

Hunter 691

Chapter 691: Nevermore: Work Ethic

"Good, now adjust the energy output... slowly... good, now do not forge- ah, you remembered, good. Alright... watch the outer circle, do not let the resonance fade. You need to maintain the equilibrium until a perfect balance is struck. Keep it up now... good, good... and the final part... perfect!" Grand Elder Duskleaf said in a proud voice as he inspected the magical formation.

Meira was covered in sweat and felt exhausted, yet proud, as she looked at her creation.

The large formation stretched out in front of her, lighting up with intense mana from the nine catalysts acting as batteries. In the center of it, energy gathered, and a small hole had already been pre-dug.

"Now for the seed to be planted," Duskleaf said happily as Meira smiled and took out the tree seed from a lockbox she had left off to the side. It was a silverish seed, and she was excited to see it grow. Meira used mana to levitate it into the air and guided it into the hole. She proceeded to fill the hole with some special soil from afar, her Teacher standing encouragingly beside her. She then took out a watering can and took flight to get above the formation, and watered the entire thing. The formation responded to the magical water and pulsed with power as it fully activated and began feeding the seed energy.

"It's done," she smiled. She heard the sound of a notification as she gained a level, making her even more excited. One step closer to C-grade.

"Indeed it is," Duskleaf nodded proudly. "The Silverpine Astral Tree should be able to reach at least ancient rarity with this formation, so it is something to be proud of."

Meira smiled a bit and shook her head. "I am sure Teacher could do far better when he was my level."

"Master used to slap me in the back of my head for failing to produce a single epic rarity plant while in D-grade," the old god chuckled.

"That's..." Meira said, fidgeting with her hands. She knew that her Teacher repeatedly said he wasn't that good at lower grades, but... she had a hard time seeing it. Because today, no one would dispute he was one of the premier alchemists in the entire multiverse. How could he possibly have struggled to produce products at epic rarity?

Seeing her doubt, Teacher shook his head.

"I told you already, talent is a bonus, not a requirement, and that is only in cases where the talent does not become a handicap. The most important thing in the multiverse is work ethic. Nothing else matters if you do not have a good work ethic," Duskleaf said. It was something Meira had heard many times before. She understood it from a logical perspective, but it was still hard to imagine. Could one really become a god just by working hard?

Everyone around her growing up had worked hard in the mines, day in and day out. They had toiled away endlessly to survive... but she did know why that didn't count. One still had to challenge themselves. Something her Teacher could help her do.

"But you still need to know what to work on," he continued, elaborating on her own thoughts. "If you decided to just replicate formation at or below your skill level over and over again, you will get nowhere. No, you need to constantly improve and challenge yourself. Without Master, I would have never even made it to C-grade. He was the one who guided me, gave me challenges, and whenever he felt I was stagnating, he gave me a push in the right direction. A guiding hand that made sure I would always face

new challenges and be forced to improve. And I knew that he would have abandoned me without a second thought if I fell into complacency, for he did that with so many others who studied under him.”

“I understand, Teacher,” Meira said with a nod. She did not know if Grand Elder Duskleaf would also abandon her if he believed she was stagnating, and she did not intend to find out.

With Lord Thayne’s true identity as the Chosen of the Malefic One revealed to all, Teacher had finally taken her as an official disciple and even given her a Divine Blessing. He had gone so far as to allude to him not having a Chosen himself and hinted at her potentially getting her Blessing upgraded if she proved herself worthy. Meira couldn’t even think about becoming a Chosen as she was already overwhelmed by her current Blessing and elevated status.

No, no, she had something far less impactful she wanted to accomplish

Because... Meira had found her own goal. One separate from Lord Thayne and even her Teacher.

She wanted to free her clan.

Meira knew that to do this, she would have to borrow the status of her Teacher, but she also wanted to go there with her head held high. The most powerful people in the clan were C-grades, and she wanted to go there at C-grade too.

Her mother and siblings were still at the old clan based on what Izil had told her, and while some would call it an infantile dream, Meira really wanted to be the one to go and “save” them. She wanted to bring them to the Order or perhaps even claim the entire clan as her own to protect it. Something she likely could do right now... but she did not want to go before C-grade.

Meira wanted C-grade to be her “turning point,” so to say. Even if she was no longer a slave, her profession and class both bore marks of her being one. Both made it clear she was still a servant. If all went well... then none of her evolutions would even hint at it.

She wanted to show up before her family proud of who she had become and not just her status as the student of the Grand Elder.

It was a small goal in the grand scheme of things... but it was perhaps the first goal she had set entirely for herself.

Her first goal of many, hopefully.

Sandy was sleepy, so Sandy slept a lot.

Sandy was sleepy because they had eaten too much and had a stomach ache.

Sandy had not moved from within the Order of the Malefic Viper since the ceremony.

Sandy would begin to feel better after a few days, only to eat again and get another stomach ache.

Sandy was caught in a cruel loop of consumption due to all the evil people having given Sandy too much stuff to eat during the ceremony.

Sandy was totally okay with the current situation they found themselves in.

So... having a regular day job kind of sucked before the system. At least most people seemed to think so. Not Jake, though. In fact, he had very much liked having one.

It had given him some kind of structure to his life. Wake up, shower, go to work, do the work, go to the gym, drive home, and relax until he had to sleep to get up for work the next day. This constant flow of everyday life had helped keep Jake together during the nightmarish years before the system.

He still recalled those days as... bad. It was only now, after a few years had passed, that Jake could truly understand how much life had sucked for him back then. How boring and meaningless the entire world had felt. Work had, ironically enough, allowed him to have something to focus on and get through the days until, finally, the initiation arrived, and color returned to his world.

One thing had stayed, though. Jake still liked to work on stuff, which was probably part of the reason he was good at alchemy. He still needed to always try and keep himself busy, and sitting still just never really worked for him. Jake would begin to feel restless if he did nothing for too long, so even when he was on “holiday” and visited his parents and Caleb, he still did some alchemy and helped train Caleb’s shadow assassins here and there.

Minaga’s City Floor gave him some flashbacks to those calmer periods of his life, both before and after the integration. Life was incredibly simple here on the city floor, and the days blended together as the months passed. Jake just did alchemy day in and day out. Every “break” he took was going to one of the arenas and getting some points there.

Speaking of the arenas, as Minaga had said, then one could fight there once a day versus monsters. One could also fight other people, but it didn't reward anything. If one could bet Minaga Coins in duels, that would have been a far too easy exploit.

Anyway, the daily arena challenge was quite simple. One would enter and be teleported into the middle of the arena, where a timer of one hour would begin. Monsters would then enter the arena, and as long as you killed all that were alive, more would come. This meant that someone more powerful would manage to kill far more monsters than anyone else. It also had to be mentioned that the arena was for individuals only.

After the hour was up, you would be rewarded with Minaga Coins based on the monsters you killed. Overall, Jake only saw this arena as some good exercise, and it helped him practice finishing foes faster. Sylphie and the Fallen King naturally went to this arena every day, and it had become their primary source of income. Both of them also sold stuff from within Nevermore to get more coins, as they were the slowest when it came to accumulating them.

As the Fallen King had complained, then it did seem harder for monsters to obtain coins compared to those with professions. The two of them could still do other stuff besides the arena, but it gave little compared to just crafting. There were different facilities in the city that one could work for by assisting natives with all sorts of tasks. The Fallen King had found one that asked for help with soul-related rituals that gave decent coins, while Sylphie helped craft natural treasures using her weird green wind. Jake had no idea how all that worked, but he let them do their thing to earn coins as best they could.

Dina was a bit of an odd one out in their party. She did not have a profession, only her Dryad race and Druid class, but that did not make her any less of a crafter. It was only on this floor that Jake learned Dina had an amazing technique to make what was effectively genetically modified plants. She would communicate with herbs to accomplish this, and through this, she created many different plants that Jake had never seen or heard of before.

Even if she used plants she already had before entering Nevermore, she could then sell these crossbreeds. However, Jake and she quickly discovered that if they used materials they had gathered inside Nevermore in crafting, the Brokers would buy their products for even more.

Speaking of the Brokers... Jake had no idea why they bought stuff for what they did. These Brokers were all cloak-wearing humanoid creatures that dwelled within many near-identical shops spread throughout the city. These Brokers could be spoken to and negotiated with, and Jake did see some people get away with more Minaga Coins than he would expect by virtue of good negotiation, so merchants did seem to have one advantage.

It had to be mentioned that skills did not really work that well, though. Illusion magic or any kind of mental magic was also not an option, as these Brokers had one tiny little detail about them that made it unfeasible for a C-grade to influence them:

They were all A-grades.

Why were they all A-grades? Well, it was likely to avoid people manipulating them with skills... so Jake guessed it made sense. Luckily for Jake, he never planned on manipulating them; he just sold his alchemical creations. Someone who could still kind of “manipulate” them was the final member of Jake’s party... because the old man had taken the coin lead by quite a margin through selling paintings. It turned out that creations with purely subjective values, such as works of art, were far easier to bullshit a high price for.

Jake was not jealous. Totally not. That the old man was only seven thousand coins off seemed totally fair. That Jake, who had also worked his butt off, was still thirty thousand short was not at all something to complain about.

Current Minaga Coins: 184,190/214,000

From the time they had entered Minaga's City Floor till now, about thirteen months had passed, so they weren't gonna break that record that was mentioned to them, that is for sure. This meant they had spent well over two years within Nevermore so far, with nearly half the time spent on this city floor. Jake would lie if he said he wouldn't have preferred to do without... but the time was not entirely wasted.

Because it turned out that just grinding out alchemy products every day was quite good when it came to raking in levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 211 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 224 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 215 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

...

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 221 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Over this period, Jake had gained 14 Profession levels, which, if he had to say so himself, was pretty damn decent. The others had also grown over this time, and honestly, this floor did give Jake and the Sword Saint a good excuse to work on their professions while Dina leveled up her race quite a few times.

He had seen the levels slow down the more time passed, and he knew he would soon not get much more experience from just crafting, but that was honestly fine. Once he had enough Minaga Coins for his own toll, Jake had a date with a certain puzzle box he had received during his Chosen-reveal ceremony.

Overall, he would say things were going well.

However... one thing had left a sour taste in Jake's mouth. Ell'Hakan had appeared on the Minaga City Floor four and a half months after Jake and his party made it there – so they were well ahead despite entering at nearly the same time - and the current Leaderboard had not been updated, meaning Jake was ahead of him on points too. That had been sweet, but that taste of sweetness only made what happened next leave a far sourer taste.

The record to pass the Minaga City Floor had been broken.

Ell'Hakan had appeared on the floor and did not seek out Jake. He did not seek out anyone. Based on reports, he had simply listened to the rules explained by someone on the floor allied with him, nodded, and brought his entire party to one of the Brokers.

An hour after entering the Broker's store, he had left it, and he and his entire party had headed straight for the toll booth. They all paid their toll and moved onto the thirty-sixth floor right then and there, leaving before barely anyone knew they were there. Not even Jake heard they had arrived before after-the-fact.

Seventy-nine minutes. That was how long it had taken Ell'Hakan to pass the city floor.

Jake had cursed how the hell that was possible, only for Minaga to pop in, full of schadenfreude.

"Would you look at that, a dirty cheater complaining about another dirty cheater? So what if he found a loophole using his Bloodline? Do you think that should be banned? I could totally ban it from here on out because, you know, it's not like there are five more floors of my labyrinth, right? Surely, you would not consider using your bullshit Bloodline on these floors, right? That would be super hypocritical, wouldn't it?"

As much as Jake wanted to punch the four-eyed dungeon master, he could only grit his teeth and curse internally as he swore to make up for the lost time by utterly demolishing the remaining labyrinth. Ell'Hakan had taken far longer doing the prior labyrinth floors, so he hoped to catch up.

When it came to how Ell'Hakan had cheated, Minaga didn't say, but he did drop one hint.

"The Brokers ultimately decide what they buy something for... so if they for some reason think it is a good idea to buy objects for hundreds of thousands of Minaga Coins, then what can you do? Well, I could do something, but if I stop one Bloodline-powered exploit, I would have to stop all of them."

Jake once more did not want to argue that point, as he still felt like his Bloodline was a better cheat than Ell'Hakans. In fact, he refused to acknowledge any other Bloodlines could ever be superior overall. Sure, Dina's was better in a plant-filled environment, and Ell'Hakans was better on a fucking city floor, but Jake would reign supreme in the vast majority of situations.

Besides, Ell'Hakan not sticking around wasn't exactly a bad thing, as it meant Jake didn't have to bother even thinking about the guy. Instead, he could turn his attention to all the other familiar faces who had begun to arrive on the city floor, some of which he had already made contact with.

In fact, considering how long it took on average to gather all the Minaga Coins, Jake had a feeling they had quite a reunion on their hands.

Chapter 692: Nevermore: Earthly Reunion

"I already told them to go fuck themselves," the short-haired woman said with a shrug. "Turns out that when the big boss is backing you, everyone else also just backs down. Funny how that works."

"My interpretation is that you just like to create chaos and political uproar," Jake grinned.

"Who gives a shit?" Carmen said, clearly not caring much.

"Well, not me in particular," Jake shrugged as he looked at the pugilist that had come by to visit. This was not her first time coming by, either, as she had barged in – or at least tried to, only to be stopped by a system-made barrier – the day she arrived on the city floor.

Through his sphere, he also saw others slowly making their way over to their chosen meeting spot, with the next to arrive likely being the Sword Saint.

“Davian is still being a bitch complaining about people talking,” Carmen sighed, clearly annoyed as she looked at Jake casually mix some stuff into the cauldron. She herself was also fidgeting with some weird stone figurine in her hand.

“Shouldn’t the talk have died down by now? What are they even saying at this point?” Jake asked, not caring overly much about what people were saying.

“It’s quite romantic, actually,” an old man said as he appeared in the doorway. “A real Romeo and Juliet tale. Two souls from opposite sides of a conflict, their love seeking to overcome even the will of the gods. I am sure books of such a forbidden love shall be written.”

“Hey, old man, wanna test how strong those bones of yours are? The ones in your face in particular,” Carmen shot back as she turned to him.

“No, I am quite confident my feeble old bones are not fit to match the fist of a Runemaiden,” the Sword Saint chuckled. “And would it lighten your mood to know this rumor is not exclusive to you two?”

“Oh?” Jake asked, confused. He had to admit he was not up-to-date on the latest gossip, but considering the old man nearly had enough Minaga Coins for his toll, he seemed to have some more time.

“An even more unbelievable and romantic tale,” the Sword Saint said as he went over and took a seat. “Imagine the scene. Two lovers even before the initiation, but in the final moments before the universe changes, one of them sadly perishes... only for the system to arrive and allow them to return to life. Both are thrust into their own Tutorials, neither aware of how the other is doing or even that they live...

but the moment they arrive back on the same planet, they find themselves part of warring factions, with one now even a Risen.”

“Wait,” Jake said, but the Sword Saint raised a hand.

“Could you imagine the pain these two poor souls must feel? To finally be reunited, only to discover their love is forbidden. Even so, it refuses to fade, no matter how they try... and when they once more encounter each other within Nevermore, free from the oppression and influence of their factions, love blossoms stronger than ever before,” the old man, spinning quite the tale.

“You can’t be serious, right?” Jake questioned, knowing who he was talking about.

Smiling, the old man pulled out a painting from his spatial storage. Jake looked at it for one moment as he nearly choked and momentarily lost control of his mana.

The painting depicted two people Jake knew quite well. One was an extremely handsome man with loose robes and deep blue eyes. He had a white rose in his hand as he held it out in a romantic gesture while staring intensely into the eyes of the other person across from him. Opposite stood a pale man with hesitation in his eyes, looking shy as he held a black robe behind his back, his clothes also halfway undressed for some reason.

Who else could the painting depict but Jacob and Casper? Highly stylized versions of them, anyway.

“You seriously painted that?” Carmen asked in disbelief.

“Naturally,” the Sword Saint nodded proudly.

“It’s pretty good,” she nodded.

“Seriously?” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“What? I may be a brute, but I can appreciate good art when I see it,” Carmen shrugged.

“It’s practically fanart,” Jake protested, pointing at the painting as he turned to look at its painter. “And why the hell did you even paint that to begin with? Too much free time?”

“For the Minaga Coins, of course,” the old man answered, flashing a large smile. “Recently, paintings on this topic have been trendy, and the Brokers gladly buy them for high prices, especially as the demand is high while the supply is low. Being a first-mover in the market has already been a big advantage.”

“How bloody bored are people?” Jake had a damn hard time understanding. “I would ask if people also wrote fanfiction, but from your smirk, I am just going to assume the answer is yes... how the hell did that rumor even begin?”

“A very good question,” the Sword Saint nodded. “It would have had to be someone from Earth to know about their relationship before the system. Additionally, they must have started this rumor and helped perpetuate it for some tangible gain, would they not?”

"Are you for real?" Jake said, his mouth open as Carmen giggled.

"I gotta admit, old man, you are far more entertaining than I first give you credit for," she said, still looking at the painting.

"Pretty sure you even painting that qualifies as blasphemy. Also, isn't the Risen and Holy Church pissed? Oh, and why the hell did none of them mention this is going on?" Jake questioned.

"When did you last talk to either of them?" the old man asked.

"About... two weeks ago, I would say?" Jake said.

"Well, that answers it then. These rumors started only ten or so days ago and have been spreading like wildfire since, with the prices still spiking. They should reach a zenith within the month, and hopefully, I should be able to collect the final coins by then. Or at least get very close," the Sword Saint explained.

"You think that painting can fetch that much?" Carmen asked.

"Of course not," the old man shook his head. "I have a collection that I happened to coincidentally pre-prepare."

“You know what? We should change the topic, as the two main characters of your head-canon are nearly here,” Jake gave up as he didn’t wanna discuss the topic more. Casper and Jacob were indeed arriving within the minute. Considering the two were not walking together when they arrived at the hotel, Jake did find it suspicious that they arrived within thirty seconds of each other.

Maybe there was something to those rumors after all... not.

Jake heard them talking in the hallway as they walked over, quite loudly too.

“I swear if I ever find the guy who spread this bullshit...” Casper spoke loudly from outside. “And you said you tried to kill the rumor?”

“That I did, and there was some effect for a while, but not much. At this point, I fear that denial will only strengthen the delusions of those who have chosen to believe the rumor,” Jacob said, his voice full of hopelessness.

“Lyra is pissed, just in case you were wondering,” Casper kept complaining. Jake looked at the old man as he lifted a finger to his lips and shushed, getting a muted giggle out of Carmen. She enjoyed this far too much.

When Jake saw them enter, he also couldn’t help himself.

“The loverboys arrive,” Jake announced them loudly as they walked in together. “Coming from a date?”

"Very funny," Casper stared daggers as he also saw Carmen. "Shouldn't throw stones when you live in a greenhouse. Aren't there also rumors about you two?"

"It's stones in a glass house," Jacob sighed. "And at least there is some partial truth to that rumor, right?"

"See, now you make me want to punch both of you in the face," Carmen smiled as she looked at Jacob. "You especially, Augur of Cons."

"The Holy Church is not a con," Jacob shook his head.

"Sure, and the Primordial Church is not a cult of fanatics," Carmen snorted. "Let's not beat around the bush; the Holy Church is a fucking meatgrinder of souls to fuel the Holyland, nothing else, nothing more."

"Now, let's not get all political here," the Sword Saint shook his head.

Yeah... Carmen did not like Jacob. Jake couldn't really blame her, either. Had Jake not known Jacob before the system, he too would be far less inclined to engage with the Augur.

"Besides, more people are coming," Jake commented as he saw two others approach. Caleb would naturally also participate in their little meeting, and he had even brought along Maria, who Jake hadn't met up with before. He did know she had arrived on the floor, having gone to the ceremony at the Order and all, but that didn't mean he expected her to participate.

One could say many things about Minaga's city floor – not many of them kind – but it was certain that it functioned as a nice gathering spot of geniuses. The record set by Jake's party had even been broken about eight months back by a group from the United Tribes, led by a beast that reminded Jake of the Great White Stag.

Caleb and Maria soon joined them as they all greeted each other. The two of them had both only done the Demon Lord empowered with one artifact, making them get mocked a bit, while everyone else present had done it with all three on full power. Jake was kind of amazed the Holy Church had done it, considering Jacob was not a fighter, but he had shared that it was perfectly doable with Bertram able to revive. Having a guy who could use ultra-powerful items that would blow him up after use was quite an advantage, and Jake still remembered that Holy Sword during the fight with the Monarch of Blood.

It was good to finally catch up with everyone, despite it not being that long for many of them. Jacob did feel a bit out of place at times, but he took the constant jabs at the Church with grace, recognizing the faction was problematic.

A lot of blasphemy was definitely going on, that was for sure.

On a side note, this get-together was pre-integration Earthlings only. Sylphie and the Fallen King would not join them, partly because they were busy gathering more Minaga Coins to catch up but also because they wouldn't fit in. Matteo had also rejected the invitation due to not fitting in, with Bertram not going as he wanted to focus on gathering Minaga Coins.

Someone that didn't care about failing to fit in was the last person who was about to arrive.... someone Jake had not at all expected would actually bother. It was the healer that had mysteriously disappeared from Earth only to reappear at Nevermore with the Dao Sect. He had arrived with a party that was not only hailed as real contenders for the top spot but had even broken the record of the group from the United Tribes, making them the current record-holders.

He was naturally talking about Eron, the last person invited. Arnold would also have been, but he had yet to reach the city floor. Jake only heard about that group from scouts placed by the Court of Shadows, and the weird void party apparently stopped on every single city floor for quite a while and engaged with the Challenge Dungeons there before moving on. An odd strategy, but the entire theme of Arnold's party was being weird as fuck, so it tracked.

Jake kept an eye on Eron through his sphere as he walked towards the large hotel room they had booked. He looked the same as before and did not wear much equipment, based on what Jake could see. The moment he entered the hallway leading to the room, Jake felt something he had not felt for a while bubble up from deep inside of him. He frowned as he suddenly began to feel... hungry. Famished.

When Eron appeared in the doorway, Jake had to restrain himself as he nearly instinctively jumped the healer. Jacob went to greet Eron, but Jake remained seated as he clenched his fists, suppressing himself.

Fuck...

Jake cursed the curse as he took a deep breath and forced down the feeling. He knew where it was coming from too. As the wielder of a cursed weapon, one he had even tethered to his soul, it was natural to be influenced by it... but this was a first. Because looking at Eron, he felt an overwhelming sense of gluttony.

Eternal Hunger could smell the feast before it, and it wanted to dine.

"Are you okay?" Caleb asked Jake as everyone turned to look at him.

"Yeah..." Jake said with a sigh, returning his senses to reality. Eron stood not far from him and smiled as he stretched out a hand.

Jake controlled himself enough to extend a hand and shake it as Eron raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Your control of the curse is... impressive."

"Curse?" Casper practically jumped. "Oh, fucking hell, you are still walking around with that?"

"It's a great weapon, just a bit hungry at times," Jake defended himself, having properly reined in Eternal Hunger. The curse was still lurking, but Jake was no longer filled with the same sense of starvation. Now it was just a slight buzz telling him to pounce - that a wellspring of vital energy stood before him, reaching levels Jake could not even properly understand. Jake did wonder... if Eron had addressed his weakness to soul attacks, was he truly invincible unless some utterly overwhelming force appeared? Because as things were now... Jake got the feeling he wouldn't be able to do much to Eron, and he wondered if anyone else at their level could. Shit, he reckoned that the overpowered healer could have potentially soloed the Demon Lord at full power alone. It would have taken a damn long time, but it should be possible. This feeling did make him uncomfortable, but he knew Eron could not truly be invincible.

There must be a poison I can make, Jake told himself as Casper spoke once more.

"It's a fucking Sin curse; the longer you keep it with you, the more it will embed itself in your soul until one day it becomes a part of you so significant you can no longer cut it out without severely hurting your Path permanently," Casper explained, trying to be helpful. "As your resident curse expert, I would bloody know."

"Well..." Jake shrugged as he took out Eternal Hunger. Casper looked at it for one second before face-palming.

“Fucking lunatic.”

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Jake smiled as he put the weapon away and turned his attention back to Eron. “I did not expect you to show up.”

“Why not?” Eron asked with a raised eyebrow and a smile.

“You disappeared from Earth without anyone knowing what happened, only to show up here with the Dao Sect, a notoriously recluse faction. A faction I know is big on cutting out your prior life and dedicating your entire being to your Path,” Jake pointed out.

“I must admit I also find it... odd. They are isolationists by default,” Jacob commented.

“So does the Holy Church wish to brand itself, yet you, Augur, find yourself in the company of a Runemaiden of Valhal, a Judge from the Court of Shadows, a mercenary in the service of Gwyndyr, the notorious Chosen of the Malefic Viper, a Transcendent blessed by Aeon, and finally a student of the Dao Sect. Why is that, Augur?” Eron asked.

Jacob narrowed his eyes. “We are in Nevermore... and I have been given certain freedoms due to my position and what they expect of me.”

“Then, perhaps I find myself in a similar situation,” Eron nodded, not sharing further.

“People will still talk,” Jacob pointed out.

“If mere words can sway one’s Path, then you have far to go,” Eron shook his head. “The opinions of others are of no consequence. Missing a meeting with all of my fellow Earthlings would only be a cause for regret.”

“Some of us do have to consider the impact our actions have on others,” Caleb pointed out. “Not everyone can act carefree.”

Jacob nodded to that. “True. The reason I am here is that out of everyone, I have the easiest explaining my actions. I am an Augur, and my Path is to help others find their Paths. For me to talk to anyone and everyone is expected, and many believe I am meeting you all to try and bring you onto a Path aligned with the Holy Church.”

“Hey, I have a better reason,” Jake protested. “I don’t really care.”

“Perfect argumentation,” the Sword Saint chuckled.

“I’m just a mercenary who was hired to be here if anyone asks,” Maria shrugged.

“And I am here because this was simply where my Path took me,” Eron finally smiled as he took a seat before turning to look at Jake. “Now, pray tell, how is our dear small planet doing these days, World Leader?”

Chapter 693: Nevermore: Agree To Disagree

"Earth?" Jake questioned as he responded to Eron. "Pretty sure it's still there. Was the last time I checked. Speaking of, how did you even leave the ninety-third universe? The Dao Sect does not strike me as the kind of faction to have blessed beasts capable of setting up a formation capable of teleporting anyone to another universe."

"It was not beasts, no. I was invited by a temple that had prepared a teleportation circle for them to leave," Eron answered.

"A temple?" Jake questioned as he looked at Jacob and Caleb. "Was there a faction capable of constructing a cross-universe teleportation circle we didn't know about?"

"I never heard of it," Caleb shook his head, Jacob also looking unsure.

"You said it yourself; the Dao Sect likes its isolation. Earth is far bigger than any of us had time to truly comprehend, so is it truly that odd that some would have been hidden from sight? They never claimed a Pylon or engaged with anything system-related. They simply stayed at the old temple they had always lived in and, with guidance from the Dao Sect, constructed a way for them to join the faction properly," Eron explained rather forthcomingly.

"I have been wondering, how is this Dao Sect related to those following similar ways of life to their beliefs before the system?" the Sword Saint asked.

"As I am sure you all know, Records bleed through to a new universe even before the integration. It often ends up slightly warped due to the change in natural laws from an integrated and a pre-integration universe, but the influence is still stark. We see this with many religions and the Holy Church, but also with places like Valhal and entities such as Yggdrasil being known names even before the system integrated us. For the Dao Sect to also be present is only to be expected," Eron gladly continued to explain.

“Huh,” Carmen said. “Not gonna lie; I never even bothered thinking about it. But I guess it does make sense the Holy Church inspired those annoying fucks that go around knocking on people’s doors at all times of the day, wanting you to join some shitty cult.”

“Records of Valhal created ripples that gave birth to pillaging rapists that raided the innocent all across the globe,” Jacob shot back.

“While the Holy Church taught us the goodness of burning women at the stake,” Carmen scoffed.

“Hey, they never changed that mindset,” Casper chimed in, throwing Jacob a glance. “They still want to purge everything that doesn’t fit their mold.”

“That... I can’t argue against,” Jacob sighed. “The attitude towards what the Church calls corrupted enlightened is not something I am a fan of.”

“Also, I never said Valhal were the good guys. Let’s not kid ourselves; all our factions fucking suck. Well, maybe not the Dao Sect, as I don’t know anything about them, but look at the rest of us? Evil snake god cult, assassin cult, death cult, “holy” cult, fighting cult, mercenary cult... actually, I guess the old man is the only one not part of any damn cult. Aeon doesn’t have a cult, right?”

“No cult, as far as I am aware,” the Sword Saint chuckled.

"But they do have fanatic fans of his watches. You know, the kind to buy an expensive watch and then somehow make the fact that they own that watch become their entire personality," Jake pointed out.

"So, still kind of a cult," Carmen nodded.

"Touche," the old man shook his head, taking the joke in strides.

"It is also a bit rude to call the Order of the Malefic Viper an evil snake god cult," Jake protested in jest. "It's an Order, not a cult."

"The least orderly Order I know of," Jacob cut in. "There is little control and support embedded in the organization's structure. Perhaps it is good for the powerful, but the weak see none of this so-called order."

"While the Holy Church only sees control of everyone," Jake shook his head.

"Not entirely. Look at me, I am here right now, and if anyone in this room was part of the Church, you too would have immense freedom. Just not absolute freedom. There would still be consequences, expectations, and responsibilities, but is that really so big of a sacrifice? That you feel slightly inconvenienced at times to bring peace to a trillion living souls who were less fortunate than you? To them, your freedom becomes their fear, while the Church's control becomes their safety," Jacob shot back as he continued.

"Is the Church perfect? No, far from it, but the multiverse is a wholly flawed place. There is no such thing as perfection, just making the best of a given situation, and I believe the Church will bring the most good for the largest number of people. Even if it does mean that sometimes sacrifices have to be made..."

sacrifices nobody at the Church like to make but still sees the necessity of making. I wish it was not so, but the multiverse does not allow it to be otherwise, partly because of the uncontrolled freedom and selfishness of others.”

“Wow, you really are here to try and recruit us, huh?” Carmen raised an eyebrow. “It may just be me, but I would rather struggle for myself than be a comfortable slave.”

“They are not slaves, and you have the privilege of being who you are. We all do. You can’t expect everyone to be like us or expect them to turn their entire lives into one long struggle,” Jacob shook his head.

“Neither can you expect me to struggle to make them comfortable,” Carmen didn’t let up.

“We are getting very political again,” the Sword Saint cut in once more. “But do let me offer some words from someone who has spent his entire life training and managing a large organization... it is hard. You can’t make everyone happy all the time, and in the end, it is rare that anyone can say what the right choice is when a hard decision is made. The same is true for the factions we belong to. They are all flawed in their own ways, and we can argue from now till we get kicked out of Nevermore and never agree. Ultimately we belong to factions or have backers that fit who we are as individuals, and isn’t that as close as we can get to finding our perfect personal factions?”

Jacob and Carmen seemed to listen to the old man as they nodded tentatively and let the topic drop as Jake shrugged.

“Or, if it isn’t perfect... just get strong enough to change it for. Make it your own version of perfect. The Holy Church does what the Holy Church does because that is what the Holy Mother and the Holy Pantheon want. Reach a level where you can stand beside them and actually change shit if you want to

make things better. It may take a while, but shit, if you're aiming for godhood, you literally have forever," Jake said in a relaxed tone.

"You speak of godhood so casually," Jacob shook his head. "Statistically speaking, the chances of any one of us even reaching S-grade is incredibly low, much less godhood. While it may be your dream and goal, I don't believe it is healthy to anchor the changes you wish to bring about on the assumption you will ascend to divinity."

"Sounds like the words of a pussy with no self-confidence," Carmen scoffed.

"Or a realist with a clear head and no delusions," Jacob shot back.

"To even reach for godhood is to not only delude yourself into grandeur but truly embrace that delusion... enough to one day make it into reality through your own actions," Eron finally chimed in after being satisfied just listening in for a while.

"Jacob, I do believe you misunderstand some things," the Sword Saint shook his head. "To many of us, godhood is not truly a goal, just an inevitable consequence of us walking our Paths. Either we will become gods walking this Path, or we will die with no regrets as we lived true to ourselves. At least, that is how I feel."

"Then what is your goal?" Jacob asked the old man.

"To live up to the name I have come to embrace. To truly make myself worthy of the title of Sword Saint," he smiled.

“And what will you do with all the power you accumulate through that pursuit?”

“That... doesn’t matter. Not truly. I do not gain power to use that power for anything in particular. I gain power to overcome my own self. To reach further and beat myself over and over again. I do not dwell on the why; I simply focus on the how. I have an innate desire to improve... to change. Not changing would be denying who I am. Getting stronger is not something you have to question. It simply happens as that is the natural course of things,” the Sword Saint explained.

Jake listened in and nodded to himself. He saw Carmen be the same. This reminded Jake of one of the conversations he had with Villy about how important internal motivation was. To have that innate drive to progress, no matter what. Thinking about why you wanted to get stronger was a waste of time in Jake’s mind.

“I guess we will just have to agree to disagree,” Jacob sighed. “I just don’t see the meaning in having power if you have nothing you want to accomplish with it.”

No one else commented on the matter after that, as the topic once more changed. Eron finally got to ask some questions about Earth, and it became clear he truly had no idea what was going on. He had only heard that Jake had become World Leader and found the notion amusing. The guy was also surprised when the Sword Saint explained the council they had established.

It also became obvious Jacob did know everything that was going on, proving that the Holy Church likely still had a lot of people on Earth yet to be weeded out. Spies left behind to keep an eye on things, or devout individuals who failed to evacuate in time and now hoped to make themselves useful for the Church. Yeah, Jake really didn’t like the Church either.

Catching up with everyone was nice, even if some people were a bit withheld when it came to giving information. Jacob and Eron didn't share that much of what they had been up to, only giving snippets here and there. Casper, on the other hand, gladly told them all about how they were growing New Yalsten. The realm was also still attached to that meteor just flying through space towards who-knows-where. Not even Casper was sure exactly where they were going, but it sounded like they had some kind of target destination.

Jake already knew what Maria and Caleb had been up to, but they still told a bit more, especially about their parties and how Nevermore had been so far.

The restrictions on sharing information about Nevermore only applied to people who had not passed a floor yet, so they could all discuss their journey through the mega-dungeon as much as they liked.

Jake found it interesting hearing about how everyone had done the different floors so far. It was also good to hear that they unanimously despised that one horrible water floor, with Maria especially complaining about how shit it was. Being a fire archer... yeah, Jake totally got her.

When they reached the topic of Minaga's Labyrinth, they naturally couldn't avoid the topic of the dungeon master... and this was where Jake learned they truly had different experiences with Minaga.

"I believe he is an element primarily made to cause confusion and add a challenge to this part of Nevermore. I am not entirely sure why it was judged necessary for him to be here... but I am certain there is a good one," Jacob muttered. "Also, he is clearly not just some C-grade Unique Lifeform."

"Minaga is just a dungeon master excited about his dungeon, and he is actively gathering feedback from those doing it. I can't see any problems with that," Casper shrugged. "Being excited about your own creation is not a crime, and the handiwork is honestly mind-boggling. I do also agree he is not a C-grade,

and he is definitely a god or very close to godhood. If not, making what of the dungeon we have seen so far would be impossible. Overall, I would say he is pretty damn great.”

“Minaga is quite the figure indeed,” Eron just nodded, not really saying more, though his subtle smile made it clear he knew more about the Unique Lifeform than he let on.

“Pretty sure the blue bastard has the ability to deal soul damage just by constantly talking,” Maria complained. “To make matters worse, my party leader decided to not engage with him at all, meaning he is just talking to us and not with us. Which results in him mainly throwing jabs and mocking all our failures.”

“For some reason, he kept referring to Matteo and me as the sneaky boys throughout the first three floors while also repeatedly alluding to me at least being better than a certain family member of mine. He even went on a whole rant about how nice it was that being a cheater wasn’t a hereditary trait,” Caleb said, more confused than anything.

“An interesting character that I must admit I do find amusing at times, though I do believe that is primarily because of a certain hunter on our team who has some good banter with the Unique Lifeform,” the Sword Saint shared with a chuckle.

“I think the live fight commentary was pretty good. He even managed to mimic the sound of those echo-y microphones. It reminds me of when I used to do boxing, and it was especially fun versus the Demon Lord. We had a damn good brawl, the two of us,” Carmen smiled.

“I think Minaga just wants to be entertained, not gonna lie,” Jake shrugged. “Trying to find logic in why he does what he does sounds like a waste of time. Also, live fight commentary?”

"Yep, it was pretty funny, and it honestly helped hype me up. Does that count as assistance? Also, only I could hear it, with not even my party members noticing a thing," Carmen said, thinking a bit. "He definitely did seem willing to slightly bend the rules if it would create a more entertaining scenario."

Remembering when Minaga began collapsing an entire floor on them to move on, Jake smiled. "Definitely does seem that way. Though there is also a sense of... balance to how he does things. Despite someone "cheating," he does not directly interfere to stop that person or punish them. Shit, just look at Ell'Hakan cheesing this entire city floor."

"True, I guess that is slightly commendable if infuriating," Maria – one of Minaga's biggest critics – agreed.

"Not sure I can entirely agree," Jacob said, shaking his head. "The mist in the labyrinth makes sense to not allow groups to easily just blitz through, but I find it downright malicious that divination isn't just hampered but turned downright detrimental. I had to actively fight following my skills and instinct during the entire labyrinth, lest I would hurt my teammates."

"Divination purposefully leading you down the wrong Path is just funny, not gonna lie," Casper chuckled. "Let me tell you, dealing with fucking seers and Augurs like you is the most infuriating shit when you are trying to make a dungeon with any kind of exploration or mystery. I can only praise fucking over classes like yours for once. You shouldn't complain too much, either. The skills were useful on that damn harem floor, right?"

Jacob still didn't seem to agree but kept his mouth shut as he knew he was outnumbered. No one else there liked divination.

"Speaking of the harem floor, you should really share your stories from there. Quite a few hijinks went on while on that floor," Minaga chimed in as he stood upside-down on the ceiling.

"What in the actual fuck!" Maria screamed as she saw him, with Jacob also jumping back and Caleb halfway standing. The rest of them stayed seated as Jake looked up at him.

"The same joke of suddenly appearing mid-conversation again? Sooo original."

Chapter 694: Nevermore: A Truly Delusional Goal

Jake got quite varied reactions from the different people in the room upon joking with Minaga. Casper smirked slightly, Carmen gave the Unique Lifeform a friendly wave, Caleb looked a bit worried, Maria was still not entirely over the guy just popping into the room, and Jacob looked more confused than anything. Eron and the Sword Saint both looked relaxed, with Eron bowing his head slightly, making Jake more sure than ever that the guy knew something they didn't about Minaga.

"A good joke begets repetition," Minaga answered, still standing on the ceiling. "Plus, it works every time, so why not keep doing it? Just because you are never surprised doesn't mean others can't enjoy the experience."

Throwing the startled people in the room a glance, Jake smirked. "They sure look to be enjoying your presence."

"Who doesn't feel happiness at my presence? Look at me, I am always in my own presence, and that has turned me into a very joyful and positive person," the Unique Lifeform joked as he stopped sticking to the ceiling and did a flip before landing on the floor.

"For the record, Casper and Jake are both correct when it comes to their assessments of me. I monitor how people do my labyrinth to see places I can improve, but also to get a feeling for the general power level of the generation. It's good research and valuable data," Minaga explained. "As for engaging with you while doing it... well, that is purely for entertainment purposes, of course! To add a unique flair of me to the experience, making my part of Nevermore truly stand out."

"Does it not hurt the competitive integrity of Nevermore that you so openly interfere and engage with the individuals doing the dungeon? Especially as you take a subjective disposition toward each party, either becoming a helpful or detrimental force?" Jacob asked, looking to have gathered some courage with all of them present. He still did look pretty damn nervous just asking that question.

"Eh, nothing is ever perfect," Minaga waved him off. "With how varied the multiverse is, creating a truly balanced playing field is utterly impossible, and adding myself and my mostly meaningless commentary is such a small factor it isn't worth mentioning. I have said it before, but if my talking and commenting are enough to throw you off your game and make you fail, then you have bigger problems. In other words, stop being so damn punctilious with how you think a dungeon is supposed to be run. The multiverse isn't fair, and neither is Nevermore. What it does give is mostly equal opportunities, and so do I."

"How is it mostly equal when some Paths are downright handicapped while others are assisted?" Jacob argued.

"How is it mostly equal when someone with a Bloodline or a Transcendent can walk in and ignore ninety percent of the challenges?" Minaga pointed out as he threw Jake a glance.

"How is it fair when some are not only immune but can use the fire energy of the Demon Lord to empower themselves?" he continued as he pointed at Maria.

"When others are borderline invincible, no enemy capable of breaking through their sheer level of durability or seemingly infinite health pool?" Minaga said, referring to both Carmen and Eron.

"Or... when someone is able to continuously resurrect a party member of theirs, allowing that party member to repeatedly burn their very life away to release suicide attacks over and over again?" Minaga finished, looking straight at Jacob.

"My point is that you can cry about equality or fairness from now till the end of the multiverse, and you will sound like an idiot all the way," Minaga smirked. "So embrace the unfairness and overcome it. That is how you become strong. I should know, seeing as I am a Unique Lifeform. I was born only being awesome and managed to overcome that fate to become amazingly awesome."

"I, for one, commend assisting dungeon engineers," Casper raised his hand.

"See, I have the crowd on my side," Minaga smiled confidently at Jacob.

The Augur seemed to consider the Unique Lifeform's words as he just sighed and nodded. "Very well... it is ultimately your creation."

"Exactly. But if you do have any grievances, you can file a written complaint after you have completed Nevermore, and I will be sure to read it. I am not saying I will do anything, but I do read every written complaint we get."

"How many written complaints do you even get a year?" Jake questioned.

"Well, we don't really count them by the year... but at least one every million years or so," Minaga nodded. "People just can't be arsed to go through proper procedures to submit them, you know?"

"Pray tell, what are these totally reasonable procedures," Jake smirked.

"Well, first of all, you need a written letter, right?"

"Right," Jake nodded.

"And you need to go to Nevermore," Minaga continued.

"Reasonable."

"Exactly. Anyway, once at Nevermore, you just have to do the final stop of handing the letter to the Wyrmgod or myself," he finished. "See? Super simple."

"Definitely simple and easy," Jake grinned. "I am sure you two meet with anyone who comes by."

"Of course we do! Sheez, what do you take us for? We meet with all gods that come by within the very reasonable waiting time of a single second to a few eras, based on how much we like the god that showed up," Minaga finished with a resolute nod.

"You just said again you are actually a god," Jake pointed out.

"That I never did," Minaga outright denied.

"No, I am pretty sure you just implied it very heavily," Jake insisted.

"Circumstantial evidence is not solid proof of anything, and I deny all such accusations. It's all hearsay!"

"Not hearsay when you were the one who said it," Casper jumped in.

"Casper, I thought we were on the same team here," Minaga muttered, looking all sad.

"You're right," Casper nodded as he smiled before looking at Jake. "He is clearly not a god, and if you keep making such unfounded accusations, we will file an official complaint with the Order of the Malefic Viper based on your conduct."

"Very well, I shall retract my slander immediately," Jake went along with the joke as he stood up and bowed. "I apologize on account of my client – myself – and wish to settle this matter amicably."

"Apology accepted; I am glad we could reach a settlement," Minaga smiled wide as he clearly had fun. Still smiling, he looked around the room. "Anyway, are there more questions? If not, then we must get to the juicy bits..."

"You mean..." Jake began as the Unique Lifeform grinned.

"Time to discuss the wonderful harem floor!"

"Oh, the thirty-fourth floor?" Jacob began. "That one was quite interesting, and we-"

"-were fucking boring is what you were. You just made friends with everything that wasn't a demon or the Prime Consort, and that was it. I am not saying that wasn't allowed, just that it was thoroughly uninspired," Minaga said with disappointment, making Jacob smirk a bit as he lifted his hands defensively, not offended at all.

"Oh," Caleb sighed. "I guess ours was also pretty uneventful."

"You assassinated everyone and left the floor before anyone even knew you were there. You didn't even exchange a single word with any living being outside of that first demon," Minaga pointed out. "It was pretty damn good to see the sneaky boys strike like daggers from the dark."

"Well then, glad you liked it," Caleb smirked.

"Why the hell did we not do that? That would have been way better than trying to make friends with all those fuckers..." Carmen muttered in annoyance as she began to explain how they had done.

"You punched the first Mistress you met because she tried to flirt with you," Minaga said with a deadpan face.

"I thought she tried to attack me."

"She tried to hug you."

"Which can be constituted as an attack," Carmen smirked. "But, hey, things ended well, didn't they?"

With a light mood, they all shared their various experiences from there, with Carmen naturally going first. They had made the Second Mistress into the new Prime Consort and gained access to all the Secret Scrolls through that. Maria's team turned out to have a demon on it, and through some proper subterfuge and powerful illusion magic from this demon, they managed to convince the Prime Consort that the demon would be a better candidate as the next Demon Lord.

Only for him to end up in the same situation Jake was in: Poisoned with the intent to throw him into a ritual. The difference was that while Jake had resisted the poison, this demon hadn't, and the guy had been damn close to dying. Luckily they managed to save him in time and kill the Prime Summoner. All of the Mistresses and even the Guard Captain had witnessed the Prime Summoner try to sacrifice him, and the group managed to spin a tale where they had taken down the corrupt Prime Consort who wanted to replace the Demon Lord. From there, they were welcomed into the Demon Lord's castle as heroes.

Casper had a pretty normal experience. They had allied with natives from earlier floors and made some allies and enemies on the thirty-fourth, initiated a vote, and started an internal conflict that ended up creating enough chaos for them to get the Secret Scrolls and move on before a new Prime Consort was even elected.

When they finally got to Jake and his party... Minaga had a hard time holding himself back as the Sword Saint gladly narrated their tale. The Unique Lifeform jumped into the conversation to confirm all the stupid stuff that had happened and even praised the Sword Saint for properly understanding the assignment when the floor was called a harem. They also all had a good laugh when Minaga took over and narrated Jake's "flirting" with the Prime Consort. Jake had to threaten Minaga to stop the Unique Lifeform from sharing a recording of the entire scene, much to the disappointment of everyone present, especially Carmen and Caleb.

They continued to share some funny anecdotes before the attention turned to the last person in the room. Eron had been pretty silent, and the Sword Saint finally asked him directly.

"How did you and your party take on that floor?"

Eron just smiled lightly as he looked at Minaga. The Unique Lifeform seemed powerless as he sighed before speaking. "Well... the rules of the floor said you could not kill the innocents there... but... I guess the concept of death can have many interpretations."

"We did not kill a single entity on that floor," Eron smiled.

"Technically not," Minaga shook his head. "But is there truly that big of a difference between what you did and just killing them?"

"Yes, there is," Eron said, not a trace of doubt in his voice. "For they still live. Their sparks still burn... and do not try to convince me that the original dull flames of their souls had any more meaning than what they do now. They were aimless vessels from the beginning."

Minaga didn't really say more but seemed to have lost some of his enthusiasm. "What a bummer. Anyway, my objective here is done, and I guess I should leave you all alone again. See you all soon, and I hope you continue to enjoy your time in my little city!"

With that, he was just gone. Seeing as the Unique Lifeform had left, the others also soon began taking their leave, with Jacob leaving first. The Sword Saint followed soon after, with the others trickling out one by one until two remained.

Only Jake and Eron were left, and he knew that was no coincidence. Jake felt the gaze of Minaga still on them, but he threw a brief look toward the ceiling as he frowned, making the god back off. He seemed to understand Jake was about to say something he did not want to spread anywhere and respected that.

"I take it the gazes of all those curious are now dispelled," Eron said in a relaxed tone.

"Why did you come here?" Jake asked as he nodded to confirm. "You were less than interested in the actual meeting, and I don't believe you came just to learn about Earth."

"I do care about my home planet, and I am glad to see it doing well," Eron spoke as he leaned a bit forward and looked at the floor for a bit. "But you are correct. My primary reason for attending was not to learn of Earth or those we share a home planet with. I came to seek you out, and I would prefer for it to have been done under less suspicious circumstances than a one-on-one meeting."

"Why?" Jake questioned.

"You talked about goals for gaining power earlier... but none asked me," Eron smiled.

"Neither did you volunteer anything," Jake countered.

"True indeed... for my goal would perhaps be seen as more delusional than those of others," the other Bloodline Patriarch said as he changed the topic. "Have you read through the journal I gave you during the Treasure Hunt?"

"A bit of it, yeah," Jake nodded. He had to admit, most of it was just mumbo-jumbo, but some insights had led to significant improvements in his health potions.

"Have you shared it with anyone else?"

"No," Jake shook his head. Eron had given it to Jake, and sharing would have been pretty rude, as it was clearly personal insights.

"I see. Perhaps that is for the best, though I would have been curious what the Malefic One thought of my insights," the healer said, with a bit of regret.

"I can ask him next we speak," Jake shrugged.

"I do believe that would be for the best, but do also take this," Eron nodded as he took out another journal. This one was even bigger than the other one, and after Jake accepted it and flipped through a few pages, he frowned.

"What is this even? This isn't just soul magic... but...." Jake muttered.

"No, no, it is not," Eron nodded.

"What the hell..."

Jake kept flipping through as he tried to get an understanding of what the hell Eron was researching. The more he skimmed, the more perplexed Jake became.

"Every living being has a spark... even the Risen like your friend has one, though it is no longer a true flame. Yet it burns nevertheless. The problem lies in exactly this. My Bloodline allows me to see a spark – a representation of the vessel that holds the vital energy of all entities - but with some practice, I came to see more than just the vital energy. I could get glances at the soul, and only then did I understand why it was a spark. Because for there to be sparks... something has to burn."

Eron looked deep in thought as he continued.

"I saw a god after learning more of my powers, and the sparks of gods are truly different. Not just in intensity and power but on a purely qualitative level. They are far different than any grade evolution could possibly lead to, which made me question: what is this fundamental difference?" Eron began as he went over and flipped to a page in the large journal.

Jake stared at the drawn diagram there for a second as his eyes opened wide. "You're serious?"

"I am... and to do it, I acknowledge I may need all the help I can get, Harbinger of Primeval Origins," Eron said with a deep knowing smile. "Perhaps, this ability of yours will be key. For we will need things not within the purview of the system."

"This is beyond delusional... but..." Jake frowned more and more.

Eron truly did have a goal that was beyond what Jake had expected... what most expected. While Jake and the Sword Saint wanted to reach the apex of power through their Paths, Eron did not. His mind had been far more singular from the beginning, and he had just one goal:

"I want to protect life... to never see that spark extinguish. To see them capable of forever growing. I realized one enemy is more dangerous than any other to all but the gods. That is when I understood the fundamental difference between all other grades and godhood. We are mortals... they are immortal. Their sparks burn eternally, their Truesouls producing an infinite amount of fuel," Eron said as he took a step back and smiled widely with an almost fanatical look.

"I want to conquer the greatest enemy of all life in the multiverse... of all souls. I want to heal and cure the one ailment none but the gods can recover from, no matter how strong."

"Time..." Jake muttered.

Eron's goal was indeed that of a fucking lunatic...

He wanted to create a cure for mortality... or, at the very least, become able to heal away the march of time itself.

Chapter 695: Nevermore(not really): Newcomers To Earth

Holstred looked at the blue sky above as he felt the sunlight on his skin. The planet he now found himself on was a bit cooler than the one he had been born on, but not by a large degree. He had feared that the environment would have been unfriendly when he was informed they had been "gifted" off to the owner of another world, but the climate was nice. Even those still in lower grades were comfortable.

Sighing, he turned to the woman who had just walked up beside him, and despite their situation, he failed to resist displaying a small smile. "How is everyone settling in?"

"Some better than others... the teleportation took a toll on those in lower grades, but the healers said that they just need time to recover," she answered as she took his hand and put it on her slightly bulging stomach. "We will be fine, okay?"

Holstred sighed again as he looked at his pregnant wife. "I know."

He felt her stomach before grasping her hand and squeezing it as they both looked at the sun together, and he couldn't help but remember better times. Times before they became slaves... a time before they had been given away to a powerful religious figure on another planet. At first, Holstred had actually hoped that leaving their home planet and the strained environment there could turn their fates for the better, but... now he doubted that.

Hearing their new owner was someone known as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had not meant anything to Holstred initially, as he did not know of this Malefic Viper they spoke of. Only later did he learn they would be under the rule of what was essentially the divine prophet of a god with a less-than-stellar reputation. That this Chosen was from an Order of poison alchemists. Learning that had sent a shiver down Holstred's spine.

I just hope my people can survive.

The world he and his family had come from hadn't been a paradise either, but... it had been the home. Their homeworld had been filled with strife for hundreds of years before the system even arrived, as war was a constant thing due to the three races being in neverending conflict. The human empire Holstred had been a part of had long been considered the weakest, with the dwarves and the Nirax – a scalekin race - both stronger. However, neither faction dared attack the human lands due to the fear of the other empire taking advantage of the opening. That was how a balance had been reached for centuries... until it was broken by the system initiation.

Holstred had been known as the Knight Commander in the lands of man. A grand title gifted due to Holstred's strength even before the initiation, and with the arrival of the system, he had continued to prove his excellence. He had done well in the Tutorial, gained a lot of levels, and returned to their home ready to fight for his empire... but things went downhill from the very beginning.

Their emperor died in the Tutorial, and nobody had any idea who would take charge. Individuals who had gotten powerful began to cause trouble as dozens of minor factions sprung up, vying for control, and all the old nobles rebelled with the intent to take charge. They all saw the arrival of the system as their opportunity to become the new rulers of the empire, not even considering how that was only exacerbating the ongoing chaos.

They were fools who had never lived on the frontlines. Never known what a precarious state their empire had long been in. Unaware that should they show the slightest weakness, others sat ready to pounce.

So when the Nirax attacked, the expected happened, and they were not ready. Yet they fought back, Holstred on the frontlines from the very first day as even if the empire was not ready, he had been. War raged for nearly two years, with intermittent system events and World Congresses that only didn't end in bloodshed due to the rules of the system. If not for that rule, that entire event would have been a slaughter, and with the rules, it just turned into a shouting match that further fueled the hatred between the races.

Eventually, the nobles got their internal issues resolved, and a temporary emperor was selected. A fool of a man who had then entered an alliance with the dwarves to fight back against the Nirax. Things finally seemed to be turning for the better, but Holstred knew it was all a mirage. The nobles did not see that the dwarves just used humanity as a meat shield to fight the Nirax for them while sending their own elites into dungeons or to fight monsters. They grew their armies as humans, and Nirax died on the battlefield. By the time they did realize... it was too late.

As expected, the dwarves had turned on the human empire the second the Nirax were no longer a threat. What followed next had not even been a proper fight.

The human armies fell, their top general was slain, and in only a day, Holstred had gone from a war hero to the commanding officer of a broken army. He had made the difficult decision to surrender, hoping they could avoid a massacre. They did... but the cost was high.

Despite being in early C-grade, Holstred was made to sign a slave contract. What he did not know was that in the background, the dwarves had joined a divine faction from the wider multiverse and taken in their teachings while expanding. The dwarves had long been an ambitious race, and they were showing that now by wanting to go beyond their planet.

Now, with the war over, Holstred had hoped things would calm. However, the dwarves faced challenges from within, for despite them being the victors, many still sought the total destruction of the humans and the Nirax. The enmity was simply too deep... their hatred too ingrained.

In the final battle, the entire Nirax army was annihilated, and the majority of the population was wiped out, with the remaining survivors now thrown into ghettos and camps. Humanity had been slightly better off, but their lives were far from good. Yet many internal factions within the dwarven empire still wanted them wiped off the face of the planet.

Many were killed during this period. Dwarves were the superior race, and some enjoyed taking strolls in the slums, acting however they wanted toward the humans and Nirax both. Executions on the street were normal, and people getting dragged off to scout dangerous areas was commonplace. Everyone, even the dwarves, knew that this was not sustainable.

That is when a dwarf offered an alternative to genocide... to sell off the surviving humans and Nirax as slaves to other factions across the ninety-third universe. He quickly got support from the merchant families, and with the help of the divine faction, they began selling off slaves. Humanity and the Nirax were split into segments and sold off, with Holstred being placed "in charge" of this segment. Nearly a million people, ranging from F to D-grade, with only Holstred and a fallen noble – a former duke, now a Viscount according to the system - in C-grade.

"I should head back," his wife said after a while. Holstred still looked worried as she gave him a hug.

"We will survive, alright? I believe in you; we all do," she whispered into his ear as she gave him a peck on the cheek before she pulled back. "See you later, alright?"

Holstred nodded as he stayed there, waiting. He would have joined her, but he had been called here.

Still staring at the warm sun. Holstred felt another woman approach. It was the one with the scarred face... Lillian was her name, he believed. He had only seen her once, and that was when they first arrived on the planet, and she handled their initial welcome.

"Holstred?" she asked, looking down at an odd flat metallic object with glowing glass.

"That is I, Ma'am," he bowed.

After they had been brought to Earth only two days ago, they were put into temporary residences. In all honesty, the accommodations were better than the broken capital he had come from. The fact they hadn't been treated too badly yet was a bit of comfort. That their new owner and many of the people in charge were also humans helped ease his worry slightly too. Though, to be fair, every segment of slaves that had been brought to this planet were treated well, regardless of race.

Even so, he did not hold much hope. They had no incentive to treat their new slaves badly right now, but neither did they have any incentive to treat them overly well. Initially, treating your slaves well was also a common strategy for many noble families back in the old empire, as that ensured they worked well for longer, as they hoped that through hard work, the good days could return. Back then, Holstred had seen them as naive... now, he questioned if they simply never had a better choice.

"Follow me, please. Miranda is ready to see you," the woman called Lillian said, only briefly looking up from her odd magical device.

Holstred bowed and followed. Miranda... the one the Chosen had put in charge of his planet. At least, that is what he was informed before even arriving on this planet and by the woman walking ahead of

him during the welcome. Outside of her identity as the current leader of the planet, she was also a direct disciple of the Verdant Witches, gods that made the divine beings the dwarven empire served pale in comparison.

It is time to learn of our fate,

Holstred told himself, trying to stay stoic. He knew what this Order of the Malefic Viper often did with slaves, and he hoped his people could avoid that. All he could hope to do was try and appeal to the woman's humanity, though he doubted it would work. She was a witch, after all, a Path not known for mercy or kindness.

"Just inside," Lillian said after showing him the way to a large tent with several magical formations around it. Holstred once more bowed, knowing not to speak out of turn lest he offend her.

Entering the tent, he saw the woman in question sitting at a table with several stacks of paper in front of her. She seemed busy but instantly noticed when he entered and looked up.

"Ah, there you are. Holstred of the Silver Knights, was it?" the witch asked.

"I was once known as such, yes. How may I serve my new Mistress?" he answered after kneeling. In a situation like this, he did feel lucky that his father had made him learn etiquette and he had practiced meeting the imperial family of old. He also knew that showing full subservency would do him best... at least, he hoped so.

"No need for the courtesy. Please get up and take a seat," his new Mistress said, looking like she was already tired of his way of acting.

"I apologize if I caused any offense," Holstred tried again, but she once more waved dismissively.

"Please sit, then we can talk properly, alright?" she insisted.

"Yes," Holstred said, biting his tongue just as he was about to call her Mistress again. He went and sat in the chair directly opposite her, something he did find slightly inappropriate. It appeared he had much to learn about this planet's culture, and he truly feared he had offended her.

"So, I have read some basic information about where you came from, but my understanding is that you and the people with you are remnants of a fallen empire that lost a war. Is that correct?" the witch asked.

"It is as you say," he confirmed.

"Alright. We already sent some healers to talk to people and make sure they are handling everything okay, especially the children. While we are all far more resilient both physically and mentally than before the system, it is still better to find and treat cases of trauma early on rather than delay," she nodded. "We also interviewed a few people from the same planet as you, and they all spoke highly of you, Knight Commander. You at least seem to have earned their respect and led them well during this time of strife, and I hope you will continue to do that as the coming time may continue to be tumultuous."

"I shall do my utmost in whatever task we are given..." Holstred said, not sure what he should say. The first part about the children was also... was it to make sure they would be more productive? Did they need them to be clear-minded for some specific purpose?

"You aren't given any tasks per-se. But you are given choice," their Mistress said as she cleared away some of the papers and looked him in the eye. "What do you want to happen next here on Earth? What kind of future do you hope for? Answer honestly, and don't just say something to placate me. I have heard plenty try to do that already today."

Holstred was taken aback for a moment, not sure what to say. But he did detect honesty in her voice, and he believed it unwise to lie. So he took a gamble. Gritting his teeth, he answered truthfully.

"I wish to ensure our survival. And... perhaps one day... freedom."

It was truly a gamble to say to your new Mistress you wanted to get out of serving her.

"Be a bit more ambitious," the witch smiled, leaning back.

"I... I am unsure. I do not think I can speak for everyone, only my own selfish desires," Holstred shook his head.

"What are these selfish desires?"

"To rebuild some of what was lost... and find a new home for myself, my family, and all I hold dear," Holstred managed to say.

"And do you believe those who follow you want that too?" the witch questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," he nodded.

"All very doable," the woman nodded with a smile. "All I will ask of you is to draw up a plan for how you want to make this happen and ensure you have enough personnel to act autonomously. Considering the size of your group, I hope you have enough internally. If not, we may have to discuss bringing in others to make sure everything runs smoothly. If there are any competent people you recommend to help facilitate the transition, please bring them to our next meeting. We have people on our side handling surveying and finding a proper spot you can settle in."

Holstred was confused as he looked at his Mistress as she went over some papers.

She noticed his confusion and looked back at him as she seemed to reach a realization. "Ah, I totally forgot to mention it. Lord Thayne - the Chosen of the Malefic Viper - is not a fan of slavery, so we will be nullifying all of your slave contracts once we are done organizing everything. Ah, but let me fix yours right away. Where was yours again... are here it is."

His Mistress took out a black book he had signed the slave contract in... and a second later, she was no longer his Mistress.

Holstred stared in utter confusion as she smiled. "Congratulations, as of this moment, you are free. But do take this and remember to read it over. Not being a slave doesn't mean you are free from the law, after all."

His former Mistress handed him a small folder reading "Welcome to Earth: Starter Guide," and he had barely gotten it in his hand when the woman called Lillian entered again.

"Take Holstred here back to his group and go find me... what was her name again... that elven lady we talked about earlier," the woman called Miranda said as she looked once more at Holstred. "It was a pleasure meeting you, and I hope things work out well for everyone. Please spread the word to those under your influence. In a week, we will fetch you again, so have the plans ready for then, alright? We have high expectations of you and don't worry, once things calm down, we will look into expanding to the political structure of the planet to involve you all."

"I..." Holstred said, trying to control himself. He questioned so many things. Was this all a bad joke played on them? He did not understand... but if it was real...

"Tha... Thank you," he bowed, this one with true sincerity.

"You have nothing to thank me for. I am just doing what I should," she smiled radiantly as Holstred was led out of the tent, and he began walking back toward the small city of tents and temporary housing his old empire now occupied.

On the way, it finally hit him as he stopped mid-walk. The slave mark on his soul left by the contract... he felt for it... and it was truly gone. Looking down at his hands, he saw they shook. Taking a deep breath, he clenched them... but it didn't help, and for the first time, his stoic demeanor broke.

I'm... we're free?

Holstred had spent the last many months of his life fighting to accept his status as a slave... fighting for his family and all he cared about. Hoping that even if he lived as a slave, perhaps his unborn child would one day be free.

Only to be freed the moment his life as a slave was meant to truly begin. He just stared ahead of him as tears slowly welled up in his eyes, the realization finally sinking in fully.

We're free...

Chapter 696: Nevermore: Fun Times Ahead

Jake was left alone in the meeting room, pondering his conversation with that absolute madman, Eron.

Some rules of the system were known to be absolute... and the line between mortality and immortality was one of them. It was a fundamental law for a reason and one that had never been broken in the history of the multiverse, as far as Jake knew. At least... as far as he knew before his meeting with Eron. Because the other Bloodline Patriarch had shared that a long time ago, one individual had broken this rule.

One immortal mortal, if you may.

Jake had wanted to ask more, but Eron had refused and asked Jake to question the Malefic Viper instead. No matter how much he pressed, the healer had been utterly unwilling to share more.

Shortly after that, Eron had left, just leaving Jake. After a bit of reflection, it got him questioning... was it truly a good goal? Was giving immortality to everyone even a good thing?

People dying was, as cruel as it sounded, necessary. Most enlightened never even reached D-grade during their lives, but even so, a single human could live hundreds of years. In that time, it was pretty

common to have dozens of children. If all these children also grew up to have dozens, even a planet like Earth would be utterly overpopulated in just a few centuries.

Even now, wars and such were customary on low-level planets to cull populations. Yet even with these measures, age was likely the primary killer for most beings in the multiverse. Many individuals in high grades reached points in their lives where they believed that further evolution was not an option, and they chose to settle down and create families or nurture their factions. This is not even mentioning the many people who never cared about battle to begin with, but only focused on their professions. If these people who never fought lived forever... Jake wasn't even sure the system would allow it.

There was also the problem that Eron – to put it nicely – didn't give a flying fuck about other people or who they were as individuals, nor what was good for the multiverse as a whole. All he cared about was them not dying. Not once did he consider the "gift" he wanted to give the multiverse a curse to some.

Immortality was not necessarily a good thing. It took a certain mindset to handle, and Villy had mentioned before this mentality was rare but a fundamental requirement for attaining godhood. What would happen to someone becoming immortal that did not have the mindset for it? Insanity? Would they ultimately end their own lives?

There were many thoughts in his head, but Jake did recognize they were likely useless for two reasons:

The first was that the chances of Eron achieving this goal were minuscule. He wanted to do something countless others had tried before, and while he did have his Bloodline, would that truly be enough? Even if he got help from others with Bloodlines and Transcendents, Jake refused to believe others hadn't tried that before in the trillions of years the multiverse had existed. Even if Eron succeeded, Jake doubted it would be anytime soon, in which case it would be a future-Jake problem.

Secondly was that Jake knew the system still did have some restrictions that not even Bloodlines or Transcendents could overcome. The most obvious one was the rule that everything took something to use – a law of exchange, if one may. Not necessarily an equivalent exchange, but few things were free. That was why the Sword Saint could not just instantly have created a Transcendent that turned him into a god then and there. He had to instead pay with levels for the power he gained. Jake's own infusion of Records related to Primeval Origins was similar, as the system had restricted him in how often he could do it without fundamentally harming himself. It likely knew that a Jake capable of mass-producing pinnacle-level creatures would be too imbalanced.

So, what would the price of granting someone else immortality be? Sacrificing other lives? No, it could not be that simple. Jake thought for a good while and concluded that it was likely the system would never even allow Eron to create a method to make everyone immortal... but if it was just healing the impact of time? To – using his metaphor – refuel the Truesouls of others, giving them more years of lifespan?

That... could be possible. With help, of course. Eron would need assistance from many people, but there would be just as many opposing it, Jake reckoned. As with Sanguine, anyone breaking the power balance established by the gods would find themselves facing much opposition. Jake had faced this with his special ability, too. One could just look at the Automata Legion, which was less than keen on him at the moment.

Ultimately, Jake didn't want to rule out the mad healer's goal. Even if Eron's goal was utterly delusional, he was not the only one Jake knew who had such far-fetched dreams. The healer actually reminded Jake a bit of Arnold and his goal of fully comprehending the entire multiverse and the system through the power of math. It was so utterly outrageous Jake could only respect it. They both had goals that weren't just "get strong," but both goals still required them to reach such high levels of power before they would become feasible that by the time they succeeded, they would be approaching the pinnacle either way. To them, power was just the means to an end – the end just being so far out of sight it wasn't a demerit whatsoever.

Shaking his head, Jake tried to dispel the thought as much as he could. Worrying right now was useless when the possibility of Eron's dream even becoming a reality was so low. For now, he would shelve even thinking about it and instead discuss it with Villy after he was done with Nevermore. That sounded like what Eron hoped he would do anyway.

Jake smiled a bit to himself, reflecting on all the people from Earth he had just met up with. They all had their own goals and aspirations, some grander than others. The person he was most worried about was Caleb... he was his little brother, after all. He had not shared it with the group, but Jake did know that his goal was quite simple: He wanted to protect his family. That itself was a good goal to have, but it was rarely – if ever – a Path that led one to the pinnacle.

Umbra had likely known this too, which was part of the reason he got the Legacy of Tenlucis. The Path of Tenlucis was essentially about forcing someone to keep progressing or die from the pressure of the dark heavens crushing you to death. It would force Caleb to keep going even when he wanted to sit still, and while it was selfish of him, that gave Jake some relief.

Jacob was even worse off than Caleb, Jake did recognize that, but he didn't feel the same sense of worry. One was his little brother, and the other was just his old boss and friend from work. It was his own problem if he didn't have the right mentality to go all the way. If he wanted to get on a Path to godhood, he had to find it himself.

Feeling done with reflecting on the group, Jake left the hotel room towards one of the many alchemy labs provided to get some proper crafting done and rake in those final Minaga Coins to finally move on and explore the rest of Minaga's Labyrinth.

Time passed as Jake continued grinding out alchemical creations to finally get enough Minaga Coins to pay his toll. He ended up being a lot slower than the Sword Saint, who finished only a week after their meeting by dumping his entire "art" collection on the Brokers.

It still took Jake nearly three months to get done, as his speed had slowed down a bit. He did not rush as much while even mixing in a bit of experimentation here and there. They would have to wait a bit for Sylphie and the Fallen King no matter what, with Dina also done collecting all her Coins shortly. It also

didn't help with motivation that his leveling speed felt significantly slower, though he did manage to rake in two more levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 225 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 226 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 222 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

And, as mentioned, he was good on Minaga Coins.

Current Minaga Coins: 214,390/214,000

Now Jake just had to figure out what the hell his plans were as the others also got ready. As things were, he saw a few options.

The first one was to continue grinding alchemy while focusing more on experimentation. This one was slightly problematic in the sense that Jake would still feel some diminishing return due to him having just churned out stuff for over one and a half years. He also didn't know what kind of foes he would face on later floors, so even if he wanted to research a new kind of poison, he had no idea what he should focus on.

A second option was to try some of the Challenge Dungeons. The Sword Saint had considered this, but Dina had discouraged them both. According to Nature's Attendant, it was best to focus on all the Challenge Dungeons as late as possible to get as powerful as one could. At least for some of them. The problem was you didn't know what kind of Challenge Dungeon you would find yourself in before entering, and as with Nevermore's general rule of information-limiting, people couldn't share what they knew of the Challenge Dungeons either. Dina had also mentioned that often these Challenge Dungeons had a very set "theme" and was about progressively getting more difficult, making one go further on average if they were attempted as late as possible. The final nail in the coffin was that some of them had limited attempts, and entering and leaving again counted as one attempt. Jake had chosen to take this advice and wait.

The third option of things to do was to use the charge of Path of the Heretic-Chosen he had gained when he reached level 220 in his profession. When he had initially gained the charge, Jake had considered using it, but in the end, he had delayed. His problem with the skill right now wasn't that he didn't know what to use it on... it was that he had too many things to use it on. One had to remember that it had gone from only working on his "of the Malefic Viper" skills to now working on a shitload of things.

"Focusing on any core skill, event, or entity related to the Malefic Viper's Legacy will allow you to peer into the True Records of the past as you journey through time, space, and reality to experience history firsthand."

What was it called again? Decision paralysis? Choice overload? Jake wasn't sure, but whatever the hell it was called, Jake felt like he had so many choices it was difficult to make one. The problem was even worse by the fact that he felt he could now choose any of the nine Legacy skills if he wanted, as the requirement of adequate understanding was also gone.

But... he could also focus on the First Sage, as Jake was incredibly curious about that guy. Shit, Jake even considered checking out the other Primordials if he could. He had already seen Valdemar in one vision and gained a lot from it, so should he see a vision with him again? Maybe someone else? Eversmile, perhaps?

There were also events, though that one was a bit harder, as Jake was not clear on that many interesting events, as not much was known about the first era before the different Primordials rose to godhood. Jake also felt that there were some things he could not see. As an example, he poked the skill to see if it would show him the moment the Malefic Viper gained his Transcendence or when he ascended to godhood, but both of those were no good. If it was because they were not “related to the Malefic Viper’s Legacy” or because the system had restricted the skill in some way, Jake didn’t know.

Ultimately, Jake just couldn’t choose. He kind of wanted to focus on a skill to try and upgrade it, but without the requirement for him to understand it, how would he even know it could help him? No, he wanted to wait and use it when he felt like he truly needed it, and that time just wasn’t right now.

That left Jake with the fourth option. This was his original idea for what he would do when he was done collecting Minaga Coins, and it still seemed like the most attractive one:

He was gonna play with his Puzzle Box.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (1/10000).

This was probably Jake’s favorite gift from the entire Chosen ceremony. Sure, all the other items had been nice, and Jake had used quite a few of them during this crafting session – such as the items gifted by the Risen – but this one still stood out.

He had loved the practice cauldron Villy had given him back during the intermittent period between the Tutorial ending and his arrival on Earth, and this one gave off similar vibes. This was not quite the same as it didn’t focus on just alchemy but was more about general mana control.

Mana control was very much like practicing with any weapon or tool, and from the very first time Jake had interacted with Villy, the god had emphasized the importance of improving his control. Getting better at mana control improved your alchemy skills, abilities as a mage, ritualist... anything that required mana. Usually, one just practiced using mana for practical things or while using all skills, but puzzles like this weren't that rare either. Jake even did one during the Treasure Hunt when he first met Reika.

This Puzzle Box was, needless to say, on an entirely different level than anything he had ever done before. The first level had been incredibly easy as it was just a method to Soulbind the item, but when he took out the box and infused energy into it this time, he found his consciousness sink into the box, and he instantly realized things would not continue to be that easy.

Jake also had his mind transported to this place when he initially bound it to himself, and back then, he had just seen a few squiggly lines that didn't properly align with each other and were easily fixed.

However, this time he found himself surrounded by broken lines of pure mana, tangled messes, and mana just in pure disarray. Jake looked at the absolute mess in front of him and couldn't help but smile. If this was still only level two... man, did he have a lot of fun ahead of him.

Chapter 697: Nevermore: Finally Done

Jake analyzed the structure as he noticed several errors in it. This structure in question looked like a large square building, at least twenty stories tall and made of pure mana. It was hardened and reminiscent of Jake's stable arcane mana, but it was indeed just pure mana formed into a shape and then compressed and strengthened through formations.

His job was to bring the structural integrity up to a certain level but to do that, he had to address flaws embedded within the structure. Not just on the outside either. This meant he had to "drill" holes and infuse mana to fix what was wrong before he could cover everything up again – all while making sure none of what he did would make the entire thing collapse.

As several formations also covered the building, he had to avoid those too. How long it took him, Jake didn't know, but he quickly found flaw after flaw, and in many cases, he had to make up new methods on the spot to fix a particular problem. His preferred method was to strengthen the mana using hardened braided mana strings, almost functioning as rebar.

Due to its nature as a mana puzzle, Jake couldn't use his arcane affinity, but he could infuse some concepts from it. It reached a level where the normal mana was nearly identical to his arcane mana, though there were still some stark differences, such as the sheer gap in durability between the two and the far more physical nature of his stable arcane mana. While a powerful enough disruptive mana wave could make the entire "solid" structure in front of him collapse, it wouldn't be able to do the same to his arcane mana.

After an undetermined amount of time, Jake nodded. Everything seemed good. With a thought, a prompt appeared before him.

Submit Completion?

This was something else Jake had learned. The Puzzle Box was programmed to respond to things he did and worked a lot like a computer program, even able to summon system prompts while he immersed his consciousness within it. In some ways, entering a box was a lot like entering his Soulspace.

Jake confirmed his submitted completion. Suddenly, pressure washed over the entire mental scape, as it felt like gravity increased dozens of times over. Jake himself was utterly unaffected as he had been turned completely intangible, also making him unable to interfere with the test.

The building held strong, but then a powerful wind of pure mana came in from the side... which was when Jake saw he had slightly damaged one of the formations around the ninth floor. A part of the wall crumbled, and the wind invaded the structure, ravaging through it. Within seconds, the entire mana structure collapsed and dispersed into nothingness.

Level failed. Retry?

I'll get it this time!

Yeah, this wasn't his first attempt...

Retrying, the building reappeared, but it was not exactly identical. The difficulty level was the same, but the test itself itself was different. The formations were similar but placed in different locations, the flaws were never the same, and the entire building had slightly changed and was even twenty-one stories this time.

This was naturally done so one couldn't just try the same level over and over again until they completed it. It was a test of skill, after all, not pure trial and error.

More time passed as Jake fixed everything he could find and made sure to strengthen certain sections of the building he feared weren't strong enough to handle the stress. After double-checking everything looked right, he once more got the system prompt.

Submit Completion?

Like last time, he approved, and the pressure reappeared. This time the building held, and even when the disruptive mana wind swept through, none of the formations were dismantled. The entire stress test went on for about two minutes before everything stopped, and he got another prompt.

Level 54 completed. Proceed to level 55?

Jake said yes, as he appeared on the next level. This one was a massive hanging bridge of mana, and Jake instantly began to analyze it as he became aware the task this time was to make sure the bridge could bear a certain weight while staying stable for at least one year in a sped-up stress test. However, he did not get far, for within his Sphere of Perception, he saw something he hadn't hoped would happen...

The Sword Saint was walking towards his room... which could only mean one thing: Sylphie and the Fallen King were done collecting their damn coins. The Golden Mark left by the King tended to expire after a few weeks, which was why the old man had to go get him in person.

It was with mixed feelings he emerged from the box. He looked down at the precious object for a moment and smiled.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (54/10000).

After giving the best Puzzle Box in the world a hug, he put it away as he stood up. Checking the time, he saw he hadn't moved from the floor in about a month, so he stretched a bit and went towards the door, ready to open it the second the old man knocked.

The bastard never knocked but just stood outside for a moment before speaking.

"Jake, I know you know I am here."

"Can you knock anyway?" Jake asked.

"No."

"Please?"

The old man sighed as he reached out, but just before he could knock, Jake opened the door while grinning.

"You were totally surprised, right?" Jake joked.

"Truly," he shook his head. "I assume you know why I am here?"

"Sylphie finally got enough Minaga Coins?"

"Precisely," the Sword Saint nodded as Jake walked out and began following the old man as they headed out of the hotel. "And she is not happy about being the last one to complete her coin-gathering. She has not complained as much as the Fallen King, though."

"Not gonna lie... it's about bloody time," Jake said. "Did Carmen and her party manage to get ahead of us?"

"She did. They left just a week ago," the old man confirmed.

"Fuck me," Jake grumbled.

"Disappointed she did not say goodbye?" the Sword Saint teased.

"Nah, we already talked about limiting our interactions in this period leading up to her leaving, and with Jacob and Casper leaving, we had fewer excuses to meet. Her going to say goodbye would have been weird from an outsider's perspective," Jake shrugged. "It wasn't like she hadn't come by quite a few times during their shared time on the floor. Just hoped we would at least beat them."

Jake did also regret not having a proper bout with Carmen in the arena. Both of them had wanted a duel, but sadly there was no way to have private fights. With how durable Carmen was, Jake would likely have been forced to go all-out, and he wanted to hide some of his abilities if he could. Especially skills like Eternal Shadow, which were incredibly effective when used without the opponent being aware of them. Jake not using his full power would also be disrespectful to Carmen. So, in the end, they agreed to postpone their duel.

"The scientist from Haven also reached the floor. Are you going to go greet him before we leave?"

"Arnold? Nah, he is a big boy; he can handle himself," Jake shrugged. "Besides, I reckon he would have reached out to me if he wanted anything. He isn't the type to just wait around."

"How about your brother or Maria?" the Sword Saint also asked.

"Already did before my last practice session, as I quite frankly expected us to have already moved on by now," Jake said, shaking his head.

"I see," the old man nodded, not saying more as they kept walking.

It was a bit annoying, but Jake and company had ended up taking just over two years doing Minaga's City Floor. Sylphie had ended up being the big limiter in how fast they could pass the floor, as the deck was honestly stacked against her.

She was the highest-leveled of them all, which meant she had the biggest toll to pay, but she also had the problem that her marketable skills were limited. She couldn't craft anything, and when it came to tasks she could assist with, she was equally limited as many of these tasks required knowledge or skill in certain disciplines.

Sylphie was simply too young to have ever learned anything complex, and all her powers came from instinct and her powerful innate knowledge as a beast. Sadly for her, none of this innate knowledge helped her anywhere outside of the arena.

Jake and the others did help her as much as possible. She sold items they had obtained within Nevermore and reached the cap for how many coins she could earn every single month, but that only did so much.

The two of them quickly walked together to the toll booth, where they met up with the three others. Sylphie was indeed a grumpy bird, with the Fallen King looking more than a little impatient to finally get a move on. Dina looked fine and gave them a small wave as she saw them approach.

"About time you arrived," the Fallen King said when they made it over.

"Well, excuse me for adding another five minutes to this city floor. When was it you got done collecting your coins again?" Jake smiled teasingly.

"Let's just proceed," the Unique Lifeform said, really seeming in a hurry.

Jake proceed to activate the toll booth together with the Sword Saint, allowing them to walk through the gate leading to the next floor. The moment he paid, Jake got a system prompt that he had honestly forgotten was even a thing.

Bonus Objective Completed: Pay the Toll to leave the city floor without ever leaving Nevermore. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

"Five hundred points, huh?" Jake said with a small smirk.

“Yeah, not a lot... but it is something, isn’t it?” Dina answered, trying to be positive.

“An amount so low it is almost insulting. This entire floor has just been a useless waste of time,” the Fallen King scoffed.

“Could have been more productive for sure, but I won’t call it a total waste of time,” Jake shook his head. True, it had been pretty damn inefficient when it came to gathering Nevermore Points, but that didn’t mean it had been a waste of time. They had all stayed in contact during this time, and based on how the number of opponents the Fallen King and Sylphie killed in the arena every day slowly increased, the two of them had clearly improved. The many tasks Brokers gave were also all ones that required the person to slowly get better.

Jake and the Sword Saint had also naturally progressed their professions quite a bit, with Jake even improving his mana control with his Puzzle Box. The Sword Saint hadn’t sat still either but had chosen to continue painting even when he didn’t need it for Minaga Coins, as the old man wanted to rake up some more profession levels. In his words, then it was rare he had calm periods like this to just relax and paint, and he seemed hit less hard by the diminishing returns than Jake for some reason.

“Perhaps not a total waste, but can you truthfully say you wouldn’t have preferred to do without?” the Fallen King countered.

“Well, if you put it like that...”

“Ree!” Sylphie joined in on the complaining.

"Who is delaying our progress now?" the Sword Saint butted in as he motioned for them all to proceed.
"The thirty-sixth floor awaits."

The old man was right, and they stopped dragging things out as they moved through the barrier blocking the entrance to the next floor. Through this barrier was just another gateway, and without further ado, they all activated it as they were teleported away.

They appeared within a vaguely familiar room. It gave Jake the same vibes as the usual "welcome" room they had first seen on the thirty-first floor, but it all seemed a bit more... high-brow? The old-ish-looking temple walls were replaced with pristine marble, and overall it just looked more well-kept.

"About time you arrived here. That took quite a while, huh?" a voice echoed through the hall as their dear dungeon master appeared on the central platform, though there were no fireworks or big display.

"And whose fault is that?" Jake instantly countered.

"Not mine if that is what you are insinuating," Minaga denied. "You can't blame me for you being slow."

"You designed the rules of the city floor," Jake pointed out.

"That I did, but doesn't that just mean you are even more at fault? Because me being wrong couldn't be the case, hence why it must be entirely on you. Definitely," Minaga nodded confidently.

"Fine, we suck, happy?" Jake sighed. "Now, what's the plan from here?"

"Five more floors of my labyrinth," the Unique Lifeform answered.

"Huh... don't you think it is kind of beginning to overstay its welcome?"

"Hey, I tried to mix it up!" Minaga seemed offended. "These next four floors – with a special surprise on floor forty – are all of an identical design with only slight changes, but they offer something interesting nearly no other dungeon floor does: true choice!"

"But it is still a labyrinth?" Jake asked.

"Yes, there are still labyrinthian features."

"So..."

"Yes, you will be able to utterly cheat and ruin all sense of exploration, ruining much of the fun of the floor... but not as much as on some of the others," Minaga answered, looking like he had entirely given up on trying to stop Jake from cheating.

"Nice, just wanted to make sure," Jake smiled.

"Now, as with prior floors, I will once more need you to make a difficult choice – better known as a difficulty choice," Minaga said, very proud of his wordplay.

"Do we have the same options as on prior floors?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Yep... and can I just assume you will choose the Archmage difficulty? Anything else wouldn't really make any sense," Minaga asked.

"Naturally," the King answered.

"Great, great," the dungeon master nodded. "Now, I do know you suffered a bit during my wonderful city floor and aren't all that happy, so let me give you a tiny little tip to cheer you all up. This is not the only time on this floor that you will have the choice of taking an easier or a harder path... and if you want the best ending, don't ever take the easy route. Always strive for the highest difficulty."

"Duly noted," Jake smiled.

"Now, with all that over, I hope you enjoy this floor and those to come! I will add one more thing... I kind of learned that characterization is not my strong suit, so that is very limited in these next few floors," Minaga said, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Probably for the best," Jake nodded as he teased the totally-not-a-god. "Not only because the "people" were bloody horrible imitations of real sapient creatures, but because it makes life harder for assholes who are good at manipulating them. A pleasant surprise to see you can learn from your mistakes."

"I will just choose to interpret those very hurtful words as you venting the last of your anger towards the city floor," Minaga smiled unbothered.

"Totally was," Jake nodded.

Minaga smiled lightly as he did an exaggerated bow. "In either case, I believe I have taken up enough of your time... without further ado, let us continue Minaga's Labyrinth!"

With those words, the Unique Lifeform disappeared, and the giant glowing gate at the far end of the room began opening. Out came the mist that restricted all senses and movement, and Jake did not hesitate to close his eyes and send out a Pulse of Perception just as the system message for the floor also popped up.

Welcome to the Thirty-sixth floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 6)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Complete the floor while selecting and completing the room with the highest difficulty rating at least three times (0/3).

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (0/3). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 28973

Jake read over the description, and coupled with his mental map from Pulse of Perception, Jake did have to admit... this part of the labyrinth was kind of different.

Chapter 698: Nevermore: Predictable Choice

A labyrinth was a labyrinth, no big way to really change that. Minaga hadn't tried either, as they once more found themselves walking through winding hallways of mist, following after Jake, who had a nice mental map in his head. The difference this time around was that there was a "correct" way right off the bat, with no rooms or anything to look for.

Instead, they just had to pass through a pretty big labyrinth to reach a gate at the end, but based on how long it would take to reach the gate, this could not be the entire floor. They also had at least three rooms to clear with difficulty ratings attached. The only challenge on this floor so far was the occasional trap, which they could have some fun with. Some of these traps were placed even on the fastest path to the finish and were quite varied.

Some were good-old spike traps, some released mana bolts from the walls, and a few even summoned enemies they had to fight. The fights and traps were all made quite a lot harder to deal with due to the mist, but they still easily managed and moved forward quickly – or as quickly as one could with the mist limiting their movement speed.

"This is quite familiar to what we have done before," the Sword Saint voiced his thoughts.

"Ree!" Sylphie complained as she flew alongside them.

"Yeah, pretty damn similar, but we will reach the gate in just a bit, so maybe something will change then," Jake shrugged as they did indeed soon reach the first gate. It had taken them nearly two-and-a-half hours to get there due to the traps while taking the fastest route, so he guessed this floor would be quite a pain for parties without what was essentially maphack.

A few minutes later, they turned the final corner and saw the gate before them. This gate was quite a bit different from those prior, and on the other side of it, Jake just saw an empty void of nothingness. On both sides of the gate itself were two large runes for four total that all lit up. Jake scanned them and quickly got the gist of it.

1. Puzzle (Easy)

2. Combat (Medium)

3. Crafting (Easy)

4. Random (Easy)

"We get to choose the challenge room type and the difficulty," Jake noted as he looked over the four options.

"Not much choice when one considers the bonus objective," the Fallen King said.

"True," Jake nodded. "Now, how do we pick..."

It took minimal figuring out before they discovered that three of them just had to infuse energy or touch one of the marks at once. They naturally activated the second option to do a little combat.

Once they activated it, the entire gate began to glow, and as Jake released another pulse, he saw a massive room appear on the other side. It extended even beyond his Pulse of Perception, meaning it had to be at least three-hundred kilometers long. He could see that it had a width of around two hundred kilometers, though.

When the gate opened, they walked through the usual fog gate, and Jake felt the pleasant wind hit him. They were in a mountainous environment, and when Jake looked ahead, he saw a pterodactyl-looking creature flying through the air. He naturally used Identify, and it had a quite disappointing level.

[Windborne Shrieker – lvl 239]

Moreover, he did not feel like it was a strong variant at all. Jake also quickly saw a whole lot of dinosaurs wandering around in the deep valleys below, and as he was still trying to figure out where all the enemies were, they got a system message.

Room Objective: Clear the room to unlock the teleporter.

841/841 enemies remaining.

"That seems simple," Dina nodded.

"Yeah, I am surprised there is not some twist... I just think we have to kill everything here," Jake nodded.

"It does seem as such... thus, we should get started immediately," the Fallen King said as he reached out his hand towards the Shrieker Jake had Identified earlier. It abruptly stopped in mid-air many kilometers away as the King squeezed his clawed hand. The Shrieker struggled as the King lifted his other hand and made a tearing motion. In the distance, a wing was ripped off the creature as it continued to struggle, with the Fallen King's hands finally glowing golden as he crushed them together; the Shrieker in the distance also getting crushed as it fell broken to the ground.

840/841 enemies remaining.

"City floor wasn't entirely a waste of time, now was it?" Jake smirked as he also pulled out his bow.

"Meager improvements do not make up for time wasted," the Fallen King shot back as he began looking for his next target.

Jake smiled a bit and nodded as he looked toward the sky. "Considering we have to kill everything here... I guess finding all of the opponents is meant to be part of the challenge too."

"Probably," the Sword Saint agreed.

"In that case," Jake grinned as he released another pulse, and as it released, he focused. Whenever it passed a creature, Jake made sure to note it as he activated Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter, hundreds of marks placed within less than a second. With his high Perception, marking this many was no problem at all.

Using the Golden Mark, Jake shared the location of every single marked target with the party as Dina looked at him. "Are you sure about all these locations?"

"Yep," Jake smiled.

"Okay," she nodded as she took out her staff and slammed it into the ground as a pulse of nature mana was released. Jake just shook his head and took to the air as the Sword Saint, Fallen King, and Sylphie also took off.

Jake was flying towards the far end of the room to mark all of the opponents, with the Sword Saint taking the left side of the room. Behind him, a giant tornado emerged on the left, with rain clouds gathering on the right. Yet before any of these had time to do much, death arrived from below as dinosaurs in the valleys down in the valleys felt the environment itself turn against them as Dina's attack arrived and did quite a number on the local wildlife, as many died in mere seconds.

814/841 enemies remaining.

Seeing the others have fun, Jake also began to release death from above. Being inside the room, Jake could see the end and estimated the entire place was around four-hundred kilometers in length. That meant his Pulse soon allowed him to scan it all. Once he had marked all the dinosaurs present, Jake set up shop as he summoned a platform of arcane mana beneath himself. It was as sturdy as arcane mana could be after his mana practice, and with a proper foothold that could handle the explosions he was about to release, Jake began to act out his dream of being a living Arcane Powershot turret.

He started with all the flyers before moving toward those on the ground. Towards the entrance, a scar of destruction made its way towards him, wind, rain, vines, and explosions of force magic tearing up the land. Within long, they were done slaughtering the far too-easy room, with Jake finishing off the last few dinosaurs while the rest of the party made it over to where Jake was.

Room completed. Teleporter activated.

As they had all flown to Jake, they quickly got the teleporter that had been towards the far end of the room inside of a cave filled with what looked like temple ruins. Entering it and teleporting onwards, Jake saw the bonus objective update just as they disappeared from the room.

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (1/3)

They once more appeared at the start of a labyrinth with three paths to pick from.

"That was too easy... do we need to make our way through another labyrinth before the next challenge room?" the King asked, slightly impatient.

"Seems like it," Jake answered after sending out a Pulse of Perception. "But this one does have a shorter path. More traps, though, but it will still be faster."

"Lead the way," the Sword Saint smiled, unbothered.

Jake and company made their way through this labyrinth within only two hours. It was a bit annoying, but the one positive thing Jake could say was that at least it gave them time to properly regenerate their resources before the next challenge room. Not that they were in trouble when it came to enduring long battles – they always had potions if things went south.

Arriving at the next gate, they were once more met with four options.

1. Puzzle (Medium)

2. Collection (Medium)

3. Combat (Easy)

4. Random (Easy)

And this one was actually a choice. Both the Puzzle and the Collection one were of equal difficulty based on what Jake could see, though he did want to make sure that was indeed the case.

"Say, Minaga, when several options have the same difficulty rating, can we just pick ourselves?" Jake decided to ask the designer of the dungeon.

"Right on! I did tell you there would be actual decision-making on these floors, didn't I? You can select whichever one you believe fits your party the best as long as they are all of the highest difficulty rating available. I do want to also add that I am not actually deciding which ones get the high difficulties here. I made it all pseudo-random to make every experience slightly different. Ah, for reference, you will be able to find this kind of floor with the same design even in other grades. It is quite popular if I say so myself," Minaga gladly answered, even deciding to overshare a bit about the dungeon.

"Several grades, huh?" Jake said, nodding. "Man, that must have been hard. Almost like it takes a godly level of power to design something like that."

"I did say they were pseudo-random, but that doesn't mean I don't have a backdoor where I can decide to make every single room the worst... say, how about we decide to make every single challenge room from here on out take place underwater?"

"You wouldn't," Jake said with not a shred of fear. "I do not believe your integrity and professionalism will allow you to have water levels within your labyrinth."

"I... you're right," Minaga surrendered. "There are lines that simply shouldn't be crossed, and that threat was in poor taste. From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. Though I will add that I can still change the rooms to something else that you will also hate."

"And I am forever grateful that you will not do that," Jake smiled. "Thanks for answering, and I hope you continue to have a great day."

"Good to know we reached an understanding. Enjoy the floor!"

"We will," he smiled before turning to the party. "We should pick the Collection one. My gut is telling me that will be incredibly easy and cheeseable."

"Oh, come on!"

Alas, his complaint was too late. They had all activated the Collection room, and the door opened to reveal another large, albeit slightly smaller room than the last. This environment looked like a large underground cave, but luckily there were no mushrooms anywhere. There was plenty of moss, though, and it grew in odd patterns, leaving natural formations all over the place and the air full of mana.

Room Objective: Collect all the Hidden Tokens.

32/32 Hidden Tokens remaining.

Their objective was to find all the hidden tokens throughout the large cave. These tokens were all hidden inside natural formations, below the ground or inside walls, with some even floating inside odd green clouds that permeated the air.

Anyway, a few Pulse of Perceptions and a Dina who kindly asked the moss to lend a hand later, and they teleported to the next labyrinth.

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (2/3)

"I do hope the difficulty increases," the Sword Saint said as they began walking through yet another labyrinth. "After the Demon Lord, this seems far too straightforward and easy."

"Ree!" Sylphie also complained, saying that the later opponents in the arena on the city floor had been harder and a lot more fun.

"Variance is welcome when it comes to the rooms, but in order for the variance to hold meaning, there has to be an element of challenge to the variance. If not, it is simply going through the motions," the Fallen King joined in.

"Well..." Dina said as she fidgeted with one of the flowers growing from her hair. "I think it's okay. The Demon Lord was a big outlier in difficulty, and if this floor didn't start easy, it wouldn't have space to get harder later on. We are pretty good at these rooms too, and I do think there is fun to be found in seeing how fast we can go."

"See, that is a good mentality to have!" Minaga swooped in to agree.

"Oh, so you do like it when we speedrun the floors and cheese them?" Jake shot back with a grin.

"Anyway, please continue," he backed off as fast as he had come.

Jake shook his head as the party kept up their high speed through yet another labyrinth before they arrived at their third gate and choice of the day.

1. Traps (Medium)

2. Crafting (Medium)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Easy)

This one had the most interesting choice so far. They didn't want to waste too much time discussing, though, and ended up just going with the combat option as the Fallen King and Sylphie both heavily advocated for it. Jake had a strong feeling they just really wanted to kill stuff and blow off steam after the city floor. Hopefully, they would calm down shortly.

This combat room also proved itself easy, though it was slightly harder than the first one they had done, despite both being medium difficulty. After clearing it, Jake had to confess he had kind of expected the floor to be over. They even completed the bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Complete three rooms of the highest difficulty. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

However, despite the objective getting completed, they found themselves facing yet another labyrinth. Jake frowned, wondering how many they had to do, the others thinking the same thing.

"Is it possible this is part of the labyrinth?" the Sword Saint theorized. "That we can't just pick the fastest path every time? Also, is it possible there was more than one exit in any of the prior labyrinths?"

Jake considered for a bit and used another pulse. Ultimately, he went with his gut and shook his head. "No... no, I think we just have to keep going, and that were are just more than three."

"How many do you think there are?" Dina questioned.

"Hm," Jake thought. Then a light bulb went off in his head, and he spoke with certainty. "There are six rooms total we need to clear."

"Okay, how in the cursed name of evil Demon Lord Gubrothas did you cheat yourself into figuring that out? Seriously, how utterly overpowered is that Bloodline of yours to-

"It's the thirty-sixth floor," Jake interrupted him. "Thirty and six. Hence six rooms as having thirty-six total would honestly be too much. Shit, there are probably seven rooms on the next floor."

Silence followed for several seconds as the Sword Saint just smiled, and Dina did all she could to suppress a giggle.

"Am I... am I that predictable?" Minaga questioned his entire existence.

"A better question is if I am indeed just incredibly smart," Jake joked back.

"Considering that is an impossibility..." Minaga roasted him. "I... Did the rest of you also figure it out?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Dina answered.

"Ree," Sylphie said, also not really caring.

The King stayed silent as expected, with the Sword Saint smiling. "Such an idea never even crossed my mind. I had considered there was some hint in prior words you spoke, a clue in the number of difficulties and how all the options got harder with time. Alas, all in vain, as it seems I merely do not have a mind comparable to you two."

"I am pretty sure he just insulted us both," Minaga said.

"Same, man," Jake nodded.

The old man just kept smiling as he motioned forward. "Should we not get going? We have three more rooms next, do we not?"

He spoke the last part while looking up toward the ceiling of the labyrinth.

"You know, I am beginning to hate your party more and more..."

"Nah, he loves us," Jake joked with the Sword Saint.

"You know, I am definitely filing a complaint with Vilas and Aeon both after this."

Jake kept smiling as they walked, holding himself back from pointing out how referring to two Primordials using their names was definitely the behavior of someone who wasn't a god. Definitely.

Chapter 699: Nevermore: Cruel Trap Room

After the fun bantering with Minaga, they arrived at room number four, and finally, the difficulty seemed to have increased. At least it said this would be hard.

1. Traps (Hard)

2. Collection (Medium)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Hard)

As they were still following Minaga's advice of never picking anything that wasn't of the highest difficulty, the only choice was between Random and Traps. Jake considered for a second, but his gut didn't really tell him one was better than the other. Maybe because both would be easy for him.

"Let us just pick Traps. The hunter will likely be able to trivialize any challenge and allow us to pass through quickly," the Fallen King said as he scanned the options.

"I guess," Jake shrugged as he turned to the others. He did kind of want to pick the Random one just to see if there was some fun category they had yet to even see, but alas, the other three agreed to just go with Traps. Well, Sylphie didn't particularly care, but she did seem like she wanted to get through these floors fast after the city floor delay, so she just went with whatever she thought was fastest... which often was just to agree with everyone else.

"Let's do that then," Jake nodded as he infused energy into the particular rune, with the four others joining in. The rune lit up as the door in front of them began opening, revealing the room that had just been generated. Jake released a Pulse of Perception and saw the entire place was only around ten kilometers long and less than five meters in height and width, which made the place incredibly small for a challenge room. However, he also soon realized why it was so small.

The entire place was utterly packed with stuff. What appeared before them was a massive obstacle course with a web of challenges. The walls looked to be made of some kind of metal, and large panels were placed here and there, forcing whoever tried to go through into small openings reminiscent of doorways.

Jake looked around for a while and quickly noticed one more thing of note. The mist was not entirely gone in this trap room. A small amount of it remained, but its properties seemed slightly different. It did not obstruct sight anymore, but Jake did feel that the movement-restricting effect mostly remained, meaning things like teleporting through were out of the question.

"Odd," Jake also said. "I don't feel any real danger..."

Dina looked at the room a bit before taking out a seed. She tossed it in the air, and before it landed, a vine soldier had grown from it. The one-meter-tall creature began walking into the area with the traps, and the moment it walked just five meters ahead of them, a barrier sprung up, separating the vine soldier from Jake and the others.

It paused slightly, but Dina urged it to keep walking. It did so, and just a few meters later, it activated a formerly invisible formation on the floor, resulting in an explosion of mana spears shooting up from the ground. The vine soldier was hit, but the spears only left small tears in its body... and then it disappeared.

Only to reappear back right beside Dina, the barrier in front of them also fading in the process.

"I believe we may have underestimated these trap rooms," the Sword Saint voiced his thoughts.

"Ree!" Sylphie said, wanting to give it a go. Jake saw no reason to deny her, and the hawk shot forward as she turned into wind. She got several hundred meters into the room while successfully avoiding all the traps until suddenly, a section of the wall shot out like a piston, hitting the living gust of wind that

was Sylphie. The glowing formation at the end of the piston glowed with some kind of energy, and in the very next second, living wind joined them back behind the barrier.

Sylphie turned back into her physical form and screeched in annoyance. But she did learn something.

The piston had managed to do a very small amount of damage to Sylphie, and that had triggered her to teleport away. The prior traps she avoided had failed to do any damage even if they had partly hit her, making Sylphie – the smart bird she was – conclude that only if someone took damage would they be teleported back.

“So, who wants to go next?” the Sword Saint asked.

Jake was about to volunteer when Dina stepped up. “I can test if it is indeed about taking damage.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” the old man smiled as he motioned her to give it a shot. As she walked forward and passed that invisible threshold, the barrier popped up again, confirming that only one person could do the room at a time.

Dina walked forward while taking out her staff and touching her chest with her one free hand as it glowed with dense life energy. Bobo, her living armor, began to grow as her body was covered, and tapping herself with the staff infused Bobo with even more energy as vines sprung from all over, creating a cocoon of defensive plants.

Then, she jumped forward as she pointed her staff, shooting forward a vine. The vine gripped one of the panels meant to block one’s progress as she dragged herself further into the room, the vines below her functioning as dozens of small legs.

Nearly instantly, she triggered a bunch of traps. Spears shot out from the walls and hit the amalgamation of vines, but they failed to do much. Even as a few vines were cut off or exploded, Dina remained untouched behind all her defenses.

When she reached the piston, her vines took most of the blow, and she ended up using the vines almost as springs as she allowed herself to pounce. She launched herself forward with help from the momentum, and within only a few minutes, she reached the midway point. So far, the only true challenge for her seemed to be the small openings she sometimes had to get through, forcing her to shrink her form momentarily before expanding it again.

"Does not seem hard," the Fallen King said as he walked over and poked the barrier blocking them in, making sure it was indeed utterly impenetrable.

"Let's see," the Sword Saint said patiently.

Dina kept going as the traps got harder in the second part. At one point, the walls to both sides grew spikes as they slammed together, but Dina managed to not get crushed as she raised her staff to stop both walls at once. The damn staff didn't even bend from the impact, and after she infused some energy, it grew in length and pushed back both walls, allowing her to pass safely.

More traps followed. Explosions of mana, spears shooting out, pitfalls, acid getting blasted from the walls, crescent energy waves, and of course, the trap room itself moving physically while trying to stop her. However, against the Dryad druid, nothing managed to penetrate her defenses. Even when the Fallen King pointed out a blast of soul energy, Bobo somehow managed to absorb it instead of Dina, which did look a bit funny as, for a fraction of a second, Jake felt like Bobo had been teleported away but was somehow instantly brought back to Dina again.

In the end, Dina managed to make it to the other side without suffering any injuries. The second she stepped on a small platform at the far end of the room, the barrier in front of Jake and the others faded away.

"Okay, yeah, it is about taking damage. When Bobo took some damage, the room tried to teleport him, but because he is bound to me, he was instantly brought back again. So good defenses do work here," Dina explained through their telepathic link.

"I believe the real way it was meant to be done was memorizing the safe path... there were places you could go without activating anything," the Sword Saint sent through the Golden Mark.

"That appears to be like an unnecessary waste of time," the Fallen King scoffed. Without waiting further, he floated forwards straight into the trap room. His passive barrier was already active, and with a wave of his hand, it turned golden as he casually flew at a relaxed pace.

Traps activated all around, nothing managing to do anything to the barrier, and in a time only slightly slower than Dina – only because he clearly didn't rush - the Fallen King made it to the other side safely. His defenses were simply too overpowered.

"Now, who is next?" the Fallen King questioned cockily.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched as she flew up in the air, gladly taking on the challenge as a glowing green branch appeared behind her feet that she perched herself on. Jake felt her confidence and cheered her on as he observed her.

She seemed to levitate on the branch as Jake saw her wiggle in a cute-looking way, like a cat ready to pounce. What was less cute was how her body began to glow with green energy, and the wind picked up around Jake and the Sword Saint. Power accumulated in their surroundings as Sylphie lowered herself a bit and opened her wings. Jake barely saw the familiar Green Shield appear around her body as the entire entrance area of the trap room exploded.

Like a bullet from a railgun, Sylphie blasted through hundreds of traps, narrowly navigating into all the small gaps to make it through the room. Even with the mist limiting her movements, she flew with insane speed. All the spears, pistons, moving walls, and any trap that took even a moment to activate were simply too slow and only fired off in her wake. What did hit her, the Green Shield managed to stop. This resulted in Sylphie safely making it to the other side in record speed.

"Ree! Ree!" she bragged over the Golden Mark as she sounded incredibly proud.

Jake sent a mental thumbs-up as he had honestly expected Sylphie to have trouble with this room after seeing her trying to get through after transforming her body into wind. Luckily that wasn't an issue. That just left Jake and the Sword Saint.

"You can go first," Jake motioned to the old man.

The Sword Saint hesitated for a moment before nodding. On guard, he entered the room, and with light steps, he began making his way through. A water barrier surrounded him as he slowly went through, trying not to activate traps as he went. Sometimes he did activate one, but before the attacks could hit him, he either dodged or released a counterattack.

However, less than a kilometer in, he failed to dodge an attack as a mana spear penetrated the water barrier and left a small cut around his ankle. Instantly, the Sword Saint found himself teleported back right next to Jake.

"I shall wait patiently," Jake smiled teasingly.

The old man just sighed as he went again.

This happened fourteen more times as he got further with every try. In the last two attempts, he used his boosting skill to make his defenses better and speed faster, resulting in him finally passing the room and getting to the other side, a bit worse for wear. It had ended up taking the Sword Saint a bit over an hour to get the room done, which in retrospect, wasn't that bad. It just felt like a long time due to how fast the others did it.

"Now we only wait for the hunter," the Fallen King spoke through the Golden Mark. "I hope you do not disappoint us."

"That would certainly be embarrassing after being after me so much," the Sword Saint concurred.

"I am sure he has a plan," Dina tried to be diplomatic.

"Ree!" Sylphie encouraged him to just smack every trap with his cauldron.

Jake didn't really think that was necessary as he walked into the trap room and smiled. "Be there in a jiffy."

What followed was a nice and casual stroll. Whenever he got close to one of the traps, Jake saw the formation and quickly stepped around the lines that would activate it. Occasionally he did activate one and easily dodged whatever was shot at him. Towards the end, he purposefully just walked in a nearly straight line as he evaded everything the trap room could throw at him. All in all, it was a nice experience, and Jake soon rejoined the others.

"Showoff," the Sword Saint chuckled as Jake walked through the final barrier. He hadn't used a single skill during his little stroll and only summoned a couple of stable arcane barriers here and there to block stuff he felt too lazy to dodge. Oh, and he did catch one mana spear mid-air after infusing his gauntlet with energy. That one was indeed only to show off.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked why he didn't use the cauldron.

"A meager trap room like this isn't worthy of facing my ultimate weapon," Jake answered in a haughty voice.

"Ree," Sylphie answered in full understanding.

"You know... I... no, I can't say that. Sharing information like that is against the rules," Minaga said as his voice echoed.

Jake and company were already mid-teleport as he spoke, and they appeared before yet another labyrinth.

He saw Dina was about to ask, but he nudged her slightly, and she seemed to understand as she didn't say anything.

"Truly... truly can I say it?"

All five of them continued to ignore him as they followed Jake and entered the labyrinth.

"Alas... it seems no one can hear me, so perhaps it is safe to disclose..."

Their team cohesion was truly on point, as none of them reacted to a single word the Unique Lifeform said.

"Well, if no one is listening, I guess I can just talk out loud a bit. That trap room was quite well designed if I say so myself. It was made so people who are just incredibly durable can't just walk through, allowing it to counter certain individuals, forcing them to actually think for a second. It is also interesting to think about how that trap room was partly based on one of the Challenge Dungeons available here in Nevermore, albeit that one is quite a bit different. Thinking about it further, that Challenge Dungeon would surely be easy for someone who can just casually walk through and easily dodge every single thing here. Ah, it is truly good that no one is listening because I am definitely not allowed to disclose that. Also, while I am here talking to myself, I can't help but meander about one of the funniest things going on right now in one of the other instances of floor thirty-seven right now. I couldn't possibly have predicted that a trap room made not to damage but teleport people back would completely and utterly screw over some of the people who manage to find methods that make them borderline invincible in their current grades by seemingly giving them infinite health points. Yeah, definitely couldn't have predicted that."

Jake and the others casually walked as they listened to the Unique Lifeform sharing information that Jake was pretty sure you couldn't share according to the rules of Nevermore. Not that he complained. He also instantly put together who Minaga was talking about towards the end of his talk to himself.

"Could you guys imagine if Eron had to do that trap room that we just did?" Jake joked with the others.

"Odd, I just had this weird thought that some trap rooms are harder than others..."

"Or maybe one even harder," Jake grinned.

"The schadenfreude is palpable," the Sword Saint chuckled as he shook his head.

"Hey, that's what he gets for being faster than us on that damn city floor," Jake shot back.

"Ree..." Sylphie whined softly.

Jake plucked the bird out of the air and patted her head as he walked, holding her in a hug. "It isn't your fault the evil creature who designed the city doesn't like awesome hawks like you."

"None of my design decisions are ever targeted individuals."

"He is just jealous," Jake comforted her more.

"I am definitely never jealous."

"Yeah, a super jealous guy for sure," Jake kept comforting Sylphie as she cheered up a bit. Still, Jake couldn't help but imagine Eron in one of those trap rooms.

Man, do I wish I could see that. He is definitely not having a good time.

Eron was not having a good time as he appeared back at the beginning of the trap room. He did not know how many times he had tried so far. Frustration was obvious on his face as he simply had to try again. He memorized the route he took the last time and managed to get five meters further on the next attempt, taking him to a bit over the twelve-kilometer mark. Only three more to go.

His party members were all meditating at the end of the trap room, having all completed it. All they were waiting for was him.

He kept going, again and again. All methods had been tried. Even if he purposefully did damage to himself during the trap room, the teleportation would activate, making him unable to use his original plan of just blowing up his body and slowly making it to the end.

More days passed as he inched ever closer. Every attempt was identical until the end, adding on just a few more meters every time as he had to make sure he didn't trigger a single trap. His stats were simply not high enough to allow him to dodge anything. Finally, after who knows how long, he passed through the final barrier and completed the room as his party members all awakened.

They all looked at him and nodded as they prepared to move on. A tacit agreement was reached of never picking trap rooms ever again. At least they would gladly pick the Random option over one.

Eron truly hoped to forever put the experience behind him. To never think about it again, and for no one else to ever-

"Man, that's a great new record! Ninety-seven days to pass one trap room? Okay, not actually sure it's a record, but damn, am I saving the recording anyway! Gonna be fun to rewatch. Maybe I should invite some friends over for a watch party?"

Alas, fate could be cruel.

Chapter 700: Nevermore: Progress Is Nice

The rest of the thirty-sixth floor proved relatively trivial as Jake and company soon completed the entire thing and entered the in-between room. There had indeed only been six rooms and their accompanying labyrinths, but when they arrived at the break room, he was a bit disappointed at seeing they had only managed to get three achievements along with the usual completion bonus.

At least he was disappointed until he saw the achievements in question.

Thirty-sixth floor completed. 360 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor within one day (24 hours). 750 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor while selecting the highest difficulty at every room. 600 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor without straying from the shortest possible path by any more than 10% of the total distance. 900 Nevermore Points earned.

That was a whopping 2250 Nevermore Points from achievements alone. Counting in the Bonus Objective and the floor completion, they had earned 3110 points from this floor alone. Sure, it wasn't incredible compared to the Demon Lord, but it was pretty damn solid.

"These are all sliding-scale achievements, right?" Jake asked as he went over to the usual bar in Minaga's in-between room and poured himself a drink.

"They are indeed," Minaga answered instantly, ready to jump into the conversation.

"Nice. So..."

"Yeah, you got the best ones. Won't say if you missed any other achievements, though. Maybe you did, maybe you didn't."

"Eh, it'll be fine," Jake shrugged as he chugged the beer-like liquid he had poured. It was okay, but not as good as what Villy usually brought.

“Do we need a recovery period?” the Fallen King questioned.

“I do not believe we do,” the Sword Saint answered.

Dina and Sylphie both seemed fine with just getting a move on immediately, so without further ado, they continued and moved onto the thirty-seventh floor, Jake quickly rushing after them while finishing his drink. As Minaga had already mentioned, the next floor was practically identical to the one on the thirty-sixth, though there were a few extra things added here and there.

The traps differed, and one especially nasty trap they ran into would teleport whoever stepped on it to a random place elsewhere in the labyrinth. At least Jake called it nasty until he got an idea. They sent Dina’s vine soldiers through a particular trap, and after seeing it actually put them closer to the exit, they all activated it together and skipped a good forty-five minutes of walking. Sadly not all of the traps could be repeatedly activated like this, with most only working on individuals before dispersing.

Room-wise, it was also much of the same, and Jake would say they got kind of lucky with what rooms had the highest difficulties. Of the seven rooms on the thirty-seventh floor – because yes, there were seven on the floor – they had combat in three of them, collection in two, and another had traps before they got the most interesting option of them all on the final room. It even had a never-before-seen new highest difficulty.

1. Crafting (Hard)

2. Boss (Harder)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Hard)

Jake just had one note when he saw the difficulty:

“Really? You named the difficulty after hard, harder?” Jake made fun of the dungeon master.

“Well, what else would you have me call it? Super hard? Mega hard? Or do you want me to use an entirely different word, like insane or impossible? Seriously, what is wrong with using harder? It perfectly communicates it is harder than hard,” Minaga quickly came to his own defense.

“Still,” Jake said, shaking his head. “It looks kind of lame. You could have made up your own word or something, too. It is ultimately your choice. Just... at least don’t tell me there is a difficulty even higher than harder that you decided to call hardest.”

“... as the professional dungeon master here, I see no reason to listen to your ridiculous critique. You try and make your own dungeon and then come at me with that kind of “feedback.” Forever the critic, never the creator. How would you feel if I made fun of you whenever you failed to concoct a poison or something? Wouldn’t be fun, now would it?”

“So you actually named it hardest?” Jake wanted to clarify.

“Do I have to threaten you again?” Minaga said as he made the entire labyrinth shake slightly.

“No need. I just wanted to make sure,” Jake smiled as he waved the Unique Lifeform off and infused energy into the rune to select the boss room.

“I think naming it harder and hardest is perfectly fine,” the Sword Saint said as he joined Jake.

“Prioritizing practicality and making the options easier to understand is more important than aesthetics in instances like this.”

“I will revise my complaint letter to Aeon.”

The old man chuckled as they passed a fog wall, revealing a room with mountainous terrain. Rather than the usual rock color, the entire place looked orange, primarily filled with sand and mudstone based on what Jake could see. It was not an overly large room, only about fifty kilometers across and with a circular design.

Through a Pulse of Perception, Jake saw the boss inside a crater in the middle of the entire arena. This crater was over thirty kilometers in diameter, and with the large boss in the middle, it did look like the creature in question was the source of the impact.

The group sneaked forward over a hill of loose rocks before properly seeing the boss in the distance. It looked like a large fusion between an elemental, lizard, and scorpion. It had eight legs and a stinger like a scorpion, but its entire body was covered in dense sandstone, with its head and body reminiscent of a lizard.

Using Identify, Jake saw its level was at least decent.

[Meteorborn Beast – lvl 285]

“Huh, so the beast is the source of the impact?” Jake muttered, a bit surprised. Seeing the beast was above even the Demon Lord in level was also really nice.

“It’s a Meteorborn Beast,” Dina said, clearly already aware of what kind of monster it was. “It is part of the Lineage known as Cosmic Beasts and considered a middle of the pack variant. This particular kind comes to be by their parents laying a single egg within a meteor and then directing it towards a cluster of planets where it will then land on one. Upon impact, the egg will shatter, and the newborn Meteorborn Beast will absorb a lot of the energy released from the impact and even some of the matter kicked up from the resulting blast. This makes them take on the properties of whatever planet they land on. Upon reaching B-grade, the beast will then usually take to the cosmos again and create a few eggs they send into the universe, continuing the cycle.”

Jake nodded. Damn, having someone with actual education about the multiverse and stuff is nice.

“Any particular weaknesses or things we should be wary of?” the Sword Saint asked

“Gravity magic. All Meteorborne Beasts have powerful gravity magic, and based on this environment, I reckon this version is also good at earth magic,” Dina answered. “But its overall power level should not be overly impressive, so I think we will be fine. They are also incredibly dumb and not truly sapient.”

“Very well,” the old man nodded. “So, no need to strategize?”

“I don’t believe we will need to,” Dina shook her head. “Unless the dungeon did something special to this particular Meteorborn Beast, that is.”

“Let’s assume Minaga didn’t,” Jake smiled as he took out his bow. The Fallen King had also floated forward as he began to gather power, and Sylphie let out a low screech as she ascended into the sky, ready to strike from above.

Seeing them all move, the Sword Saint also began to stride into the crater. Dina followed behind him with her staff in hand. The Meteorborn Beast soon took notice of the two people approaching as it awoke. After seeing them, it also noticed Sylphie above. As for Jake and the Fallen King... well, it would be hard not to notice the two attacks that hit it less than a second after it woke up.

Jake bombarded the beast from long range while the Fallen King went into medium range and blasted it with repeated waves of force. The Sword Saint dove into melee range as he began to fight the beast directly, with Dina supporting him.

Sylphie descended with attacks from above as the Meteorborn Beast was instantly put on the back foot. It responded by using the exact two types of magic Dina had mentioned. Spheres of condensed space were summoned all around it, making Jake’s next arrows miss as it was thrown off-course, with the Fallen King’s waves of force exploding randomly in mid-air.

Dense orange stones were also condensed from the environment itself as the beast lifted up thousands of tons of soil and sand at once. It pressed all of this together, making incredibly durable weapons it could then control with its gravity magic. Getting hit by those would definitely hurt.

Sadly for the beast, it had met Jake and company at quite an unfortunate time in their lives. See, they had finally been given a good fight after so long on that damn city floor, making them all quite eager to let off some steam. Even Dina seemed excited as she activated her boosting skill along with the four others.

The result was as expected. The beast's eyes were blinded by arrows within thirty seconds of the battle starting, and despite its durable natural armor, the Meteorborn Beast had its defenses ripped and cut apart within mere minutes. It released its trump cards at that point, and Jake did have to admit that dodging a meteor shower that covered the entire room was quite an interesting experience.

Despite the beast's valiant struggles, Dina was proved entirely correct when she said they had no need for strategizing. With Sylphie landing the finishing blow by creating another smaller impact crater within the existing crater, the three remaining legs of the Meteorbeast gave out as it collapsed, dead.

You have slain [Meteorborn Beast – lvl 285] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 219 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Jake was pleasantly surprised to see a level gained, but the fight itself had pleasantly surprised him even more. It had been straightforward, more so than he would have expected. Jake did also notice why. They had all grown in levels during the time on the city floor – Jake and the Sword Saint more than anyone else – but more importantly, they had all just gotten... better. The only one without any big improvements was Dina, though even she had improved a little bit.

The Fallen King and Sylphie both complained a lot, but Jake saw how they had both gotten more refined at using all their magic. The Brokers who asked for assistance with tasks had all required them to push themselves over and over again, leading to subtle improvements that not even constant combat could teach them.

Jake himself had seen his improvements in prowess primarily from that brief period he had spent with the Puzzle Box he hadn't even solved a single percent of yet. But for him, the power naturally primarily came from all the levels and stats.

Speaking of stats, Jake had made some difficult decisions when it came to his Free Points. This was partly spurred on by actually talking to Dina while on the city floor, as she had some more experience with the multiverse and stuff. She had said heretical things, like how just sinking all your Free Points into Perception could become a problem for him later on, and despite Jake obviously knowing that couldn't be the case, he decided to listen to her out of courtesy.

That is why he put 500 Free Points into Strength and Agility, respectively. That was 1000 points right there, which Jake thought was pretty responsible of him. As for all the other stat points... well... Perception was still the best stat.

He had naturally also remembered to lick the weird void-lollipop that Oras had given him. This meant that Jake's stats had undergone quite the growth. That meant that after entering the next in-between room and licking his orb while placing the Free Points Jake just got, he took status as the others took a small break until they moved on.

Jake focused a bit on the system window and had it show all the changes since he entered Nevermore to get an idea of how much he had gained so far... and it was honestly a lot more than he had initially expected.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 204 --> 222]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 203 --> 219]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 206 --> 226]

Stats

Strength: 8536 --> 11022

Agility: 12496 --> 15391

Endurance: 8911 --> 10476

Vitality: 8834 --> 11053

Toughness: 7389 --> 8986

Wisdom: 11181 --> 14357

Intelligence: 9276 --> 11698

Perception: 23246 --> 30882

Willpower: 9385 --> 12336

Free points: 0

This was a total stat growth of 26906 in less than twenty race levels. Even if Jake didn't truly feel like he was getting a lot stronger fast, it was undeniable that his current self was far, far stronger than the Jake who had initially entered Nevermore.

Every single level was just so much more valuable in this grade than those prior, and Jake honestly found it a miracle how he and the others bested monsters so many levels above themselves. Jake did have Big Game Hunter to make up for some of the difference, but still.

Levels also got harder as one progressed, but Jake still thought his Nevermore progress was okay so far. Of course, he hoped it would be even better moving forward and that they wouldn't encounter another city floor.

One more thing they also got plenty of was Nevermore Points, as upon entering the in-between room, he also took stock of how many he gained on floor thirty-seven.

Bonus Objective Completed: Complete three rooms of the highest difficulty. 600 Nevermore Points earned.

Thirty-seventh floor completed. 370 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor within one day (24 hours). 800 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor while selecting the highest difficulty at every room. 700 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor without straying from the shortest possible path by any more than 10% of the total distance. 900 Nevermore Points earned.

Every achievement besides the final one had grown in points they gave, but not by a lot. He also did get why the last one still just gave nine hundred, as the labyrinth part had not really gotten harder.

Dispelling thoughts of points and stats, Jake checked in with his party. Everyone had time to quickly rest up, and it was time to move on, Minaga actively cheering them on.

On a side note, Jake and the others had noted how no loot was rewarded in any of the in-between rooms, but Minaga assured them that it was by design. No, they would get their rewards once they had beaten floor forty. According to Minaga, this was done to offer even better rewards than was normally possible, which did make Jake a bit excited.

He was confident they would make it there quickly too. Jake saw nothing stopping them for long as they continued onto floor thirty-eight. They would keep going as planned and pick the hardest room they could every time while also prioritizing combat whenever possible. Especially bosses were at the top of their priority list as those were the fastest by far for their group and also the most enjoyable opponents.

On the topic of enjoyable opponents... Jake did hope that floor forty would be a pleasant surprise. And if his suspicions were correct, he was confident it would be quite awesome.