interrupted him. "Still not interested, and worst comes to worst, we can just ask Minaga."

The merchant flashed a small smile as he shook his head. "While that may have been true on prior floors, here, that is not possible. The dungeon master does not appear here or speak, as it is a city floor. He does not have a copy here dedicated to your party, after all. It is only in extremely rare cases he has made his appearance."

"This guy gets it; I am not some guy just at your beck and call, appearing whenever you want me to," Minaga agreed wholeheartedly as he stood with his arms crossed beside the merchant.

"I never expect you to," Jake agreed.

The merchant had frozen in place as the blue dungeon master appeared. He slowly turned his head as if to confirm the Unique Lifeform was truly there before he rapidly bowed.

"This one greets the-"

"Bye," Minaga waved his hand as the guy was teleported away.

"He was just about to reveal your godly title," Jake said, pointing at where the guy had disappeared.

“Nah, I don’t think he was,” Minaga disagreed.

“He totally was.”

“I don’t see why you would think that,” Minaga remained steadfast.

“Your attempt at gaslighting will not work,” Jake argued.

“I would never and have never gaslighted anyone, and I find the accusation highly inflammatory,” Minaga said with a sad expression before his mood took a one-eighty, and he grinned as he turned to the Sword Saint. “Ah, sorry about the fire-related expression. You have already gotten roasted enough for one day.”

The Sword Saint just raised an eyebrow before sighing.

“Fine, I have been successfully fooled,” Jake relented. “Now, could you tell me why you decided to make this floor the way you did and got any tips?”

“Alright, alright. You see, I don’t like when people just fly through every single floor – you know, like you do – and that includes the city floors. I wanted this one to at least take some time and give people a good reason to spend longer here than on other city floors. So I introduced the Minaga Coin and the toll, but the coins can also be used for other things than just the toll. Though, I am not going to lie... none of these things matter to your party. I would advise you five to just quickly gather the toll and get out of here,” Minaga explained before sighing. “I can’t believe I am actually advising you not to engage with my creation...”

“Oh, the horror,” Jake smirked. “How would we go about collecting coins, and was my assessment about crafting goods correct?”

“Yep, spot-on,” Minaga nodded. “Lots of merchants around here who want to buy and sell too using normal Credit. Ah, but one warning, even if I told you to rush through, you will probably still spend a bit of time here to get enough to pay the toll. While you do have some stuff to sell from prior floors, none of it gives a lot outside of those ingots from the Demon Lord.”

“Huh,” Jake said before thinking. “If crafted stuff can be traded for coins, can’t we just spend a shitload of Credits, buy a lot of crafted stuff from others, and sell that for coins to move on instantly? You know, steamroll the place with wealth?”

“I may or may not have put a cap on how many coins you can earn monthly from non-self-obtained items...” Minaga said with a cheeky smile.

“So...” Jake said, as he sighed. He had a feeling there really was no easy way around it.

“Yep, you gotta do stuff yourself to get coins! Get that cauldron out and get cooking!” Minaga laughed.

“How about us?” the Fallen King entered the conversation as he referred to himself and Sylphie. “How are we supposed to earn any coins? We are monsters, not crafters.”

“You can do jobs that are non-combat that earn tokens you can exchange for coins. You can also fight in the arena once a day, something I feel like you both would enjoy. The arena is time-limited and will repeatedly send new things out to kill to rack up more points for a better token that you can then exchange for coins. No experience points, though. This is a city floor, after all,” Minaga explained.

“You are awfully forthcoming with information?” Jake questioned. Usually, Minaga liked to be all secretive, but here he just shared stuff willy-nilly.

“Because the impact of what I tell you is negligible. No matter how fast or slow you pass this floor, you get no points for doing it. Only the bonus objective gives any bonus points,” Minaga shrugged. “Me helping you while giving some basic advice will have a minimal effect. Plus, I teleported away the guy who would have said something similar, so in some ways, you can argue I am just setting things right.”

“Wait... this entire floor gives no points?” Jake questioned.

“No, of course not. It is a city floor,” Minaga said, waving him off.

“Then... you are legitimately just doing this to waste everyone’s time...” Jake sighed.

“I told you, it is for a better overall experience and allow you all to socialize a bit,” Minaga grinned. “Now, from your point of view, it may seem like a waste of time, which I can totally respect and promptly not care about as I force you to play my game.”

Jake sighed again. The worst part was he couldn’t even get on any ideas that would help him cheese this floor. Minaga seemed to have thought of most things with the limit on things you could sell that you hadn’t made or obtained yourself.

“Anyway, nice to chat with you all. I’m gonna head off and do dungeon master stuff,” Minaga smiled.

“Not even gonna let your title slip before you leave?” Jake teased.

“Alright, alright... as a final treat,” Minaga sighed. “While I am mainly known by you C-grades for creating floors in Nevermore, I go by another name in the wider universe. One echoed throughout existence, as even the most powerful of gods shudder at the mention of my name.”

He’s gonna make another damn joke, Jake had already concluded.

“In the wider world, I am not simply called Minaga... but the Magnificent Minaga!”

“That was bad, and you should feel bad,” Jake said with a deadpan expression, the rest of his party slowly nodding.

“Killjoy,” the Unique Lifeform said, acting offended for a moment before he flashed a slightly more serious smile. “But I didn’t totally lie. They do shudder at the mention of my name.”

With those words, Minaga teleported away, leaving the party there to take in his words. He probably thought he was dramatic, but Jake just chuckled. “For some reason, gods shuddering from us mentioning having to potentially deal with Minaga doesn’t surprise me in the slightest.”

“Rude,” a voice echoed in their heads, completely ruining any dramatics he may have had going on.

Jake smiled as he turned to the party. “Let’s go check the Leaderboard and stuff anyway?”

“We should. Trusting the words of a stranger seems unwise,” the Sword Saint agreed.

With no one protesting, they went to check out the large Leaderboards in the middle of the city. As they walked, Jake did take notice of one thing different about this floor... outside of the city floor between floors five and six, this was the most populated one. The average levels of those here were quite high, too, with many above level 300.

These were essentially the “boosters” of people from the new universe. They carried them through floor after floor to help them level up, but also for these high-level individuals to explore the later floors on their own. Having a five-man party was optimal, but with a good level advantage, four-man parties also did just fine. “True” parties like Jake’s were still incredibly rare, based on all Jake saw.

Reaching the Leaderboards, their group did confirm that the peak C-grade had been telling the truth before. They did indeed hold the Point Record.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-35): 7582

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-35): 28473

“Sitting at the peak right now does not mean we can relax or slow down. Only that we have to further strengthen our lead and assure our victory,” the Fallen King said.

“Naturally,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“We’re just getting started,” Jake agreed with a smile.

After they confirmed how great their party was, they went to check out the gate to know how high of a toll they had to pay. There was only one gate leading to the next floor, and in front of it was a toll booth and a barrier. Jake went over and placed his hand on the booth as a system notification popped up.

You must pay 214,000 Minaga Coins (current Minaga Coins: 0) to proceed to the next floor.

Without any reference to know how easy or hard earning two-hundred thousand Minaga Coins was, Jake didn’t know how hard it would be. After the others in his party also checked, they concluded the cost was equivalent to your race level times a thousand. That meant Sylphie had to pay the highest toll, which for some reason, made her happy.

“I guess there’s nothing to do but just get to it and figure out the best way for us all to earn our own toll amount,” Jake shrugged as the group briefly began to telepathically discuss what to do. They decided to find a home base first – there were plenty of hotels around – and then make a good plan. Even if the city floor was meant to be a relaxing place, they had no intentions of taking any breaks.

While It was good to be at the top, that didn't mean they could in any way be satisfied. They had made it there before many of the other top parties and had a lot of competition on their heels. Who knows, maybe they would even meet some of them on this floor if it turned out to take a while to earn those coins.

Something Jake had a strong gut feeling it would... especially after he asked a random guy close to the toll booth.

"How long it usually takes? No idea about the average, but I think the current record is about fourteen months? Or was it fifteen?"

Yeah, they were definitely gonna run into other parties... which did make Jake wonder. How were all his friends doing? Both those in and outside of Nevermore.

Chapter 688: Nevermore: The Runemaiden

The level 255 Demon Warden – one of the bosses on the thirty-third floor of Minaga's Labyrinth on Archmage difficulty – dodged as the blast of pure kinetic energy flew past him. He quickly got his footing as the woman followed up, diving in close.

Several deadly strikes flew out as she relentlessly attacked. The Demon Warden summoned barriers as he retaliated, manifesting a spear of crystal he thrust down toward his opponent. Rather than dodge, the woman followed through with her attack, punching the demon in the chest right as she herself was speared in her shoulder.

At least, that is what the Demon Warden had expected to happen.

The crystalline weapon shattered upon impact with the woman, tearing up her leather armor but failing to penetrate her skin, leaving only slight marks. In return, he was punched square in the chest, launching him backward.

With confusion, he attacked again, his crystalline magic failing every time to truly damage his opponent and his attacks as a pugilist failing even more disastrously. It was as if her body was made of metal, with none of his physical attacks working. The Demon Warden thus switched up his strategy and began to use fire magic.

However, even that proved ineffective. The second the magic hit her, runes lit up on her body, weakening the flames. Growing more and more desperate, the Demon Warden kept trying different things. He knew his comrades were struggling elsewhere in the prison camp, but no matter what he did, nothing worked.

The only good thing for the Demon Warden was the low offensive prowess of the woman, but that didn't help when he failed to do any meaningful damage either. In the end, the battle turned into a long slugfest. One the Demon Warden would never win. Soon, four individuals appeared nearby, simply watching the fight.

Ultimately, the outcome was determined when the Demon Warden fell after what felt like the ten-thousandth hit, his entire body broken from the repeated pummeling and his health points utterly depleted.

"Well fought, Carmen," the young druid said as he flew over. He was a weird one because even if he tried to talk like an old man at times, he only looked to be in his twenties.

"Finally learned to use my damn name, huh?" she scoffed. "Also, no... that wasn't well-fought, but a drawn-out pummeling. Fighting without using big finishers seriously sucks."

"I truly meant no offense with my comment or failing to use your name as you have asked of me. Customs were simply too ingrained in my being, Runemai- I mean, Carmen," the druid said apologetically.

"She was taking the piss. At least with the name part, Carmen does suck at actually killing anything," a bare-chested large man said as he walked over, his chest not actually visible due to how much blood had drenched him. This was Carmen's favorite guy in the party. He was a berserker that used two massive swords. A pure brawler. He also wasn't as uptight as many of the others and the leader of their party – Warlord Davion.

"Well fuck you too," Carmen scoffed.

He just laughed as he took a seat and looked at the pummeled Demon Warden and back at Carmen. "That mini-boss couldn't manage to overcome your defenses either?"

"No," Carmen shook her head.

"Well, fuck me indeed. Damn Runemaids... then again, I guess you are a special case," he shook his head.

The last two members of the party were a shaman and a seer, which made up the casters of their group. It had to be mentioned that even if druids were usually casters, their druid sure as hell wasn't. While he liked to act all refined, his primary mode of combat was turning into a large scaled tiger with wings that could breathe lightning. So at least he could fight properly.

Overall, she didn't have that many complaints about her party, and they were overall pretty okay people. Though if you had asked her just a few months before entering Nevermore, she would have said there was no fucking way she would enter with Valhal.

Carmen had been less than satisfied with the faction for a long time. The political bullshit pissed her off to no end, and she had even been told not to associate with pretty much anyone on Earth outside of those who belonged to Valhal. She had not attended all the meetings Jake had held with all the other factions, been unable to go to that big ceremony of his, and honestly hated belonging to the faction she had chosen to be a part of. It wasn't like she could just leave, either. Not without fucking herself over majorly, as the Path she walked required her to remain.

In the end, Carmen had reached a breaking point. The status quo had to change, or she would go crazy, and she only saw two choices: either abandon Valhal and her entire Path or make Valhal tell her what the fuck was going on. With this in mind, she had reached out to Gudrun and laid out her thoughts. After some deliberation, Carmen was offered a deal.

If she wanted to "be in the know," she had to prove herself worthy.

From the very beginning, when she signed up with Valhal, she had been walking the Path of a Runemaiden. Runemaids were quite a peculiar thing, as it was considered both a title and a Path.

Only in C-grade could one become a true Runemaiden, but even those who walked the Path of one were called a Runemaiden in lower grades out of respect. To walk the Path of a Runemaiden was to willingly risk your life to survive the Runemaiden Ascension Ritual. The process through which the Runemaids were created. A ritual that would either give birth to a True Runemaiden... or death. Well, and a lot of Bone Metal.

Bone Metal was a special material that wasn't even metal, which made the name pretty damn dumb in Carmen's mind. It was only really used by Valhal as they were the only ones who knew the method of crafting it. As the name indicated, the "metal" was created from bones. The usual way this special quasi-metal was made was through the bodies of the fallen - a final way of honoring them by turning their very bones into weapons, so they could continue to battle even in the afterlife. These weapons tended to always be of high quality and were better the stronger the dead person was.

However... this led to a question. What if the process of creating Bone Metal was applied to someone who still lived? There would be two results. One was that the person would die, their flesh would melt away, and only the metalized bones would remain. The second outcome was a success. The bones would successfully be turned into Bone Metal, and the entire body would be reformed. Their skin would become as hard as armor, their muscles and flesh making the body more closely match that of a defense-focused beast rather than a humanoid.

All it would cost was any and all ability to ever do magic. Something Carmen was fine with because fuck magic.

Carmen had strengthened her body throughout the grades to prepare for this ritual, such as the process she went through to strengthen her fists. She had even focused primarily on Toughness and Vitality, especially towards the end of D-grade. It had made her slightly weaker in combat, but it was all to build a foundation. Her D-grade evolution had been the final primer.

In reality, Carmen did not have a high risk of dying if she wanted to become a true Runemaiden. If she was satisfied with just barely becoming one, that is, for not all Runemaids were born equally.

The materials required to birth a true Runemaiden were numerous and rare, and Valhal remained secretive about what they were, but the most vital ingredient was well-known in the multiverse:

Blood.

Blood of a greater being.

The deal Carmen had struck was to successfully become a Runemaiden of one of the gods of Valhal by using their blood in the ritual. Gudrun had advised her about what god they could use... but Carmen already knew who she would pick. Usually, one would avoid the blood of gods during the Ascension Ritual due to the overwhelming Records of the god, but it did happen semi-frequently. Which begged the question... which god's blood should she ask for?

Well, the answer was pretty obvious.

Carmen knew the kind of people that surrounded her. The old swordsman was an utter monster and a Transcendent. Jake was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and had a Bloodline. She had even felt Sylphie, the cute bird she had met during the Treasure Hunt, surpass her while they hung out together after splitting from Jake as she grew into her own. If she wanted to have even the slightest chance of wanting to keep up with all of these supreme geniuses, she had to take a risk. Carmen didn't think she was a supreme genius like the rest... but she was too stubborn to not at least try to keep up.

Hence why she had chosen Valdemar's blood for the ritual.

Something she was instantly forbidden from. The risk of the Runemaiden Ritual was directly proportional to how powerful the blood of the greater being was. That meant getting blood from Valdemar would carry a risk higher than anyone else... so high that the success rate was too low for Valhal to use his blood anymore. It simply wasn't worth the risk. The last forty-thousand rituals using his blood had failed, and that was when they had stopped.

Carmen didn't care; she insisted on using his blood anyway. Ultimately, Gudrun surrendered before Carmen's stubbornness and agreed on one condition... Carmen had to make Valdemar himself approve of her and donate his blood.

When Carmen reached level 199, she was thus teleported from Earth and left the ninety-third universe - straight to the headquarters of Valhal itself. She had appeared in the Grand Hall of Valhal. Stood before the gods of Valhal... and found them less intimidating than she probably should have.

Something that had amused one of them more than anything... because while she didn't find most of the gods intimidating, the feeling was vastly different when she met her blood donor in the flesh. This was not an instance of her getting teleported by the system or talking to a projection. He was truly there, and for the first time, Carmen felt like she stood before the definition of overwhelming power.

Carmen had only been able to grin. Something that also made Valdemar smile. Her knees had buckled, her entire body covered in sweat, but she had managed to stand before him, something he clearly liked. Their eyes had met once before he grinned and spoke.

"You're willing to use my blood and risk everything to gain a small advantage over those just using the blood of another warrior?"

A stupid question, in Carmen's opinion. "I'm not a bloody coward."

"You're reckless in your pursuit to get stronger," Valdemar smiled.

“Weren’t you?” Carmen shot back before even thinking.

Silence took over the room. Nobody said anything, not even Gudrun. Several seconds passed as the strongest human in the multiverse stared down at her. Then, Valdemar broke into a belly laugh.

“Lass has the guts. Let her do as she wants,” Valdemar said in a cheerful tone as he looked at her. “But you have to take an oath before I allow it.”

Carmen knew there was always more to this kind of thing, and fighting through the pressure of the man’s stare, she spoke: “What oath?”

Valdemar smiled even more than before. “That we’ll share a mug of mead after the ritual. So either succeed or die a liar.”

It took her a moment to understand what he meant, as Carmen couldn’t help but chuckle. “Better have some good fucking mead ready.”

“Brewed it myself, so it bloody better be,” Valdemar laughed in response.

From there, Carmen began her preparations for the ritual. First, she had to “cleanse” her body, which required her to spend over a week in large medicinal baths while performing certain training motions in between.

After the cleaning, she had to strengthen her body as much as she could. This was not by increasing her stats or even her innate resistance but by learning how to better use her innate energy and move it in certain patterns to help her properly understand her own body. This ended up not taking that long – not even three days – as Carmen was already bloody good at it. Once that was done, it was time for the real thing.

The ritual itself was... less than pleasant. A large magical circle was created, and Carmen spent more than fifty hours getting the many runes tattooed all over her body. The process was painful, but it was nothing compared to what happened next.

This was not a ritual that simply changed her body but also her soul. Her entire Soulshape would be reforged, her entire being reborn... and she had to do it all herself. This was not a simple process of holding on and just gritting your teeth through the pain. You had to keep your soul from disintegrating as it was repeatedly shattered, all the while controlling the energy invading your body. Carmen did not think herself some genius of energy control... but she did know her own body. Moreover, she was stubborn. She also had to admit that she once more owed Jake... because one of the primary reasons this ritual was so difficult was that one had to endure the pressure of the greater being's Records all throughout. Something Jake had primed Carmen to be capable of.

Carmen knew that when she entered the ritual circle, no one present expected her to step out of it alive – besides maybe Valdemar. They tried to hide their scornful faces, their comments of how Carmen was overestimating herself and delusional, and how she was just courting death due to her own stupidity. Carmen was honestly thankful to these people, as they had made her even more resolute to succeed, just to tell them to go fuck themselves once she was done.

Needless to say, Carmen succeeded even if the ritual itself was an absolute fucking nightmare. She felt like her body was ripped apart over and over again, and she experienced worse pain than she could even imagine. There was a constant feeling of not truly knowing who you were, and everything was compounded by the Records of Valdemar seeking to overcome her own and turn her into a statue. A damn good statue for sure, but Carmen had no intentions of that fate.

The final part of the ritual was the evolution itself. Rather than the usual evolution window, Carmen was asked at the very end of the ritual if she wished to evolve her race and class – both at the same time due to the peculiar nature of the ritual - something she had naturally agreed with.

After eleven days of suffering through that absolutely hellish ritual, the first Runemaiden of Valdemar in over half an era, and the only one currently living was born. Not because the other one died of age, mind you.

Just that one was no longer called a Runemaiden after ascending to godhood.

And Carmen had no intentions of breaking that streak of one.

Carmen smiled a bit to herself as she remembered the first sight that met her after the ritual. She remembered opening her eyes and seeing a glass full of mead right in front of her as Valdemar stood off to the side, staring down at her. She especially smiled, remembering her first words to him.

“Why are you creeping on a naked girl?”

And his response.

“You’re a girl no longer, Runemaiden,” he laughed as he turned away. “But yeah, you should probably put something on...”

After that, Carmen had gotten drunk on the best damn alcohol she had ever had in her life. The mead not only been damn tasty but also helped her body somehow properly adapt better to its changes. In the end, she had walked away not just with good taste in her mouth but a Divine Blessing from Valdemar – which was a bit silly as Carmen felt like she was repeatedly changing titles these days. Though she had a good feeling she would keep this one for a while... it could change again based on Valdemar's parting words.

"Keep that obsession of yours, lass. Who knows, I may call on you when I need a new Chosen if you are interested, but you aren't quite ready yet. Prove my blood wasn't wasted on you, aight?"

Still smiling, Carmen stopped reminiscing about the past and returned to the present, standing there on the thirty-third floor of Nevermore. She felt good knowing she was not there just because of pity or because Valhal wanted to keep her happy because of Jake – because she now also knew that things were indeed complicated with all of that Yip of Yore shit.

No, she was there because she was one of the strongest C-grades of her generation, and she would gladly punch anyone in the face who told her otherwise.

Chapter 689: Nevermore: Light, Death, Void

"Tyranny has run rampant for too long. For how long will you live in fear? For how long will you live under a system of oppression, where you are treated like nothing but objects by a creature that cares not for any of you? Are you willing to face us, risking your lives for someone who hides away within his castle, unwilling to help you? Will you die for someone that would not even shed a drop of blood for you?" his voice echoed throughout the large room, the many cultists and demons wary but listening.

"I am not asking any of you to lay down your lives for me... all I ask of you is to not take up arms. Allow our passage, and help us only with your prayers and well wishes. We have come to carry out justice, and you are not yet guilty of anything but being oppressed. Stand behind us, and I swear that the Demon Lord will face righteous judgment and his tyrannical reign end."

Jacob stood atop a golden floating platform summoned by the light mage in his party. Bertrand stood beside him, ready to react should anyone make a move. To his other side, the Knight of Light's Dawn stood with a smile on his face, the Old Royal Mage also with them. In fact, they had an entire group from the ambiguous "kingdom" these semi-sapient creatures called their homeland.

"He speaks the truth," one of the people with them said. A woman wearing a cultist robe. One formerly known as the Prime Summoner. "I, too, was fooled, and now I can only try to pay recompense for once more releasing the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas. These heroes have given me a chance to, and I implore you all to join hands with us to create a better future."

Jacob amplified her words using his own skills as he saw doubt mar the faces of all those below. A few Mistresses had even appeared, though the Prime Consort was yet to be seen. Not that he was worried... he could feel from the crowd the situation was under control. If not, they still had the option to fight – a scenario in which they would always win.

Minaga's Labyrinth, as this part of Nevermore was called, had truly been a mixed experience for Jacob. On the one hand, it had allowed him to make use of his skills as an Augur and negotiate and create allies, but on the other, it had completely screwed over his abilities as an Augur when it came to navigating the labyrinth itself.

On all of the prior floors, Jacob had easily divined the best way to proceed. This had allowed them to fly through the floors at a record pace, and their party had racked up more points than they expected – even setting a new point Record as they passed the city floor between twenty and twenty-one.

When they had arrived in the labyrinth and were done getting briefed and picking the Archmage difficulty, he began his divination once more. Minaga had looked at Jacob funny during the entire briefing, and Jacob did feel like something was slightly wrong as he divined what way they should go. He had still chosen to believe it... a big mistake in retrospect.

Rather than lead him to the rooms with keys, all his divination had done was lead them straight into traps over and over again until finally, they reached a dead-end, where a giant mural of Minaga laughing revealed itself. The Unique Lifeform naturally adding an audio track to the mural himself.

From there, High Justicar Elevian – the co-leader of their party alongside Jacob – decided that perhaps they should shelve the divination for now. This proved effective, as they stopped relying on purely magical means and shifted to some far more manual ones. Scouts were sent out, light magic was shot in different directions to measure distances, and when they found their first group of natives from the labyrinth, they made use of them. They were pretty easy to convince, and Jacob quickly realized they were almost pre-programmed to want to assist him, making his job far easier than he would have expected.

It was certainly easier than what he had been doing before entering Nevermore.

Jacob had never truly left Earth before the invasion of Ell'Hakan. He had briefly been teleported away for events or brief training stints. However, as he left this time, he was tasked with a simple job... go out into the multiverse and see it for yourself. The A-grade Grand Master was assigned as his protector during this time, but Jacob was still allowed to go where he wished... so he followed his Path as an Augur and sought out those he could help.

He visited planets untouched by any factions. Places where D-grades were viewed as demi-gods that could dominate entire kingdoms. Worlds so bereft of Records that a C-grade ever appearing was impossible unless a miracle occurred, such as a random Bloodline being born or an individual with talent allowing the person to elevate themselves above their fates managed to rise.

There were worlds where the humanoid races were barely surviving as beasts dominated. Worlds where war raged, incompetent leaders willing to kill anyone with talent out of fear that they would be surpassed.

Jacob had many doubts about the Holy Church; a brief stint of exploration wouldn't change that. However... he had long suspected it, but now he knew for sure that the multiverse was far from a kind place to the weak. The lost would falter in the dark endlessly if they did not have any guidance – if they did not have the Records of greater factions lifting them up.

A high tide raises all ships, and the Holy Church was the greatest tide of them all. Yet Jacob was determined not to allow himself to be swept up in it. He would be a lighthouse on solid ground, guiding the ships that would find themselves lost. And, at least for now, he would guide them towards the Church.

Because even if the Holy Church were not the best... for the weak, was there truly a better choice?

"I swear on the Blightfather, my skill said it was this way! It is as if it isn't working as intended, but... no, I can do this!" Maltrax, the beastkin undead, said as she manipulated some odd ash before sniffing it.

"Told ya we were walking in circles" Casper shrugged unbothered.

"I... it may be that way? Yeah, it definitely is that way!" Maltrax insisted.

"If by 'it' you mean more traps, then yes, it is that way," he sighed.

They had been on the thirty-first floor of Nevermore for nearly twelve hours already and had spent all that time getting fucking nowhere. At first, they had used the ghost summoned from the banshee in their party, but that quickly proved ineffective as they got disoriented and lost their way within the fog. Some of them even ended up fading as they failed to find their way back to the banshee.

After that, Maltrax, the beastkin, took charge and used her tracking. She was filled with confidence initially, but after leading them through over a hundred traps – that Casper forewarned them all of – she seemed to be at her breaking point. Casper did come with input here and there, but she was too stubborn, so he didn't bother arguing.

Azal finally glanced at Casper as he also sighed. "You're certain you can actually find the way?"

"Pretty certain, yep," Casper nodded. He placed a hand on the wall and closed his eyes briefly before quickly opening them again. "Gotta head back from where we came; we have been walking in the exact opposite direction of any keys for the last two hours."

"I... he is lying!" Maltrax said, frustrated.

Casper didn't even bother arguing as Azal nodded and motioned for them to follow him. Three hours and a lot of complaining from Maltrax later, they stood in front of the second room they had encountered on this floor. The first one did not have a key.

"He... he just got lucky... there probably isn't even a key here..."

There was a key there.

Finally, Maltrax had to surrender and agree the dungeon engineer was indeed correct. Casper had to admit that things were far easier than he had expected. In fact, he would say his knowledge of dungeons was more valuable on this floor than the thirtieth, which made him wonder...

“Hey, Minaga?”

He got a few glances from his party members. They had discussed and agreed on engaging with the dungeon master as little as possible, but Casper felt like it was worth asking.

“What’s up? Or down. I guess it depends on your perspective.”

“I don’t mean to accuse you of anything... but did you make your labyrinth incredibly favorable for people with dungeon-related skills?”

More glances at him, one of them quite stern, very clearly telling him not to piss off the Unique Lifeform. Casper still felt like it was fine, though.

“Are you saying that I am purposefully making the dungeon easier for other aspiring dungeon masters?”

Minaga said in an angry voice. “Are you insinuating that I would be so biased just because we both make dungeons!?”

“Yes?” Casper answered with a deadpan face.

“Good, because you would be absolutely correct!” Minaga said in a gleeful voice. “Man, you know how rare proper dungeon masters are these days? They all tend to suck or only pick up dungeon engineering in the later grades. True, it is difficult to do much while still weak... but that only makes those who succeed young more admirable! It is only natural that as a Progenitor Dungeon Master, I think you are a pretty swell guy.”

“Dungeon engineers are actually that rare?” Casper asked with some genuine confusion. “Why? It’s awesome.”

“That’s what I always say! The problem is that you have to study a lot to learn proper dungeon engineering, and higher stats just makes studying easier. Dungeon engineers also have the problem that they are pretty limited in what they can do when not in dungeons, and nurturing one is pretty damn expensive. If you have a talented engineer, why not just convince him to be a formation master instead, as the required competencies overlap? At least that is what all those damn fools think, not realizing being a dungeon master is the greatest.”

“Their loss, I guess,” Casper shrugged.

“True that.”

Casper felt a bit better after talking to Minaga, and the rest of his party members also looked at him differently, their wariness replaced with relief and recognition. Azal even spoke through their telepathic link.

“For this labyrinth, you should take the lead. Good call on getting the Unique Lifeform on our side.”

Yeah, that hadn't really been a plan. It was more him just being curious. But if he had permission...

"Say, you mentioned other groups when you talked earlier... would you happen to know if others from my home planet also did your labyrinth?"

"A few, yeah."

"How about the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?" Casper asked curiously. Jake had to have come through already with their head start, right?

"Casper, rather than answer that, let me ask you something: do you respect my work and the work of all dungeon engineers who try and create proper labyrinths?"

"I would say so? Labyrinths are a pretty standard design form of dungeons, and this one is greatly designed and far more complex than I can even imagine. So, yeah, I do respect it and dungeon engineers in general," Casper answered, unsure why Minaga had even asked that.

"Well..." Minaga said, his voice full of exasperation. "Let's just say some people can't appreciate good craftsmanship."

Nevermore City had calmed down for a while after the influx of pinnacle geniuses that seemed to arrive one after another petered out. All of the major factions had sent in their bids for the peak of the Leaderboards, and all hoped to claim the spot. The longer one waited, the harder it was after all.

One just had to hold the record for a single second to get the associated reward. Of course, one also had to pass a certain threshold of minimum points to even get the reward in the first place, but all of these top parties would reach that threshold. That meant they were truly competing with one another, and any record set by a group would result in it being harder to set a new one. As expected of a Leaderboard.

However, one day, more than two weeks after everyone believed all the top parties had already entered, a new one appeared. To see the Dao Sect send a group vying for the top spot had already been a massive surprise to most information brokers, but it faded in comparison to this group. Because this group was not a faction... it was five individuals who all had one thing in common - one thing making them all uniquely outstanding simply due to that shared trait.

One was a more than three-meter tall, muscular, hunched-over cyclops-looking creature with an entirely black eye. Pitch-black chains hung from its body, rattling as it walked, yet these chains did not hit the ground but simply phased through it like they didn't truly exist. Its skin was entirely gray, and many would likely confuse it for an undead creature, except it didn't give off any death affinity energy. In fact, it barely gave off any energy, period. Even its aura was barely detectable, but those who could feel it were instantly put on edge.

A second creature was simply a tattered cloak floating through the air, the hood an endless pit of nothingness. There were no limbs to speak of, and the entire ghost-like creature – that was distinctly not undead - looked like it barely existed in the physical plane. Save for a few moments where an arm seemed to glimpse into existence floating beside it, holding a staff of some kind, it displayed no moments as it floated through the air together with the cyclops and the three other people in his auspicious party.

The third was at least recognizable as a known race of the multiverse. Or at least she had been one at some point. She looked like an elf of some kind, but not one anyone could quite place. Her skin was entirely white, to an almost frightening level, with black lines running through her in a pattern that acted like a mental attack whenever one laid eyes on it. Luckily she wore a robe covering her body, but a few weaker D-grades did puke simply upon seeing her hand briefly. She had no hair but had a head covered in odd silky threads that extended toward the sky while dancing in an eerie pattern. Most of her face was obscured as she wore a blindfold over her eyes, and her pale lips made her look almost like a walking frozen corpse. Ultimately, the only real reason people guessed she had once been an elf was her

ears. As with the two prior, she could not be properly Identified. Something the next creature could not be either.

Fourth was a humanoid-looking creature, but not one anyone could quite place. Partly because the head – the only thing visible – seemed to be in a constant flux of change. The head was far larger than any regular creature and had four faces on it, one looking in each direction. All of these faces shifted at every second, from female to male, elf to human, and sometimes even non-humanoid-looking races. The rest of the body was covered in a black robe, but one could faintly see the rustling of more than two arms beneath, and for a brief second, a long metallic limb showed from beneath the robe.

These four all gave off the presence of otherworldly creatures, and all could not be correctly Identified. Like none of them truly belonged in the world, which partly made sense due to what they all had in common:

They were all touched and blessed by Void Gods. They were beings corrupted by the void. Creatures that had stared too deep into something mortals should stay far away from and they had found themselves forever changed from the experience. Yet they had survived, proving they were extraordinary just for that feat alone. It was common knowledge that those who delved into the powers of the void would be forever warped... yet...

Somehow the fifth member of this party was the one that stood out the most. Walking in the center of all these monstrous-looking creatures was a completely ordinary-looking human – something he could even be Identified as. He wore glasses as he seemed to be reading something from the object he was holding, and his carefree demeanor made it clear he was entirely unbothered by the creatures surrounding him. His eyes – the thing that usually was the most obvious sign of corruption – were normal, and he did not seem to hide anything under his clothes. Clothes that also did not fit the theme of black robes, as he had on pants with far too many pockets for someone with a spatial storage, along with a coat and apron and work boots. The only extraordinary piece of equipment he seemed to wear was his glasses.

His normal appearance almost made him the most eerie of the group. Especially as he walked in the middle, indicating he was either the leader or the most prominent member of the party. Or maybe it had no meaning, as these were creatures of the void... and trying to understand the void was the Path of the mad.

This group entered Nevermore without making any stops, uncaring about the many observers. Yet none dared approach them, fearing they could antagonize one of them.

Void Gods had no factions. They had no headquarters, no domains, no areas they controlled, or even buildings they owned. It was simply impossible for them to. Yet none questioned their power, for the Void Gods were known and feared. Every single Void God was a being at the pinnacle – a creature that not even Primordials would dare call themselves superior to.

Those touched by the void were few and far between, and seeing five gathered in one spot was already extraordinary... much less for it to be five individuals all blessed by Void Gods. This meant they had likely interacted with the void by laying eyes on their Patrons without averting their gazes. A truly foolish endeavor, where one could only expect madness or death to follow. Yet these people had managed to retain their egos.

One thing was for sure... the top factions had just gotten themselves another party to compete with. This party being “late” was no comfort to them either because if there was one type of magic that could break a scenario and allow a party to advance fast, it was magic with its Origin in the void.

Chapter 690: Nevermore: For the Family

Teleportation was no doubt the preferred method of long-distance travel in the multiverse. It did have some problems, like requiring a teleportation circle at both the target location and where you teleported from, making it less than ideal as an exploratory tool. One needed to know where one wanted to go in order to teleport somewhere, after all.

If one did not use a magic circle, teleportation became significantly more dangerous, costly, and overall less effective. However, there were instances where one did not want teleportation circles placed in an area.

First of all, many important places were protected by magical barriers. These barriers also protected some teleportation, and while it was possible to allow a “backdoor” of sorts in the barrier, this was, needless to say, a major security flaw. A powerful space mage could often “hack” themselves into a teleportation network and, if there was a backdoor of any kind, exploit that to teleport straight into an area that should otherwise be protected.

That was why most factions only established these teleportation networks inside of the barriers. This was a good method for singular planets or even solar systems, but it became heavily flawed if one wanted to connect two distant planets. A single barrier capable of encompassing two different planets in their own solar systems would rarely be worth it.

Due to this, many Waypoints had been established throughout the different universes. These were planets not protected within any borders, filled with teleportation circles allowing one to travel all across an entire universe within weeks if one jumped repeatedly.

The problem ultimately arose when one had to travel from a Waypoint to within a closed teleportation network. Because there were some closed teleportation networks, with numerous solar systems – sometimes even galaxies - all protected by one powerful defense system. These were the large areas controlled by major factions, and often each faction would only have a handful at most in each universe.

However, even among these closed systems, some places stood out: the heartlands of each faction. Primordial-1 and a huge area surrounding it was recognized as the heartlands of the Holy Church, and it was an area no god not part of the Holy Church could easily enter – not even other Primordials or those with equivalent strength.

Another well known was the Risen and the place known as the Ghostlands. The Altmar Empire had its Capital Cluster, as they called it, with most peak factions having something similar. But, there were two heartlands more protected than any others in the entire multiverse. Which was stronger, no one knew, but all knew it was a tie between these two:

The Automata Legion and the Endless Empire.

These two factions stood at the apex when it came to defending their heartlands. This was for obvious reasons, as both had members they could absolutely not risk dying, and the entire way their societies and Paths worked just lent themselves to making sure they had incredibly safe home bases.

But... one could naturally not just teleport into these heartlands. One had to travel the final distance from the Waypoint to within the barrier themselves, and for security reasons, these Waypoints were always a good distance from the heartlands. Getting that last distance was usually not a problem... but that was only if no one interfered. Because if anyone did, things could get rough.

This was the exact challenge Vesperia found herself facing. She had appeared on the final Waypoint Planet before they would have to manually travel the rest of the way, but barely a second after she had appeared there... the world turned white. A barrier encased her as dozens of figures teleported all around, making sure she was safe as the entire planet below her exploded.

Vesperia barely saw them. A massive floating mothership and armies of Automata gods all descended upon her, ready to strike the moment she appeared on this Waypoint Planet. The only good thing was that there had been eleven total Waypoint Planets to pick between, meaning the Automata Legion had to be at all of them.

Meanwhile, the Endless Empire only had to show up at one.

The entire cosmos was set ablaze as the Automata Legion attacked. Vesperia was shielded within a pod as four True Royals took flight and escorted her toward the planet, teleportation not possible due to the interference of the Automata Legion. In the distance, she saw endless flashes of light as war raged. It was lucky that the Waypoint Planets around the Endless Empire were all artificially created and far separated from any others... for if not, then entire galaxies could have been snuffed out of existence that day. Vesperia had known this could happen but was powerless to do anything. All she could do was trust her sisters.

Ultimately, Vesperia entered meditation, knowing that the best she could do was remain calm. She faded out all the disturbances all around her as time passed. Approximately seven hours later, she felt herself be teleported, and she opened her eyes to see herself surrounded by divine beings. Her sisters – the other True Royals - among them.

It was only later she came to learn the details of the battle. More than six thousand gods of the Automata Legion had been slain, though they all knew it had little consequence besides the material cost of their bodies, as one never truly killed an Automata god just by destroying its vessel. No, the true victory lay in successfully escorting Vesperia safely into the heartlands of the Endless Empire. That they had already managed to destroy the mothership was a boon, but the Endless Empire did lose a Godqueen in return. An acceptable loss in their eyes.

The Automata Legion had known their chances of success were low, but they had tried anyway. The Endless Empire had shown up with nearly all True Royals. Being so close to their heartlands, they would gladly show up in force, which had resulted in the Endless Empire coming out on top big time, even if one did not include Vesperia in the equation.

In the end, it had been a relatively low-risk, high-reward strike from the Automata Legion.

Safely back in her homeland, Vesperia felt relief and a powerful sense of belonging. She was greeted by all of her sisters, their happiness obvious at finally seeing her return home, even if she did sense some

faint hesitation from some of them. They celebrated for a while as they waited for more arrivals to come. Something they did after only a week.

Gods of the Vespernat Lineage had all felt the moment a True Royal had appeared. Once the news spread that she had safely returned to the Endless Empire, these powerful Hive Queens did not hesitate. Gods of all ranks, including Godqueens, entered the heartlands of the Endless Empire to greet the True Royal and swear their loyalty. There was no hesitation in their actions, no second-guessing. It was in their nature to recognize Vesperia, even if she was only C-grade.

After that, Vesperia still had one more important thing to do before her true work began.

Vesperia was escorted by the Odonstrom Hive Queen down into the deepest parts of the Great Planet known as Primordial-8. Some also called it the Great Hive Planet, but its official designation was still Primordial-8, following the same naming convention as every other Great Planet in the first universe.

“Are you certain you find yourself ready?” the Odonstrom True Royal asked.

“Yes, there is no cause for concern,” she answered without hesitation. “I already feel the call and their desire.”

“Very well, I shall not question you then, sister,” the Odonstrom Hive Queen smiled, looking relieved.

“I still detect hints of doubt in your demeanor, sister. From some of the others, too. How come?” Vesperia questioned the far older god.

"It is hopefully of little concern, but it is perhaps still pertinent to bring up. Even with your assurances, there is still some doubt about you due to the matters of your birth. Your circumstances are unique, and some fear that you may not truly hold the same allegiances as the Vesperia of old," the Odonstrom True Royal sighed. "I know this doubt should be dispelled."

"I don't think it should," Vesperia cut her off. "I am not entirely the same as other True Royals or the old Vesperia. But what changes I have experienced are not negative or even ones I find a need to hide. My allegiances also still lie with my Sire along with the Empire; I believe I have made this quite clear. Is this an issue for the council? Or do you not believe it proper I receive the Lineage Treasures?"

The other True Royal sighed. "Perhaps... perhaps not. But even if there is some doubt, there is no doubt about your identity as a True Royal, and thus you can naturally claim your birthright."

"Thank you," Vesperia nodded as they continued without exchanging words. They were heading to the innermost armory of the Endless Empire, where the treasures of her Lineage resided. Items that only the True Royals of the corresponding Lineage could make use of. In her case, Vesperia already knew what awaited her:

The Vespernat Royal Diadem and the Vespernat Hive Core.

The diadem would increase the effectiveness of all her abilities by a non-insignificant amount, especially when it came to leading her hive and controlling her subjects. It was also a massive, near-inexhaustible energy source and a treasure granted directly by the system in the first era. The Vespernat Hive Core was a powerful treasure she could absorb that would expand her inner world significantly while also making the energy within far more potent. The diadem had been a treasure used by the original Vesperia, while the Hive Core had come from the body of the dead Vesperia. These two would not make her much more powerful as a warrior but assist her tremendously in rebuilding the Vespernat Lineage.

As a monster, Vesperia could not use normal equipment, but these treasures still worked for her. Throughout the eras, they had also both been nurtured by the Endless Empire. This had not only been done out of faint hope a Vespernat True Royal would appear either. As long as they kept the Records of the Vespernat Lineage alive, there was hope that a new True Royal would be born through a miracle. It did prove to have done nothing, as the miracle had been her Sire, Jake, even if some of the other True Royals remained skeptical.

Vesperia knew what many of them hoped for.

They hoped that with time, Vesperia would “come to her senses” and disregard where she came from. That she would truly embrace her fate as a member of the Endless Empire – and only the Endless Empire. She also knew why.

The Endless Empire was not allied with any Primordials, as they did not believe any of them could be trusted. The twelve Primordials had been the first gods, and they had an... odd relationship with one another. They often fought and opposed one another, but never had there been a deadly conflict between them. Even when Sanguine and the vampires arose, and several Primordials came for the first vampire, the Malefic Viper did not interfere despite his close relationship with Sanguine. He stayed out of it and saw Sanguine fall, not fighting his fellow Primordials.

Vesperia knew that Jake was not the one they had a problem with. It was the being behind him. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, after all, and did anyone truly believe he was indeed making his own decisions solely? That the Malefic One was not the one pulling the strings?

No, none believed such a preposterous thing to be possible. Vesperia also knew trying to convince them otherwise would be useless, and she didn't want to try even if she thought she could. She did recognize she was biased on the matter, and her opinion thus held less sway, so she would hold her truth to herself.

Because no matter what people thought... Vesperia had felt the Records of her Sire. Felt his will and that which dwells within. Perhaps the Malefic One could manipulate her Sire, even fool him into doing things against his own interest... but she did not believe even a Primordial could ever control him.

Some monsters could simply never be tamed.

"We have arrived," the Odonstrom Hive Queen said.

The two of them found themselves standing before a large crystal structure with items suspended within. The diadem and the Hive Core. Vesperia felt them both pulsing with power, and the other True Royal looked at her with worry.

"They have been empowered through the ages... neither is to be taken lightly. The Vespernat Diadem especially. The energy had been overwhelming to even the S-grade Vesperia back in the first era, and alas, you still only find yourself in C-grade."

"I shall be fine, of that, I assure you," Vesperia nodded as she walked forward. The two artifacts reacted to her mere presence, and with a thought, the crystals that not even weaker gods could scratch willingly shattered. The full auras of the artifacts were released as they flew toward Vesperia.

She opened her arms and welcomed them both. The diadem landed on her head, and the Hive Core melted into her chest as she felt the massive influx of energy. She felt the overwhelming power course through her body, and Records impacted her soul as she stood with her eyes closed.

Vesperia had to endure the Records... but one had to remember. She had been connected to a presence that surpassed any other she had ever felt, and compared to that, all else just paled. There was still a lot of energy to tame, but she only took four hours before she opened her eyes once more, the golden jewels on the diadem lighting up and her inner world expanding.

“That... you truly surpassed my expectations, sister. I believed it would have taken you far longer... even if you are far from making full use of both treasures, the mere fact you successfully bound them is cause for celebration,” the Odomstrom Hive Queen said with genuine happiness.

“We talked earlier about how the circumstances of my birth may impact me negatively... but did the council ever consider that it was just the opposite?” Vesperia questioned her fellow True Royal while deep in thought.

“What do you mean?” her sister asked, Vesperia’s next words simply too foreign for her to consider.

“That my Sire’s involvement in my birth is naught but a boon,” Vesperia smiled.

She did know her words could be viewed as potentially blasphemous, as how could the Origin of a True Royal possibly be improved? Vesperia also knew that these words were not ones her Sire hoped she would speak.

For it would no doubt only fan the flames of desire the Endless Empire held to have him join the Grand Hive proper and discard his involvement with any Primordials.

A thought Vesperia did have to admit she found appealing, no matter how impossible she knew it was.

For just as some monsters could never be tamed, some became restless if anyone attempted to tie them down.

She did not believe a restless Sire would do the Endless Empire any good.

“Well, that went terribly,” Caleb sighed as he leaned against the broken wall of the castle, his armor entirely burnt away, leaving him nearly naked. He luckily had an extra pair of trousers, for if not, he would indeed have been.

“We were careless,” Matteo – his second-in-command – agreed.

“Yeah,” Caleb nodded. “Good job on keeping the damn Demon Lord still while we dealt with the two Tower Demons.”

Matteo smiled lightly but did not say anything. In the fight, Matteo had managed to trap the Demon Lord in a labyrinth of auditory illusions through his piano play and use of dark magic for over two minutes while the rest of the party killed the Tower Demons, which was why Caleb said he had done a damn good job.

The problem was that they had not done a good job overall. They had decided to go for only empowering two of the artifacts using the Secret Scrolls and moved to kill one of the Tower Demons while deactivating the Heart of the Demon Lord. However, even if they did that, the situation had turned south.

"I am glad we didn't bring Nadia," Matteo muttered.

"Yeah," Caleb said as he stared from afar at where the Demon Lord had teleported away after they failed to stop him. Nearby he saw his two remaining party members walking over... and the ashes of the one who hadn't made it, still scattering as the wind swept by, the entire castle having exploded after the Tower Demons died.

Caleb and Matteo were the only ones from the Court of Shadows in the party, as, quite frankly, full parties with only their members tended to suck. The three others had consisted of two of Jake's potential party members from the ceremony and one outside recruit poached by the Court.

The one who died had been one of the people wanting to join Jake. She had been a caster and was not fast enough when the Demon Lord powered up. The sword had been sent flying towards her while she was distracted, resulting in her body getting pierced through and her entire form destroyed in mere seconds. As a wood mage, she had been weak to fire from the beginning, and in the end, they had failed to protect her.

"Judge," the princess from the Altmar Empire – their healer – spoke as she walked over with the final member, a large beastkin warrior with a shield and a mace. Their tank.

The princess looked unsure as Caleb shook his head. "I shall inform her family. Are you willing to stay with the party even after this?"

It took the elf a few seconds as she nodded. "Ilieasia made a mistake, failing to even use her escape talisman... let us just hope we get a good replacement."

A cold response but one Caleb had expected. He knew the princess was, in part, there to stay close to him to get to Jake, and Caleb could live with that. Finding a healer like the Altmar princess for their party would be incredibly difficult under normal circumstances, so he welcomed making use of his big brothers... fame? Notoriety?

He wasn't sure, and it ultimately didn't matter. Caleb was in Nevermore to get stronger to keep his family safe, and he would not hesitate if making a harsh decision could help him and his own in the long term.

"Let us hope so, indeed," Caleb sighed as he looked onward. "Now, let's move on and recruit a replacement on the city floor. If not, I will send a request to the Court."

Caleb also hoped they could relax a bit on the city floor. Who knows, maybe they would even meet some friends?