

Hunter 731

Chapter 731: Nevermore: Two More Lessons Learned

Jake had a lot he wanted to test on the next floor, but sadly, he wasn't really able to. At least not right away.

The forty-third floor was indeed another "lesson" from the Wyrmgod, but this one wasn't as much about any hard rules as it was about a norm and something that was generally frowned upon. It was a message that if they decided to act in a way that many wouldn't find acceptable, they could put themselves in a bad situation and make enemies unintentionally.

When they appeared on floor forty-three, they were on board a spaceship traveling toward a large asteroid belt, where each asteroid may as well have been a small planet. The story was that they were mercenaries in a vessel stranded in space after a battle with space pirates – yes, there were pirates on this floor again – and during this fight, the ship had gotten damaged.

Their job was to scour this asteroid belt for natural treasures that could be used to repair the ship, but after they arrived, they discovered that dangerous wanted people were also hiding out on these asteroids among the natives.

To further complicate things, these planets were filled to the brim with people of all sorts of races. Tens, if not hundreds of Billions of humans, beastfolk, demons, monsters, elves, dwarves... all sorts of races lived on these asteroids. The most powerful of which was only in D-grade. Outside of the criminals, that is, all of whom were firmly in C-grade.

Calling them criminals was honestly a bit... wrong? They were people who had pissed off major factions in a myriad of ways, some of which Jake deemed legitimate, others he found bullshit. For example, one of the criminals had purposefully created cursed weapons and armor and spread them to unsuspecting

people, driving them insane and wiping out a huge kingdom by proxy. That guy was clearly an asshole, and Jake was all fine with stomping him.

However, there were also cases where the big bad criminal had done some rather basic stuff, just to the wrong people. One of them had killed someone with a Divine Blessing in self-defense and was now marked a heretic to be hunted down and killed on sight, and another had taken and consumed a natural treasure some kingdom totally had their eyes on first.

Now, this is where a bit of important context should be added... the spaceship wasn't really one made for C-grades. In fact, the one controlling it was a mid-tier B-grade automata that had merged itself with the ship and, despite being damaged, could still harness the full weapons system of the ship.

This is to say, it had the ability to blow up smaller planets, or at least these asteroids.

The B-grade automata captain decided instantly that they should also investigate and eliminate the criminals, along with retrieving the items needed to repair the ship. Luckily they didn't have to fully search the asteroids as the ship had a mobile scanner they could bring with them when going down on each asteroid.

So, to fully summarize, Jake and company had the job of investigating the asteroids for treasures to repair the ship using a scanner while at the same time identifying the C-grade criminals hidden there and eliminating them all. Locating these criminals was the hard part, and all they had to do to beat the floor was collect the treasures, and figuring out if a planet had any treasures wouldn't take more than a few days for each.

Once it was decided there were no treasures, they could then decide to go back to the ship... and, to "optimize" their points per day, do a little bit of lying by telling the automata that the asteroid was filled

with really bad criminals and to blow it up. That way, they could kill all the criminals there without bothering to find each one individually, only at the sacrifice of a few billion F, E, and D-grades.

This was one part of the moral lesson. Because while it was made clear that this was an option, it was also made clear this could be frowned upon. Killing billions to just take out a handful of potential targets wasn't something any laws directly prohibited, but doing so wasn't exactly looked kindly on either.

Not to say that actually eliminating the criminals on the asteroids was simple if one wanted to avoid collateral damage, even after they had identified them. A genius-level C-grade and a mid-tier C-grade fighting could wreak a lot of damage, something Jake had been a witness to during his visions of the Malefic Viper, so deciding to kill them also had to be done with caution to avoid widespread destruction.

The reason why wholesale slaughter of the "weak" was so frowned upon wasn't entirely due to some altruistic intent from the multiverse's major factions. Sure, there probably was a bit of moral thinking in there somewhere, but one of the predominant reasons was the fear of setting a precedent.

If one faction decided to send a group of C-grades to destroy a few small planets belonging to a major faction, chances are the faction would retaliate in kind but with more force to not appear weak. So they would send a few B-grades and blow up even more planets... only for the first faction to then send A-grades before finally a bunch of gods are going around wiping out all life in galaxies. This kind of "war" would have no end and only lead to the ruination of a faction's future.

No, it was instead far more accepted to just send the first group of C-grades after another group of C-grades. Then they could fight, and the only "fair" retaliation would be something similar, making it far less of a slaughter and more like a competition. It also meant that the higher-ups wouldn't move, as that would ultimately make them look like the true aggressors by escalating the conflict.

This was also viewed as safer. In Villy's words, most gods or even just very high-grade people were fucking cowards. They didn't dare to fight others around their own level of power but instead preferred to settle matters through proxies. Rather than two gods fighting, they would rather compete in some other fashion, like setting up a tournament with A-grades or a war with C-grades, all while setting rules to make it a "fair" fight. This did also have the benefit of assisting the people made to take part in these competitions, effectively cultivating the next generation.

Killing a random planet of D-grades could also have other unwanted implications. Karma was a powerful thing, and no one knew if some random A-grade had once been born there or maybe some god had recently just come by and liked the place a lot a few millennia earlier, and your decision to blow it up annoyed them.

The spaceship had records of some such incidents that they could freely listen to while traveling between asteroids. One of the examples that struck Jake was about a late-tier god who had arrived on a planet and really liked a certain lake. He had settled down there for a long time and meditated, finally breaking free from his worries which allowed him to pass the final step and become a Godking. Two thousand years later, two S-grades were fighting and ended up accidentally destroying the planet, resulting in the Godking descending in the middle of the fight to destroy both of them for their transgression. He had then proceeded to wipe out both factions the S-grades were leaders of for good measure to quell his anger.

All because they had ruined a nice lakeside view.

To summarize, killing innocent people shouldn't be done haphazardly, or you could piss someone off unintentionally. That, and it was just a bad look.

Anyway, when doing the floor, they didn't blow up any asteroids. No, they were more than overpowered enough by themselves to utterly cheese the floors. Jake had his wonderful Pulse of Perception and a powerful innate Bloodline-powered ability to sense auras, allowing him to know if an asteroid had any C-grades pretty damn quickly after stepping foot on one.

Not that he was the most overpowered of them. You see, planets filled with enlightened beings and beasts were naturally full of life. Life meant plants. Plants meant Dina could also ask a damn forest that had existed for tens of thousands of years about stuff, and it would know, while sometimes even asking its friends, resulting in their fastest asteroid clearing – including getting a natural treasure – being less than half an hour.

This all resulted in them going through nearly a hundred and fifty asteroids with life on within only seven months, with the majority of the time spent flying between each of them. Jake got some good alchemy during this time and was gleefully experimenting with Curse Fragments whenever they had downtime. Sadly, there wasn't a single time he had to go all-out during the entire floor, as the one time they did find a small asteroid just filled with criminals, Jake and Dina had already been sent off to two other asteroids nearby. The Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint had thus been the only ones to experience proper combat as they spent a week or so killing all the leaders of some criminal gang that had taken over the asteroid while also retrieving the final item they needed to repair the ship and move on to the next floor.

Thus they pretty easily did floor forty-three while learning the lesson that going full murderhobo on a bunch of E and D-grades wasn't cool.

Onto floor forty-four, Jake honestly hadn't known what to expect. What more rules and norms were there?

Well, floor forty-four ended up feeling kind of... personal for Jake. For many of them, actually.

Because while floor forty-three was about how valued large groups of weaker people were and how one should leave them alone as a general rule, floor forty-four was all about individual creatures one should leave the hell alone.

They had appeared on what looked like a massive disc floating through space, filled with large islands spread all throughout. Both below the water, on the water, and floating up in the sky. Each island had its own little ecosystem and was covered by some kind of barrier keeping all the creatures inside. New monster variants had begun appearing within these domes, with their job to pass on to the next floor being to find and identify at least two hundred and fifty variants worth noting.

Information was pretty scarce, but the one that tasked them with this quest was an old woman living in a hut who Identified as a level 250 Researcher but, based on Jake's senses, was actually far more powerful than that. Not quite a god, but definitely A-grade. None of the others could notice this, though Sylphie did talk about how the wind avoided her, which made her think something was wrong.

Anyway, they were to find these rare variants and then categorize where they were while not directly engaging them in combat. The lesson from the Researcher was that all variants were of value to the multiverse as they represented new and growing Records. A single powerful variant appearing on a planet – or a dome, in this case – could uplift the entire ecosystem and lead to a cascade effect.

It was a bit like what happened with Earth, partly because of Jake. So many powerful people appearing there resulted in massive growth potential even for the average Earthling. People who could never reach C-grade before had not set foot in the grade, and then those who likely could have gotten there themselves now had far better evolutions and future prospects.

Variants appearing also mattered to many factions due to the potential of allying with them. Two beasts of a similar species but different variants having a child would lead to a merge of their Records, and sometimes a more powerful variant than both of them would emerge. Adding new variants thus mattered a lot to some factions, even to the gods. This was naturally something Jake was very well aware of, considering his status as a so-called "Harbinger of Primeval Origins."

On that note, no, Jake didn't even consider for a second trying to get extra points or achievements by making a variant on floor forty-four. The Primal Juice or whatever was far too valuable and not something to squirt out haphazardly.

Anyway, all of this is to say that a lot of factions would get royally pissed if someone went around killing weak variants for no reason. It was generally considered customary that if you, as a C-grade, saw a lower-grade variant running around, you would leave it alone. If you did want to get rid of it, one could always just send someone around their own level, at least allowing the person who kills it to get something out of the entire thing.

So, the entire floor was basically flying between massive domes all over ten thousand kilometers in diameter and categorizing variants and taking notes, with the Researcher then deciding if the observed beast or monster was considered rare enough to count.

Well, that, or just killing them outright, no matter their grade.

Because the lesson of this floor wasn't just to respect variants and the Records they represented but to be aware that some creature variants were to be killed on sight. These types of creatures were often what was considered living calamities.

Curse Remnants.

Plague Spirits.

And, one Jake truly did agree with was a menace to the entire multiverse: Fungi.

Or, well, not necessarily just fungi or all kinds of fungi. In general, plant-based living creatures with Truesouls weren't really that special. The tree Jake had met in the center of the forest close to Haven was a common example of a plant monster, and so was the fungi Jake had seen below Haven. But one of them was viewed far less favorably than the others.

Fungi that could infect other plant life were often seen as a pest akin to an ectognamorph hive but were not really viewed as calamities. But some variants that didn't just absorb energy from and control plant life could appear. Some evolved to be able to control any form of life or just anything with a soul or energy. These fungi or plants could evolve to take over entire planets, creating massive bodies out of them. From there, they would then spread and try to consume other planets one after another until they were killed or died due to age.

These plant and fungi monsters weren't that much different in that fashion from the aforementioned ectognamorphs, but there was one big difference: sapience. A hive could be talked to. Negotiated with. They could join a faction. These plants nearly never had any true intelligence, not even when reaching S-grade. It was only if they somehow managed to become gods that they would truly awaken.

Plague Spirits and such were much the same in that they only had an instinct. Curse Remnants also only existed to do whatever the curse was about, which was rarely something pleasant.

The final kind of creature one was meant to at least consider killing on sight was one familiar to Jake. It was monsters that had lost themselves and had become living killing machines that destroyed anything they came across without a care in the world.

Prime example? C and especially B-grade Villy. He had been a bloody menace back then, wiping out all life on his own birth planet, and then proceeded to slaughter whatever else he came across. Based on what Jake had seen, this was only in late-tier C-grade for Villy, though. Jake was unsure what exactly happened between the Villy he saw being crafty with the First Sage and fooling human kingdoms, to the

Villy that sat in wyvern form on top of a cliff, roaring toward the sky. B-grade Villy was bad all the way through; no two ways about it.

Naturally, no powerful A or S-grade had killed Villy during his rise to power, and Jake was thankful for that. As for now... no one would even talk negatively about this. This was a great example of why these weren't really hard rules. Though, to be fair, there weren't truly any hard rules in the multiverse.

Plagues were not looked nicely upon, and some types were viewed as outlawed, yet Jake knew the Order still worked on them. One was not meant to mess with random weak people, yet Eversmile still did experiments that doomed entire civilizations without a care in the world, while Stormild could casually consume an entire galaxy indiscriminately. Yet none looked at the Primordials and called them criminals. These were ultimately just outlines of what one could expect to piss off other factions by doing, but as long as you had the backing or the power, it didn't truly matter. Shit, based on some of the things mentioned, Jake and Eternal Hunger broke quite a few norms and rules.

Back to floor forty-four, this one wasn't hard either but was all about exploration like the prior floor while having the Researcher tell them about how important rare variants were to the balance of the multiverse. This one was better, though, as there was a bit more combat, and they didn't have to rely on a spaceship to take them around, allowing them to beat the floor in "just" five months. Pretty good for these larger floors.

After reporting on variants one final time, the Researcher summoned a portal as "new assistants were arriving shortly to replace them" while thanking them for their contribution. Another floor down.

Floors forty-three and forty-four had both been pretty simple and not that difficult, with them even raking up plenty of bonus points by doing things fast and well. Things had been pretty straightforward, and they had done as expected of them with great results. However, the final one of these "laws and norms" floors, as Jake dubbed them, would prove to be a bit more... complicated. Because this one was all about a rule in the multiverse Jake was really, really bad at:

Respecting divine authority.

Chapter 732: Nevermore: To Respect Divine Authority

Another in-between room, another small break before it was on to floor forty-five.

Over a year had passed since Jake had gotten his Arcane Supremacy skill, and throughout this time, he had time to thoroughly familiarize himself with the skill. He had time to relearn some things about his own body and truly discover how massive the bonus from the skill had been, despite the less-than-optimal setup of the floors he had been through.

The two skills that benefitted the most turned out to be Arcane Awakening, which wasn't overly surprising, but he was a bit surprised at Arcane Powershot being the second skill that got the most out of the upgrade. Pure arcane magic benefitted the most, but something like Arcane Powershot dipped into several concepts along with the purely physical aspects.

Arcane Awakening, on the other hand, dipped into all of the benefits provided by Arcane Supremacy. The lowered cost naturally made the skill more efficient, and the increased potency materialized in Jake just having to move less energy through his body to achieve the same effect as before, thus also lessening the strain on his body and increasing the time he could keep the skill active.

Adding on his increased resistance to his own arcane energy, the benefit was massive. He could now keep the stable 30% boost active nearly indefinitely without suffering much strain on his body, while the offensive and defensive modes were also pretty easy to deal with. He wouldn't even suffer any period of weakness from just using these two anymore as long as he didn't use them for a prolonged period.

A full Arcane Awakening boosting all his stats by 60% still took a lot out of him, and getting around the period of weakness wasn't going to happen. It wasn't as bad as before, though, and he could keep the

full boost active for longer, with especially the health drain reduced significantly. The passive shield and the extra arcane damage with every attack had naturally also both been improved.

Arcane Awakening still didn't allow him to boost above the percentages set by the skill without him deciding to purposefully push it higher, which was something he hadn't dared to do, lest he would blow himself up. Even if Arcane Supremacy had given him more control over his energies, he still doubted he would get out of doing that unscathed, assuming he survived it at all. But... the potential for doing so was definitely there. Circumstances would decide if he would ever do it.

The second skill that experienced massive benefits was, as mentioned, Arcane Powershot, and some of the benefits were for quite obvious reasons. He could charge it for longer due to his increased resistance, do it faster due to increased control, and release far more potent shots due to everything put together. As the skill wasn't only about arcane energy, it "only" got around thirty percent better in total... but adding thirty-percent extra power to his most reliable attack? Yeah, that was massive.

However... Jake did find one skill that got worse, and Jake had no idea how to fix it. One Step had been hit with the increased resource cost quite hard, which was a real bummer as he, quite frankly, had no bloody idea how to integrate his arcane energy into that skill. It was a well-defined Legacy skill, so even if he wanted an upgrade, it definitely wasn't going to be easy. Shit, if he broke the set upgrade path, it would only get harder to upgrade it in the future... so as things were now, this was just a loss he would have to live with. It wasn't all bad, though.

The one good thing was that the increased stamina cost was only a thing in combat. When Jake used it just as a skill to travel, the cost remained unaffected, which he assumed was due to the skill being originally invented as a traveling skill, not a combat skill. He was also very happy that the system distinguished when a skill was used in combat and not in combat wasn't being applied to the Malefic Viper Legacy skills.

Oh, and there had been one other skill that had been negatively affected... though that hadn't been for long. Jake was naturally talking about Splitting Arrow Rain, which he pretty damn quickly got upgraded with inspiration from his skill selection.

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be split to create a far more potent arrow rain. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Splitting Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an arrow rain.

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[Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, you can explode hundreds of smaller arrows, creating an Arcane Arrow Rain. Cloning arcane arrows or creating Arcane Arrow Rains using arcane arrows has a far lower mana and stamina cost. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Wisdom when using Arcane Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an Arcane Arrow Rain.

The skill honestly just integrated what he could get from the better Arrow Rain in the skill selection. It now used arcane energy, allowing him to clone arrows cheaper while also adding on the part where he exploded an arrow to make it rain. That was definitely better than what he did before, where he just shot upward and waited for the arrow to begin falling downward on its own.

He also finally got working on some curse-based poison, but it proved a lot more difficult than he had thought it would, so progress was slow in that department. Overall, things felt pretty slow, considering that even after two more floors, Jake had barely gotten any levels.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 232]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 232]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 233]

2 class levels and 3 profession levels were all a bit over a year, and two floors amounted to. By now, Jake had to get used to slower levels unless he did something truly impressive. He kind of wished he could do a Minaga fight every floor, but alas, that wasn't how Nevermore worked. Or anything worked, really.

How it did work was by throwing them on another floor meant to teach them a lesson. And the old man already had a good guess of what the last "lesson" floor would be about before they entered it.

"It will be related to gods and religion in some way," the Sword Saint said with certainty as they were about to exit the in-between room.

"That... can either go very well or really badly," Jake muttered. "Assuming you are right, that is."

He was right.

Stepping through the gateway, they appeared standing in the middle of a town square in what seemed to be the middle of the night. The place was pretty damn deserted, with many old medieval-looking buildings surrounding them. The only place with bustling activity was a massive church at the end of the square, and through a quick Pulse, Jake saw the place was jam-packed. Tens of thousands were within, praying.

Fuck me, Jake cursed as the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the forty-fifth floor of Nevermore: Peerin Kingdom of the Starcross Pantheon

You have stepped onto a planet owned by the Peerin Kingdom of the Starcross Pantheon, a powerful Pantheon ruled by over a dozen gods. The kingdom you have appeared in has been derelict for a long time, with no hopeful prospects appearing for over a thousand years, making it fall out of favor with the Pantheon.

As newcomers, you are unknown entities to the planet and must establish yourselves. Gain favor and recognition to gain access to the features of the kingdom as you aim to leave the floor and proceed to the next. Luckily, you have a token that will allow you to teleport to the next floor. There is just one problem.

The entirety of Peerin Kingdom falls within the protective formation laid down by the Starcross Pantheon, blocking all kinds of teleportation that takes one outside of it. The only way off the floor is by leaving this formation first. You must navigate the kingdom and reach the waygate station at the edge of the kingdom, which will allow you to fully leave the Starcross Pantheon's territory and, thus, the floor through the use of the token.

However, these teleportation circles are not available to the public and require permission to use. With B and even A-grades present in the kingdom, trying to force your way through seems ill-advised.

No matter how you wish to approach this, getting the attention of the clergy will be vital to your mission, as they can either help or hinder you on your path. For they control the entire kingdom.

Main objective: Use the teleportation token to proceed to the next floor.

Bonus objectives: Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom (0/1)

Current progress: Token used (0/1), Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 102.073

Right as Jake scanned the message, an odd emblem teleported right between the five of them. It didn't take a genius to figure out this was the teleportation token, and Dina instantly grabbed it, being the designated "taker of mandatory items."

"So..." Jake muttered as he scratched the back of his head.

“Firstly, we need to ensure the little hunter doesn’t instantly anger the clergy and get us all killed,” the Fallen King said.

“Seems like a good start. Sylphie should also be careful,” the Sword Saint smiled, getting an annoyed screech from the hawk. “Dina, would it be best if the two of us took the lead? I am sure you have plenty of experience with how one is supposed to act around religious figures, while I myself have had some unpleasant experiences with a certain god and am fully aware of how... demanding people of worship can be.”

Dina thought for a second before speaking. “Do we care about the bonus objectives here much? Or would it not be better to move on as fast as possible?”

A total no-brainer.

“Swift progress is preferred.”

“Ree.”

“Better to finish it quickly,” the old man said, unsure what she was getting at.

Jake was a bit slower at answering before he understood. “I take it you also wanna just move on quickly?”

“Yes,” Dina said. “That should be more efficient.”

It was a bit absurd, but these last four floors since the Minaga fight had nearly doubled their total points. Jake and company had known that points would increase as one got further in Nevermore, but they hadn’t expected every single floor after floor forty to give over 10.000 Nevermore Points each. Especially not considering that they didn’t even go insanely out of their way to do all the bonus objectives and achievements they could. But... just the huge floor clear bonus being more than four thousand for each floor meant the gains were massive.

So if they could pass the floor quickly and get 4500 Nevermore Points, that would likely give the best overall gain. Later floors just gave that many more points.

“I assume you have already felt it up ahead?” Dina continued. “There are many blessed inside... so I think it is worth a try.”

The Fallen King and Sword Saint also seemed to realize what the two of them were getting at, and the old man chuckled. “Sure, give it a go... if the floor blocks others from feeling Blessings, we can just do it the usual way.”

“And if they can feel Blessings?” Jake grinned.

“May the young master have whatever he pleases,” the Sword Saint said cheekily.

“Roger that,” Jake said as he stepped toward the church ahead with the others in tow. They had to walk up nearly fifty steps to reach the giant closed double door leading into the church proper, but about halfway up, Jake let it rip.

An aura blasted out of his body as Shroud of the Primordial entirely fell away, and he purposefully amplified his presence. It spread out of him... and less than a second later, the giant double doors slammed open, someone inside having felt Jake.

Felt his presence.

A priest flanked by two paladins appeared, standing at the top of the steps only a few seconds later, staring down at Jake and the three with him in confusion.

[Starcross Priest – lvl 280]

[Starcross Paladin – lvl 285]

[Starcross Paladin – lvl 282]

“I... who are yo-“

“Call your god down here,” Jake interrupted the guy.

“What?” the priest said, looking confused before suddenly turning angry. “How dare yo-“

“I wasn’t asking,” Jake said as he flared his aura even more, mixing in Pride of the Malefic Viper to further amplify it.

“And unless you want to create trouble for the Starcross Pantheon by ignoring the Chosen of a Primordial, I would very much comply,” the Sword Saint added in, also tossing in a bit of his own aura as someone with a Divine Blessing from another Primordial.

Dina and Sylphie also joined in as the priest stared, clearly unsure how to react. The two paladins moved forward in a defensive manner as Jake just sighed.

Very well... full Young Master mode engaged.

“I gave you a fucking order, so stop standing there like a moron and contact your god,” Jake scoffed. “Or are you some damn heretic? Is that why this pathetic kingdom has fallen into shambles?”

Jake wasn’t sure what more he could say as they discovered that the priest had indeed contacted someone. An aura appeared toward the back of the large church, and a second later, a figure teleported out to stand between Jake and the priest. Instantly Jake was aware... A-grade.

But, he was in young master mode.

“What is going on he-“

“Fucking finally,” Jake sighed loudly. “Hey, you, are you as useless as this priest, or can you get your shit together and contact that Pantheon of yours already? I haven’t got all day.”

The A-grade looked at him and the four with him for a moment before suddenly falling to his knees. “I greet the Chosen.”

Alright, seems like we are getting somewhere.

“Yeah, yeah, just contact the Pantheon. I would prefer to converse with someone possessing a worthy status.”

“Naturally,” the A-grade said as he put his hands together. His body glowed with divine light for a moment before he stood, still keeping his back bowed. “They will arrive shortly. I apologize for the disrespect and will make sure to right any injustices.”

The priest and paladins looked pretty damn frightened by now, but before they could do anything, the A-grade pointed at them as a beam shot into them, making them freeze and fall to the ground. “I shall remove these heretics from your sight at once.”

Jake thought he was overdoing it a little... but he was in young master mode. Still, he felt bad if they got punished for something he did.

“You only got yourself to blame for not properly teaching your clergy about proper procedures if they should ever meet the Chosen of a Primordial,” Jake scoffed. “Now begone. You have done as I asked and you are no longer of any use or concern.”

The A-grade didn't even speak but bowed deeply once more before teleported away with the priest and paladins.

“That went well?” the Sword Saint asked through the mark.

“I think so, let's just ho-“

Before Jake could even answer, a presence washed over the entire town. It utterly suppressed anything, and Jake felt everything warp. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a flickering torch suddenly slow down its flickering as it stopped entirely. The feeling reminded him of the Tutorial when Eversmile stopped time... because that is exactly what had happened.

Two figures appeared in the air, floating above them. It was a man and a woman, both with blueish skin and eyes reminding Jake of a starlit sky. They looked nearly identical, except for the difference in gender, though both were rather androgynous.

“What era are we in?” the male god asked as his eyes landed on Jake. “The Chosen of the Malefic Viper... never did I think I would see the day a new one would appear.”

“Ninety-third era,” Jake answered. “Not long since the integration, considering I am a Progenitor along with being a Chosen.”

“Truly? How surprising, but not a thoroughly unpleasant piece of news,” the male god nodded.

“Quite the party, too,” the woman spoke. “A Unique Lifeform, a relative of the Nature’s Attendant, and two individuals carrying the Divine Blessings of Stormild and Aeon.”

“The one blessed by Aeon is also a Transcendent,” the male god smiled.

“Oh my,” the female god said in an impressed tone.

Both gods had floated down by now and landed in front of Jake and the others. Once more, the Sword Saint, Dina, and Fallen King felt the pressure, while Jake stood unaffected, Sylphie perched on his shoulder unbothered.

“Entirely immune to the auras of gods?” the male god said, looking even more at Jake. “I am curious, but asking wouldn’t do me any good.”

“Yeah, images in Nevermore and all that,” Jake nodded.

“Indeed it is so,” the god smiled. “I am glad to see that the Malefic One has returned to the multiverse, and you must give him our greetings once you are done in Nevermore. Just say the Starcrossed Twins send their regards.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Jake nodded. Yeah, not gonna lie; chances are he was going to forget that.

“Now, let’s get on with why we are here. This floor was made to teach the masses to respect divine authority, and... hm, there is no need to explain, now is there? As the Chosen, you are a living symbol of a Primordial's divine authority,” the female god began before giggling. “We shall not hold you more. Ah, but do take this.”

She tossed a small coin to Jake, which he instantly caught.

“If you ever feel like visiting the Starcross Pantheon’s territory in the true multiverse, you would be more than welcome, and that token should help you,” she said with a smile. “Now, let’s get this silly barrier down.”

She reached out and took the hand of the male god as both glowed with starlight for a second. She then let go and looked at Jake and the others. “We wish you godspeed on your continued descent of Nevermore.”

“Thanks. From all of us,” Jake smiled as he looked at Dina, who took out the teleportation token.

Floor forty-five?

Easiest floor of his life.

Chapter 733: Nevermore: Definitely Balanced

“Okay, not gonna lie, that was kind of hilarious,” Minaga chuckled after seeing Jake pass floor forty-five so easily. “Really just tossed his weight around and got all those poor suckers to get him out of there right away. They didn’t show it, but those Starcrossed Twins were pretty damn submissive compared to how they usually are.”

“I am surprised you got those two in here for such a floor,” Vilastromoz said with genuine confusion. “Any god would do, so why have two gods as old and powerful as them? That can’t have been easy.”

The Wyrmgod was silent as he just sighed. “I had my reasons.”

Minaga raised a hand. “I know the reasons.”

Vilastromoz smiled and looked at the Wyrmgod, who reluctantly explained. “The origin of the images of mortals don’t truly matter that much as before any of them are ever used, the mortal will more than likely already be dead. Things are different for gods. While nothing that happens to the image affects them, and they never become aware of any interactions these images had, there can still be consequences. For the gods, that is.”

The Viper suddenly understood as he nodded while the Wyrmgod kept explaining. A bit needlessly, but the old dragon did like to talk about his work when given the chance.

“There was an incidence a few eras ago where the image of a god thoroughly pissed off a Chosen belonging to the Altmar Empire, to the point of just airing out his grievances that had arisen due to prior conflicts that the Altmar Empire thought they were over. While the god wasn’t able to hinder the Nevermore participant – or even made any attempts to - the Chosen still left deeply offended, and it turned into quite a situation. This resulted in all the images of gods from the Nevermore of the next era being far too... meek. Any time a Chosen or even someone with a Divine Blessing from a powerful god appeared, they would capitulate and pop in to help them right away with the hope of forming a good relationship with the young influential C-grades and allowing them to effectively skip the floor. Needless to say, this went directly against the purpose of the floor.”

“So he thought up a great solution,” Minaga grinned.

“The thought process was to put gods here that wouldn’t feel the need to try to gain favor with even the Chosens of high-level gods but would treat them like any other regular Nevermore participant. The Starcrossed Twins are part of a powerful alliance already and are not people even pinnacle factions would create trouble with, meaning they didn’t have to act courteously and respect the status of any C-grades,” the Wyrmgod said in a rather annoyed tone.

“Yeah, brilliant thinking, and it worked out perfectly,” Minaga said, holding back a giggle. “Poor Jake had a horrible time in there.”

“The reappearance of the Malefic Viper and the fact he chose to have a C-grade Chosen were unexpected factors, and I cannot blame them for making an exception. Also, it wasn’t as if I viewed it as an impossible outcome, seeing as I had already created an achievement for the feat,” the Wyrmgod finished, as he didn’t seem interested in discussing the floor more.

“It’s a shame, though. Pretty sure that of everyone doing Nevermore, Jake is the one who needs to learn how to respect divine authority the most,” Minaga grumbled a bit, clearly not as happy with just dropping the topic as the Wyrmgod.

“Or, have you considered this: he is the only one showing the proper level of reverence towards other gods as my Chosen? My Chosen being all subservient in front of other gods would be a bad look, you know? I never really thought about it before, but having a Chosen that isn’t naturally suppressed is quite nice,” the Viper countered.

“You know, the way you phrased that makes it sound like he is subservient only to you as his Patron,” Minaga said. “And I somehow have a hard time believing that.”

“Oh, he is showing plenty of reverence. Jake is just the kind of guy that is all about action and not petty words or platitudes,” Vilastromoz smiled. “I just view it as every level he gains and every feat he accomplishes it partly in my name.”

“If that helps you meditate in peace,” Minaga said skeptically.

“His relatively selfish actions make me question that claim... though I reckon that if he proceeds on his Path as things are now, he will be a good return on investment simply due to the Records he obtains,” the Wyrmgod added. “Perhaps I should get a Chosen myself, though finding a good prospect is quite difficult.”

Vilastromoz nodded but didn’t elaborate. It was tempting to reveal that he had already gotten his return on investment simply through Jake’s action of consciously creating the Vespernat Hive Queen. That feat had even led to a cascade effect of Records from all his prior creations.

“Finding a good Chosen can indeed be a struggle, but if I find someone worth referring to you, I will let you know,” Vilastromoz said to his fellow Primordial. “If not, then at least someone to give a Divine Blessing.”

“Perhaps,” the Wyrmgod said with little commitment. “I wonder, will your Chosen be capable of influencing the birth of another creature like the Vespernat Hive Queen any time soon? Assuming it is indeed a replicable act. That seems like a potential avenue to secure a good prospect.”

“I can’t answer that. You will have to ask Jake directly. I already told you and everyone else that the ability belongs to him and not me,” the Viper shook his head. “And I am a snake of my word.”

The Wyrmgod looked to be in for thought for a moment before simply nodding. “If that is how you wish to do things, fine. I am beginning to understand you have adopted an unconventional relationship with your Chosen and will not interfere in whatever you are planning.”

“Who says I am planning anything?” the Malefic Viper smiled.

Minaga and Wyrmgod just looked at him for a while before Minaga shrugged. “Yeah, true, you are the straightest of straightest shooters, never done anything shady or had any underhanded plots or plans. Anyway, I sure hope you make it out of your conflict with Yip of Yore because if you don’t have a plan, things are looking bleak.”

“Who knows?” Vilastromoz smiled without answering.

“You do, and I wanna know,” Minaga tried to insist.

“It is not odd to want things you cannot have. In fact, isn’t that what brought us all to godhood? Trying to obtain the impossible,” the Viper kept avoiding answering with an amused smile.

“Well, I am the curious sort, you know that. And I like to try and figure out things on my own when people aren’t telling me the whole truth,” Minaga smiled in response, making Vilastromoz have a bad premonition. “Which reminds me. That Vesperia lady is real nice, though I can’t quite see the resemblance between her and her dad... oh, sorry, I meant Sire.”

And this was why catching the curiosity of a god with a legion of clones, insatiable curiosity, and limitless time could be problematic.

Vesperia felt the strain on your soul as she knew she had reached her limit when it came to absorbing energy from the Hive Core. Absorbing the energies and Records of old was far from easy, and the strain on her was substantial. However, she had already exceeded all expectations and gotten further than any of her sisters had ever predicted she would. It had only taken her a few months, and yet she still wasn’t fully satiated.

Opening her eyes, the lights on the diadem on her head shone with golden lights as she had once more reached a new threshold. She felt the power rushing through her body, knowing she had finally stepped into mid-tier C-grade. Opening her status, she saw that was indeed the case.

Status

Name: Vesperia

Race: [Vespernat Hive Queen – lvl 252]

Health Points (HP): 409000/409000

Mana Points (MP): 59842/60850

Stamina: 95743/100600

Hive Energy: 24600/25200

Her health had grown more than before, naturally empowered by her racial skills. She knew that humans were simple and only got ten mana per Wisdom or ten health per Vitality, but monsters weren't like that. There were too many passives to easily compare, and her health pool which would be considered ludicrous by the standards of enlightened species was only regarded as high and not even top-tier amongst monsters.

When it came to Hive Energy, she had barely used any. It was not a resource one spent like normal and then replenished, but every point spent was a point lost unless the being you spent it on disappeared. Vesperia herself had only made some eggs so far while familiarizing herself with her innate power.

As she was sitting there getting her bearings fully, she got a notification informing her she had a visitor.

The chambers she had been given were on a planet only slightly smaller than the planet her Sire had been born on, and it was a nice place to do some experiments while still in C-grade. The entire place was

also enforced with the protective formations of more than a dozen True Royals having ascended above the rank of Godqueen and was placed in the very heartlands of the Endless Empire.

This piece of information was important... because when she checked the projection of who had come to visit, she saw the Odonstrom Hive Queen together with an odd creature she didn't quite recognize. It looked humanoid but had four eyes and blue skin. Based on how they stood together, Vesperia assumed he was a god, and seeing no reason to reject them, she welcomed them inside. She also knew that any being that could walk into the heartlands of the Endless Empire like this was someone Vesperia had to vary of.

A second later, both figures teleported into the welcome hall that had already been set up a long time ago by the other Ectognamorphs that served her.

"I apologize for the sudden visit, sister," the Odonstrom True Royal smiled.

"Hey-o, I'm Minaga. Nice to meet you!" the blue four-eyed god smiled.

Vesperia was a bit taken aback by the god's greeting, especially considering her fellow True Royal didn't even react. Instead, she sent her a telepathic message.

"Sister, I must warn you. This Minaga is no simple figure but is a being known as the All-God Legion. He was originally a Unique Lifeform with the ability to perfectly clone himself, and he kept this ability even in godhood. Making him an enemy would be ill-advised and not just for you personally but the entire Endless Empire. Thread with caution and try to not anger him. He is known to be highly unpredictable, and he insisted on meeting you," Odonstrom warned Vesperia.

"I am not aware of this Minaga figure, but I shall heed your words. Any idea why he wanted to see me?" Vesperia answered telepathically.

"Likely related to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but he never answered directly," her fellow True Royal answered.

"Hey, while I know telepathy is pretty fast, it is still pretty obvious you two are talking secretly behind my back, which is honestly quite hurtful," the Unique Lifeform known as the All-God Legion complained.

"I apologize; I was merely not aware of your identity," Vesperia apologized with a bow. "I am Vesperia, also known as the sole True Royal of the Vespernat Lineage."

"Yep, I heard. Quite the happening to have a True Royal reappear like that," Minaga nodded as he studied her closely for a few seconds before scratching his cheek. "Hard to see the resemblance."

"Pardon?" Vesperia asked, confused.

"With Jake. Well, I guess you maybe have kind of the same eyes? No, not really... hm..." Minaga said, stretching his neck to look at her from other angles. "Ah, never mind... I found it."

The powerful aura of a god descended upon the hall. Vesperia frowned but remained standing like normal as Minaga grinned from ear to ear. "There we have it indeed."

"May I ask why you thought such tests were necessary? And how are you related to my Sire? As far as I am aware, he is at Nevermore," Vesperia said, very unsure of what this odd god wanted.

"Oh yeah, he is in there right now. Can't say more than that, as I am not allowed to give out information like that, and that old grouchy dragon would probably toss me out of his dungeon if I broke that rule, so definitely not worth it. Ah, but I did talk to him quite a bit. Interesting chap, for sure," Minaga nodded with a big grin.

"He is indeed a peculiar figure," Vesperia nodded with a smile.

"Right?" Minaga said happily as he looked at the Odonstrom Hive Queen. "Would it be fine if I stick around in the area for a while? Just looking to make friends."

"We would be happy to welcome you, Lord Minaga," her fellow True Royal nodded, though Vesperia could see she wasn't overly happy about it. Yet she also knew that should she say no, the god would likely just stay anyway.

"He does not strike me as that dangerous... just odd," Vesperia sent to the Odonstrom True Royal.

"The All-God Legion has been evaluated to possess a threat level roughly equal to a Primordial. While each version of him may not reach the peaks of power, he is, as cliché as it sounds, legion. We are utterly incapable of ending him, and should he choose to make us an enemy, we would enter a war of attrition that would only end when he gets bored or we reach a truce... and he is known to be both petty and vindictive, making both of those unlikely."

“And you guys were worried that floor was going to be a disaster,” Jake grinned as they wanted into the in-between room.

“Well, excuse me for not realizing you could just act like an entitled customer and get your way,” the Sword Saint said in jest.

“The most important thing is that it worked and was not even that high risk. If they couldn’t feel Blessings, we would just have done the floor normally,” Dina said. “And I think the loss of points on this floor is worth it to move on quickly as it seems to only be increasing.”

Jake was about to agree as they were flooded with notifications.

Bonus Objective Completed: Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Forty-fifth floor completed. 4500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five by enlisting the help of the Starcrossed Twins to take down the grand barrier. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five within one week (7 days). 2500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five without killing a single member of the clergy. 1500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five without causing any damage to or breaking any divine laws of the Peerin Kingdom. 3000 Nevermore Points earned.

"You were saying?" Jake chuckled.

"That is..." the Sword Saint began.

"Ridiculously dumb."

17000 Nevermore Points – the most of any floor thus far in Nevermore - from one floor that had taken them fifteen minutes to do.

Yeah, that was definitely balanced.

Chapter 734: Nevermore: "I Still Got It"

Nevermore was a place where the publicly available information was far from scarce, yet there were still some unknowns.

Nobody knew exactly how many floors there even were in the C-grade version – or those who did couldn't or wouldn't tell – meaning for most of the individuals fighting for spots on the Leaderboards, it was just assumed they would never hit a limit. At least not a limit of floors.

The only limit they would hit was the limit of their own abilities and the 50-year time limit. A time limit that many had tried to circumvent through the ages but was upheld by one simple design choice:

It just counted the age of your Truesoul using dungeon-fuckery.

This meant that should one enter Nevermore in C-grade, be in there for ten years, and then leave again, the time wouldn't stop ticking for the Leaderboard positions.

Now, this is where one truly had to separate the early C-grades that all entered below level 210 and aimed for positions on the Leaderboards and those who were simply in C-grade and did the mega-dungeon at whatever level or pace they so desired.

The people that aimed for the Leaderboards would do best if they spent all of their time within Nevermore, never leaving for fifty years. For the people that didn't care about the Leaderboards, they truly had no reason to stay the entire duration in one go.

It was also well-known that only the top few percent of the Leaderboards would get any rewards. This meant many gave up after realizing they were falling too far behind and just left Nevermore for a time to do something else.

The total time one could stay in Nevermore remained the same, but every second spent outside of the dungeon was a year wasted when it came to competing on the leaderboards. To those who didn't care, it didn't matter. They could be in Nevermore for ten years, leave for twenty, and then do the remaining forty years if they so desired.

If someone competing on the Leaderboards did that, they would do Nevermore for ten years, leave for twenty, and then once they came back, they would only have twenty more years to rack up Nevermore Points. After that, they would still have twenty more years to just do floors, gain levels, do Challenge Dungeons, and whatnot, but they would have already had their final Leaderboards evaluation.

One couldn't cheat with time dilation either, even if they wanted. You couldn't enter Nevermore, do ten years, and then leave for another ten years in Realtime, where you actually spent two-hundred years in a time chamber. The cut-off was based on your own personal time, not Realtime or Nevermore's time.

In many ways, the most important thing for those aiming for high spots on the Leaderboards was time. Optimizing time meant more floors could be done. Of course, in order to do more floors, one also needed the power to actually complete them, even as things would begin to get more dangerous. Naturally, the levels one gained doing the lower floors would also help one go further, meaning leveling speed was also considered semi-important.

However, one often-forgotten power on the scale of importance was the ability to cheese stuff. The ability to totally ruin how a floor was supposed to proceed to the advantage of the Nevermore attendees.

Jake's party was in a very unique situation, for they had everything. Especially the ability to cheese stuff, which they happily used whenever they could, and they were all eager to proceed after doing floor forty-five faster than any floor prior.

The city floor after floor forty-five was quite a bustling place, but Jake and company quickly moved through after checking the Leaderboards, where they saw they had once more lost the top spot but were only a few thousand points behind the point leader.

Proceeding to floor forty-six, they found themselves on yet another open-ended floor taking place on a large planet. However, this time there was no lesson to be found, and their job was as simple as could be: Slay the Four Beast Kings. Four powerful C-grade beasts each ruled a part of the planet. To do this, they would choose to enlist the help of the large kingdom they initially spawned within, with a bonus objective given pushing them towards enlisting in the military and influencing them to mobilize and take down the Beast Kings.

This was the long solution.

Jake and company picked the fast one.

They split up into two groups, each headed toward a territory ruled by a Beast King. These territories were filled with countless beasts serving their king, and many powerful ones served as mini-bosses that aimed to impede them on their paths toward the lair of the Beast King. All four Beast Kings were apparently in the process of consuming powerful treasures that were the source of their powers and didn't wish to be disturbed.

They got disturbed.

Group one consisted of Dina, the Sword Saint, and Fallen King, while Sylphie and Jake acted as the second group. The power between the two groups turned out to be rather equal, and not just because of Jake, who was particularly well-suited against high-level beasts, but because of the little hawk with him. She was the highest-leveled one in their group, after all.

Besides, if Jake and Sylphie did end up needing help, Jake could always summon the Fallen King using his mask.

Ultimately, that didn't turn out to be necessary, at least not for the first Beast King.

After taking out a few annoying pests that tried to get in their way, they finally made it to the lair of the first Beast King on their list. Despite being the northern part of the planet, the place was a huge mud-filled swamp as far as the eye could see, and within a small crevice was what looked like a meteorite with a massive beast lying right next to it.

[Beast King of the North – lvl 290]

The Beast King looked a bit like a hippo but had six legs and parts of its body covered in scales. It was half-submerged in the swamp water, with only the back above the surface, forcing Jake to strain his eyes a bit to see its full form beneath the muddy water. It looked to be more than eight meters long and was bulky as hell.

It hadn't noticed them, and Sylphie seemed excited to attack when Jake stopped her.

"Sylphie... I have been waiting for a chance like this for over a year," he said in a serious tone. "Please... let me have this one."

The hawk looked at him for a moment before nodding solemnly, understanding his pain.

"Thank you," Jake smiled.

He and Sylphie were floating far up in the air, and when Jake got permission, they flew even further up. They went above several layers of clouds before Jake stopped, feeling the mana in the air begin to act up as they were getting too close to what he assumed was the system version of the stratosphere.

A stable platform of arcane mana appeared below his feet as he held out his hand. A thin string of conceptual energy gathered, forming the faint outline of an arrow as a stable film of arcane energy surrounding it.

When everything was as it should, he hardened the stable energy further and picked his poison. Because Jake wasn't going to pour destructive arcane energy into the second layer of this Protean Arrow this time... he was going to pour in pure poison.

Considering the size of the beast, using the Sleeping Night wasn't a good idea, and he didn't wanna test any of his curse-aligned poisons, so he went with some good old Necrotic Poison. That seemed to always get the job done against flesh and blood lifeforms when all else failed.

After that, he carefully finished the arrow, even adding in a bit of his familiarity with this kind of beast. While it wasn't as good as if he actually studied the beast, some things were just general for all mammal-looking monsters.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she looked at the finished arrow.

"Yeah, it's a real beauty," Jake smiled. It was more than a meter and a half long and looked like a mix of black and purple due to the sheer quantity of poison within it. Something Jake had learned quite a bit ago was that his blood did indeed count as a "form of energy" he could pour into the Protean Arrow, and he was getting close to becoming able to use crafted poison too.

Alas, for now, he would just have to give the final product a good coating. A coating of even more Necrotic Poison.

Jake stood there with the arrow floating in front of him as he carefully observed the Beast King. He felt the conceptual energy slowly build up as he found a weak spot without any scales on the back of the hippo monster he was going to aim for. As for what was building up? It was naturally his Hunting Momentum.

It wasn't much, but it was honest work and definitely worth pouring in.

"Now let's see what this bad boy can do," Jake smiled as he took the arrow. He had poured in more than ten percent of his mana and just over twenty percent of his total stamina into this one arrow. He had high expectations.

Nocking the arrow, he took a deep breath as he unleashed his energy.

Arcane Awakening jumped to 60% immediately, his perception of time slowed down as he pulled back the string, and his body exploded with power from a mix of Arcane Awakening and Arcane Powershot.

Sylphie made distance as the area of over a dozen meters around Jake took on a pink-purple hue as energy crackled in the air. Arcane Powershot charged slowly as the energy built up within both Jake and his bow. Soon, ten seconds passed as the crackling in his surroundings became stronger, space itself slightly starting to distort closest to him.

At fifteen seconds, he felt the energies begin to reach their zenith. He knew that soon his arm and shoulder would give out. It was time.

In a massive explosion of arcane energy, he loosed the arrow.

Jake faintly felt something in his arm snap the moment he released the arrow as it fell limply to his side, but he only gritted his teeth from the pain as he focused his attention solely on the descending arrow.

The air itself in the arrow's way was torn apart as a trail of pure destruction as a vacuum of energy was left in its wake as it flew with ever-increasing speed down towards the still-unsuspecting hippo below. It was an arrow that encapsulated everything he had.

Arcane Awakening.

Arcane Powershot.

Big Game Hunter.

Superior Stealth Attack.

Hunter's Mark.

Along with his passive Archery bonus, bonus from his bow, and of course, his newly obtained Arcane Supremacy just boosting everything even further. All poured into a single arrow:

Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons.

Soon, the arrow broke through the final cloud layer, scattering the entire cloud in the process. This finally made those on the ground aware of what was coming.

The Beast King reacted as its eyes opened wide... though Jake wasn't going to make it easy for it.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

It froze physically, but a torrent of muddy water still flew up to block the impending arrow. The Beast King barely had time to create a small barrier as the arrow pierced straight through, assisted by Umblemished Arrows.

The final defense of the Beast King was broken, and it only barely became able to move the second the arrow struck right between two large plates of scales. It pierced straight through the tough hide of the hippo-like beast as the entire swamp exploded, sending water splashing up several kilometers as a crater was formed from the impact.

From this far up, Jake couldn't hear the roar of pain, but he would imagine it... moreover, he felt the response from his Hunter's Mark.

Absolutely massive damage.

Yet the beast wasn't entirely dead.

Flinching from the pain, he forcefully moved his injured arm as he switched hands, holding the bow in the injured arm and drawing with the still good one. He shot down another arrow and only a hundred meters below him, it exploded, releasing a rain of hundreds of smaller arrows, as he deployed an Arcane Arrow Rain.

He repeated this a few more times as he let it rain.

However... before his Arcane Arrow Rain even reached the ground, he got a notification.

You have slain [Beast King of the North – lvl 290] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 233 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 233 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake was about to loose another shot when he the notification informing him that the Beast King was dead, having succumbed to Necrotic Poison. He stopped mid-action as a wide grin formed on his lips.

I still got it.

It felt like it was so long ago doing something like this. Killing a boss-tier beast more than fifty levels above his own. And damn, did it feel good. He had to admit that he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to pull something like this off again as he proceeded through the grades, but it was good to see it was still an option.

Also... he was pretty damn sure he was the only one in his party who could pull something like this off. Because the arrow he had just released was the strongest attack that any of them had performed in all of Nevermore so far, even surpassing a Glimpse of Spring from the Sword Saint by quite a margin.

Compounding passive skills was truly an overpowered approach.

Wanting to go down and check the result of his attack, he, with a mental command, quickly made all the arrows falling toward the ground explode, as there was no need to cause further destruction.

Flying down with Sylphie in tow, he quickly reached the ground and saw the fallout. The Beast King had a hole more than one and a half meters in diameter through its back, with a massive crater formed right beneath it. At least he estimated the hole to be about one and a half meters on impact... because, by now, it was far larger as the flesh had rotted around it.

The entire beast gave off a powerful energy of pure death from the sheer potency and dose of Necrotic Poison Jake had dosed it with. It was as dead as dead could be, with a look of indignation in its eyes as its kingly reign had been before it could even realize what had truly happened.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked as she looked at the corpse.

“Yeah, it was a good opponent for me,” Jake smiled. Slow, unaware, relatively unprotected, weak to his poison, high level, so a lot of bonuses counted, and he even got a massive damage bonus due to the distance... yep, the circumstances had been borderline perfect.

“Ree.”

“Only if the next Beast King survives my initial attack... if not, you can have fun with the other beasts in the territory.”

“Ree...”

“I know they aren’t as fun, but hey, you can always hope the next Beast King is a lot more durable or maybe able to dodge the arrow,” Jake tried to comfort the sad bird. “Who knows? Maybe it will survive my attack and put up a good fight even while injured, in which case you can have it all by yourself.

Spoiler warning:

It didn't put up a good fight after the first shot.

Chapter 735: Nevermore: Sacrifice & Dedication

Jake and Sylphie won the race to kill two Beast Kings before Dina, the Fallen King, and Sword Saint. Their victory wasn't by a little either but by more than two weeks, giving them plenty of time to mess around and catch up with the three others. The Unique Lifeform complained about them being faster at crossing large distances, something Jake just saw as a bad excuse.

After killing all four Beast Kings, they had expected the floor to be over, and if it wouldn't be, then for there to spawn some Beast Emperor or something for them to fight. None of that happened. Instead, the kingdom they could have potentially allied with teleported over an army with the aim of taking down their party with the reasoning that a group of five capable of killing all four Beast Kings was too dangerous for the kingdom's political stability.

In summary, the insecure king was afraid they would create trouble, and he hoped that after defeating the final Beast King, they would be hurt or tired. A silly hope indeed.

Jake was all ready for a fight, but the Sword Saint annoyingly so talked down the general of the kingdom and reached an agreement with the contingency that Jake and company would leave the planet while spinning a lie to the populace that they were actually hired by the kingdom to defeat the Beast Kings, giving all the credit for the feat to the kingdom and king.

It was all bullshit, and Jake would have preferred to just blast the bastards for trying to backstab them, but the old man wasn't a fan of that solution. He talked about how the stupidity of a leader should not lead to the death of the average soldier and that they would get nothing out of slaughtering an army of innocents just for a slight born out of insecurities and fear.

After they had negotiated with the kingdom, they got a group of space mages to help them teleport off the planet and thus floor by using one of the treasures hoarded by a Beast King. Once they arrived in the

in-between room, Jake did voice his dissatisfaction, only to get a semi-scolding, semi-explanation from the Sword Saint.

“Think about it from their perspective. Five people of immense power arrive on their planet and instantly volunteer to take down the four Beast Kings that have caused trouble for the kingdom for centuries. Within two months, they then proceed to kill every single Beast King within their lairs, all while refusing to engage or involve the kingdom in any way. We are complete unknowns in their eyes and could, in many ways, be worse than the Beast Kings. At least the Beast Kings stuck to their own territories while we have no such inclinations. What would happen if we decided we wanted to take control? What could they do against us? No, from their point of view, striking us while we were still weak from a fight with a Beast King would be their final hope at retaining their own autonomy from five overlords taking over the only world they have ever known.”

Jake did have to admit that the old man made sense... he just didn't like backstabbing assholes, no matter how they wanted to justify it.

“Their assumptions were shit. We had done nothing to provoke them or even once mentioned we wanted to take over anything. In fact, I am pretty sure we said we were just going to kill the four Beast Kings and then move on. Can you argue they didn't trust us and reached their own dumb conclusions? Sure thing, but what am I gonna do with that? Rather than me asking them, they should ask us first to clarify what we actually wanted to do,” Jake shot back.

“When one party is in a higher position of power, it is difficult to approach them and ask their intent in such a straightforward manner,” the old man sighed. “We are in a unique position, not just as people on a floor in Nevermore, but in the multiverse as a whole.”

“So you think we should clarify with anyone who comes to kill us if they are at least doing it under the right pretenses before fighting back and potentially hurting them? Oh, geez, I guess I fucked up when I killed two of Ell'Hakan's goons when they first invaded Earth. Should have asked them if they were super sure they wanted to fight first, I guess.”

"Now you are just being hyperbolic. Each situation is unique and should be evaluated with such uniqueness in mind," the Sword Saint said, shaking his head.

Jake was about to say more as the Fallen King cut in.

"I thought we were done with the floors about morals and norms?" the Fallen King questioned in a mocking tone. "And as far as I am concerned, any aggressor is fair game. You may argue they have their reasons, but they also had a choice. While it is true the regular soldier had little choice, there is always some level of choice. If you claim they didn't truly have any choice, then what choice did these Beast Kings have? What choice did the beasts guarding their territories have? For you never argued the innocence of the beasts you slaughtered on your way to the Beast Kings nor tried to negotiate with them."

"I can admit that my view is flawed, and I inherently treat the enlightened races differently than beasts or monsters. You are right in pointing out the hypocrisy... but I still think that should there be a chance to choose diplomacy over violence, it is worth the attempt," the Sword Saint sighed. "Do you disagree with that assessment?"

"No, I am saying that it doesn't matter either way to me. Spare, kill; I am only here for the Nevermore Points, nothing more, nothing less. So I will do whatever entails earning the most points," the Unique Lifeform stated pretty plainly. "Things are no different outside of here either. Whichever choice brings the most benefit with the least demerits is the one I will choose."

"But how will you determi-" the Sword Saint began.

“Ree,” Sylphie interrupted him.

“I think it is-“

“Ree.”

“Bu-“

“Ree.”

The old man stood defeated before the small hawk that looked annoyed at him. Truly, Sylphie did have the best philosophy that one could never argue with. A creature of perfect diplomacy that would forever choose the best option in any situation through her ultimate sage advice:

“Just follow the wind. The wind never likes the baddies.”

Truly, words rivaling the wisdom of the First Sage himself.

“To change the topic... I do wonder where the loot went. After floor forty, it just disappeared without any prompt or warning,” the Fallen King voiced his thoughts on a completely different subject.

"I think you were meditating when we talked about it, but Dina had a theory," Jake said, nodding to the dryad.

"Right," Dina nodded, having stayed out of their discussion earlier. "There are certain laws of balances, and it is possible the system won't give about any more loot after a certain point. It is also possible this was done to combat overflowing the market of C-grades with equipment. On many of the floors, you can still gather some raw materials if you want, and it wouldn't strike me as odd if there were even characters on some of these floors capable of crafting things. Even if they can't, there is no lack of crafters spread out across the city floors."

"I see. That does logically make sense," the Unique Lifeform nodded. "Though I still believe rewards should be given for completing each floor. Outside of Nevermore Points, that is."

"I definitely agree with that," Jake grinned. More loot was always better, and not getting any sucked.

Alright, it wasn't entirely accurate to say they didn't get any loot. As Dina said, then there was stuff to obtain on the floors; it just didn't come in nice boxes. On floor forty-six, as an example, the Fallen King had taken one of the unique treasures, while Dina had taken another as she could use it. There wasn't just equipment or new weapons lying around, true, but there were raw materials and natural treasures here and there, though they were a lot scarcer than on a "real" planet.

"Too much of a good thing can ruin the market..." Dina pointed out.

"It's okay as long as I am the one with the most good things," Jake grinned to lighten the mood.

The old man just shook his head, and the Fallen King solemnly nodded, Sylphie even giving a screech in approval.

Anyway, they didn't actually know why they didn't get any loot, but there was probably a reason, right?

Not wasting any more time with philosophical debates or talks about how much loot they did or didn't deserve, they dove back into the dungeon. Even if they didn't agree on everything, they were still all professionals who could put aside personal feelings to achieve the best results.

There was still a long time to go and many dungeons floors before they hit the cap for how difficult floors they could do... and once they did hit this cap, it was time to do some Challenge Dungeons.

Carmen really wasn't a fan of these damn morality floors or whatever the fuck that big space lizard decided to call them. Floor forty-one had been a bloody nightmare, and not just because of how creepy the place had been, but because she was still more than a little salty after floor forty.

The Minaga fight was something she had been looking forward to... but that shit had turned out to be way more difficult than any one of them had expected. Ultimately, they had weak links in their group, and that had bitten them in the ass during the phase where they were all split up.

Warlord Davion and the druid in the party were both bloody excellent and had come out of their one-on-one fights way faster than she had. The problems were the seer and shaman. The shaman had managed to hold on but was too injured to really be of much use for the final phase, and the seer had gotten her ass kicked out nearly instantly when she was alone. She had already been pretty fucking useless in Minaga's Labyrinth due to his interference with divination magic, but in the fight, she had just been deadweight. Worse than deadweight... she had actually hurt them by being in the party. Her magic didn't do shit to Minaga, as she mainly did mental magic and illusions, neither of which worked on the

Unique Lifeform. So her only contribution to the fight was losing them points and forcing them to constantly protect her in the first phase.

It only helped slightly to learn that at least that guy Casper and the Risen had also failed to do the Minaga fight without losing someone. It had helped a bit more to learn that the Holy Church had lost three members, including that Bertram guy who ended up taking down the Minaga with some insane suicide attack that ended phase three just as it began. Ah, but it was a bit sad to hear that Caleb's group hadn't even been able to face Minaga properly but just had to find another damn Demon Lord with a clone of Minaga only there to occasionally fling in spells to make it harder. The same appeared to have happened to Maria and her party.

From what she had learned, the only parties that did the Minaga fight without any losses – of the people she knew or had heard of, that is – were the odd ones or the ones she had really expected to do it. One of them was naturally Jake and his ridiculous party, which was really expected, while another was that weird scientist guy named Arnold, who Gudrun had warned her about not making an enemy for some reason. Carmen wasn't sure why, as the guy didn't seem that dangerous on the surface, but then again, the quiet ones did tend to be the ones you didn't wanna fuck with.

Besides that, Eron had also succeeded with his group of monks. It did suck to hear that bastard Ell'Hakan who had attacked their planet also completed the fight flawlessly based on the intel one of Valhal's agents told them during a brief on the city floor. To see her party members celebrate him had been a bit hard to swallow, but she kept her mouth shut to not stir the pot and reveal anything she shouldn't.

It had been extra hard to keep things under wraps, as her party had gotten quite a bit more interested in her and her origins after the Minaga floor... mainly because of the ridiculous intel on her fellow Earthlings, which had led to quite a few questions and subtle probes.

"Your planet is odd," Davion had said to her in an attempt to break the ice on the subject while they were flying on the barge right after arriving on what they later discovered was a bloody plague-themed floor. This was his first time bringing up the subject directly, and Carmen got the vibes he wasn't going to hold back.

"Yep," she just agreed.

"The Unique Lifeform, I understand, is originally from a Tutorial, so that is explained... the Sylphian Hawk also seems related to the Malefic One's Chosen's special ability to influence monster Origins. That Judge is also easily explained as he is the brother of the Malefic Viper's Chosen, so that could just be a case of nepotism. However, that does not explain all the other outliers. A transcendent swordsman, a Risen with enough talent to be recognized by the Blightfather, another individual with an odd Bloodline now part of the Dao Sect, an Augur of Hope. Then there is that enigmatic man who entered a pact with a Void God yet remains human. This isn't even mentioning you. It just all seems highly unlikely for so many talents to appear on the same planet at once," Davion voiced the thoughts of everyone in the group. Well, besides maybe the ranger that they had joined them after floor forty to replace that bloody useless seer. Carmen didn't really have time to talk to that gal much yet.

"I agree," Carmen just nodded.

"You don't question it?" Davion raised an eyebrow.

"Nope."

"Most would. Do you not see problems in the future when too many powerful forces gain an interest in your planet? A curiosity like that will attract attention whether you like it or not," he continued.

"Oh, sure, I see a bunch of problems for Earth. That doesn't mean they are my problems. Valhal is in a pretty bad position there already due to the planet pretty much belonging to the Chosen of the Malefic

Viper now, and I guess they are just waiting to toss us out or something,” Carmen said. She had to play a little into that lie where the Order and Valhal were actually in a conflict, right?

“That is true, I suppose. Though I thought you had a good personal relationship with the Chosen of the Malefic One already? Or at least some of his party members?”

“I guess I do,” she shrugged. No use in keeping that a secret after their constant meetings back on that Minaga city floor. “I knew him before this entire conflict, after all, and we are definitely still friendly. Ah, but I do have the go-ahead from the higher-ups.”

Yeah, Carmen was bad at this.

“I see,” Davion nodded as he sighed. “A bit of a shame that even someone of your position will have to make such personal sacrifices, but I one must do what is expected. We are still C-grades and subject to the wills of the higher-ups if we wish to remain with Valhal. Alas, I am sure your dedication will be honored. The Chosen’s unique ability is simply too invaluable to give up on, it seems.”

“What are you talking about?” Carmen asked with genuine confusion.

“You have been tasked with trying to seduce and get close to the Chosen to bring him over to our side, right? That is why you kept meeting with him despite the conflict. That is what I have deduced, anyway,” Davion said without a hint of jest.

Wait, what the fuck?

Carmen was about to curse at him, as she stopped herself. This could... work?

“Yeah, you got me,” Carmen sighed in an exaggerated matter. “But keep it under wraps, okay? Now that you know, you must help me make sure no one else suspects I have a personal relationship with the Chosen before it is time to strike. This is a highly secret mission coming directly from Valdemar and Gudrun themselves.”

Davion’s eyes opened wide as he nodded seriously. “I shall do my utmost. I honor your sacrifice and dedication, Runemaiden.”

Chapter 736: Not Nevermore: Dawnleaf

Meira had experienced a lot of surprising and frightening things throughout the last few years. From the fall of the Brimstone Hegemon and her becoming a slave to recently being freed and having Teacher privately teach her all the time.

Yet today was more frightening than any other. Because she was called for a private meeting by the Hall Master herself, but not with the S-grade. No, someone else had asked – or probably demanded – to meet her.

The Lord Protector. Boundless Hydra. One of the most fearsome beasts in the entire multiverse, second to only the Malefic Viper within the Order of the Malefic Viper, as far as she knew.

Every other time she had met frightening existences, like that one time her Teacher brought her to buy herbs from a dragon god; she was always with someone and never the person in focus. Always just a tag-along. But this time, there was no Lord Thayne, no Teacher... not even Izil. Just herself and a god who had lived for nearly the entire lifespan of the multiverse.

Viridia, the Hall Master, had teleported her part of the way there, but on the final stretch to the domain of the Lord Protector, they had to walk. As they walked, Meira felt incredibly nervous and built up courage as she asked the Hall Master.

“Uhm... Mistress, I-“

“Call me Viridia,” the Hall Master smiled. “You should get used to not being so... meek. That simply won’t do.”

“Oh... okay,” Meira nodded, getting a disapproving look from the Hall Master. Still, Meira felt too curious not to ask. “If I may... why does the Lord Protector want to speak to me?”

“I do not know for sure, but I have my suspicions,” Viridia answered. “And if I am correct, I believe it is high time you drop those social-conduct lessons you are currently doing and for us to set up some proper conduct classes.”

Meira froze when she heard the mention of conduct classes. A shiver ran down her spine as she tried to control herself, but images flashed in her head of the “classes” she had when she first arrived at the Order. Clenching her fists, she continued walking as the Hall Master noticed her actions.

“You have reached the cap of D-grade for your profession, with your class soon to follow, correct?” she asked.

Meira just nodded.

“And the Grand Elder has discussed his plans of properly Blessing you soon, right? It is already known that you are his disciple... but from what I was told by the Verdant Witches, he is considering making you his Chosen,” Viridia said.

“I... maybe...” Meira said. She had to be honest; she wasn’t exactly sure what it meant to become the Chosen of someone like Duskleaf. The thought just seemed so foreign to her. Even now, it felt incredibly odd that many approached her, not just because of the people she knew but because they assumed she herself was also worth their time.

“In either case, but especially if that is true, you will have to adapt your demeanor to the situation, not only for yourself but the Grand Elder. You will be his representative, and your words will hold authority, so to speak confidently and assuredly is a must,” the Hall Master continued.

Meira nodded once more. It made sense...

“If such is the case, I would gladly help you in this process,” Viridia smiled. “And do know that my first free lesson is that people will want to form a relationship with you primarily for selfish reasons. Which is exactly what I am trying to do by offering you these lessons.”

“Yeah,” Meira nodded. “I know.”

That didn’t really surprise her. In her meetings with Izil and the others, that was an often-discussed topic, as they always had people approach them with ulterior motives.

The two of them kept walking for a good while, only exchanging a few words in a rather casual conversation. It was only when they reached the gateway leading into the domain of the Lord Protector that Viridia left, and Meira realized she had just casually been talking to the Hall Master of the Order of the Malefic Viper for nearly twenty minutes.

It felt odd.

But not as odd as what happened next.

One moment Meira was just standing in front of the gate, while in the very next, she found herself standing on a stone platform. Before she could even orient herself, a presence swept over her that made her want to kneel... but she resisted. As best as she could anyway. Her knees still felt a bit wobbly.

Luckily, the pressure decreased after a few seconds. Just as Meira was about to breathe out a sigh of relief, a massive form appeared, towering over her. She looked up with wide eyes as she saw what looked like the giant head of a snake staring down at her. Mixed with the danger and the black stone platform surrounded by nearly pure darkness as far as the eye could see...

Yes, this was definitely the most frightening thing she had ever experienced.

"Do you have any inklings why I asked to speak to you?" the giant Hydra asked Meira, the voice of the Lord Protector echoing through the entire world. "And why I wished to have this conversation within my divine realm?"

"I... I don't," Meira said, really unsure how she was supposed to act. Normally, one would kneel or something, but Teacher had told her that as his disciple, she shouldn't kneel to anyone that isn't the Malefic Viper, so...

"Then let me not delay needlessly. You are aware of secrets exclusive to the Malefic One and his Chosen, and I know Duskleaf has also shared much many would consider classified. While I am still uncertain if I agree with the actions of Master and Duskleaf when it comes to choosing Chosen like this, I am beginning to see the novelty. It is different than prior blessed I have had, in that there is less blind worship," the god explained. "The mere fact that even you, someone that was merely a former slave of Master's Chosen, don't crumble before me does make the entire situation, how to phrase it, tolerable."

"Are... am I here because of Teacher?" Meira asked. Did the Lord Protector have something against Teacher? Why would he need to speak to her like this?

"Yes. While this was not something I imagined doing, it's better to just get it out of the way now to avoid annoyance in the future," the Lord Protector's voice echoed as a second head rose from the depths below.

"Duskleaf is the sole disciple of the Malefic One for a reason," the second head said. "He was not the only disciple the Malefic One ever had, but the only one who remains. The only one Master allows to stay. Allows to assist him in his own personal projects."

Meira nodded, listening to his words. She knew that Teacher was brilliant, and she understood the gravity of him helping the Malefic Viper. For someone to be of actual assistance in any kind of project, their skills had to at least somewhat match that of the one they assist, which meant that the Malefic One recognized Duskleaf as an equal peer, at least in some aspects of alchemy. She knew that Teacher didn't really do toxins that much, but in so many other areas, he was nearly unparalleled.

“It seems you understand that somewhat, but do you truly know who Duskleaf is? What he is?”

“What about Teacher?” Meira asked, curious and confused, forgetting herself for a moment.

“His secrets are not mine to share, but consider this. While it is true most multiversal forces avoided the Order during the Malefic One’s absence due to my presence, I would not be enough to keep away some pinnacle factions. Sure, some still feared the Viper was around and would appear if the existence of the Order was threatened... but most of the older factions knew that the Order was never something Master cared overly much about,” the Lord Protector said. “Knew it was something he could always just rebuild if he truly wanted it back.”

Meira was deep in thought as she considered his words. But something didn’t fit. She was about to speak when a third Hydra head emerged on her left, making her jump a bit.

“Duskleaf is... weak,” the Lord Protector’s new head said, making Meira confused by the next words spoken by the central head. “And one of the most fearsome figures in the entire multiverse.”

The Lord Protector noticed her confused expression and briefly elaborated. “Gods are not simple, and Duskleaf much less so. You may believe him a pacifist alchemist... would you still wish to be his official disciple if that is but one part of him?”

“Yes,” Meira answered, not having to really think about it.

“Even if it means carrying with you burdens and secrets for the rest of your existence, even should you somehow attain immortality? Secrets you may never be able to disclose to anyone, not even the Chosen of the Malefic One?” the Lord Protector asked in an intimidating voice.

"If that is what Teacher wants, yes," Meira nodded once more without hesitation.

"Very well," the Boundless Hydra said. "Then fully embrace your new role and Path. And know that should you stray or break the vow you made today, I shall carry out my duty as the Lord Protector and end your existence."

Meira shivered as she was teleported out of the realm and back to the long underground hallway outside.

Definitely frightening, Meira shuddered as she looked down the hallway, unsure where to even go...

"You're getting sentimental, little Snappy," the voice of the Malefic Viper echoed through the realm of the Boundless Hydra just as the elf girl disappeared. "Watching out for Duskleaf like that."

"Master!" the Lord Protector said happily. "Yes, perhaps I am getting a bit needlessly emotional, but this is the first time Duskleaf has taken on an official disciple, and I do not wish to see him negatively impacted."

"And that's all?" the Viper said, a bit amused.

"There have been many changes recently, and more are coming. Yip of Yore, your Chosen, and his ability to manipulate Origins, rumors of the Dao Sect recently making moves, several gods that haven't been active for a long time suddenly stirring to life once more... something is coming."

“Something is always coming,” the Viper said in a cheerful tone. “But yes, more things do seem to be changing recently. Records are converging, and all the big players are aware. Let us look forward to it, eh?”

The Lord Protector nodded. Changes were neither good nor bad on a fundamental level. However, they did represent opportunity and risk, as well as the chance to get something new.

And to the Malefic Viper and his insatiable Path, new was nearly always good, as it was simply more to consume and integrate with his infinite Path.

Months passed after her frightening meeting with the Lord Protector as Meira toiled away, leveling her class through a variety of means. She would have never thought that something like a C-grade Perfect Evolution would ever be possible for her, but her Teacher had made it clear that if she wanted to become his official disciple, she at least had to have a Perfect Evolution.

Leveling her class wasn’t easy, and she did many things she had never tried before, including dungeons. As a healer, Meira had a pretty easy time finding a group, even without factoring in the fact she was a student of Duskleaf. Even if she admittedly sucked at fighting, she still managed to get through all the dungeons she did, partly because her party members were far stronger than she was.

However, most of her levels came not from healing people. No, it came from something else entirely. Healing was a school of magic that included many concepts and affinities. Light and life affinity were the two most famous ones for healing, but nature affinity was also a very popular one.

Teacher helped Meira toward healing another form of life than usual. Rather than mend wounds, she would instead focus on truly helping people heal themselves through an odd healing concept Meira had not really encountered before.

Rather than healing, it was more accurate to call it nurturing.

Meira's healing relied on the light affinity before she began changing her Path. Her aim slowly changed from simply healing other people to being able to mend and nurture other kinds of life, even those without a soul.

As her Teacher explained it, the system was rather rigid when it dictated classes were for combat and professions for non-combat, but there were ways to make both work together. The Legacy of the Malefic Viper and the entire Alchemist of the Malefic Viper Path was a testament to that. As Teacher's Master, it was natural that Duskleaf had taken inspiration and also come up with some ideas himself for how one could circumvent these restrictions, and the Path Meira was now walking was one of them.

Plants and all kinds of natural treasures were in a constant struggle for energy and survival. They were in an endless battle to ascend and become more powerful, walking their own Paths. True, this was not a fight against a monster but the world itself, but there was conceptual overlap, which had made Duskleaf believe there was an opening.

Healers could already level just by healing the injured, even when they did not get injured in combat. That was how Meira had initially leveled her class, after all. She had healed people who got hurt in the mines back with her clan and helped relieve those who suffered. That had earned her experience, so why couldn't she do something similar by helping plants?

The system was strict but also accommodating. Something like the Augur class was proof of this, and Meira hoped to do something similar. To have both, with a class that was not truly combat-reliant but

one she could level without having to step into a battlefield. The skills would still work for combat, but it would not be their sole function.

Soon enough, Meira reached her level cap, and she stood before the first evolution in her life that she was truly looking forward to.

Right before her evolution, Duskleaf sat her down and had three things prepared. One of them was an odd bottle, another was a marble of some kind, while the third was something he could only give himself directly:

His True Blessing.

Sitting at the final moment, Meira did get nervous again, and she had to ask if Duskleaf was sure, but he waved her off.

“We already talked about this. Now let’s do the proper preparations,” Duskleaf said as he pointed out the items, starting with the bottle.

“Usually, you elves can only evolve to high elves if you attain a Perfect Evolution in both D and C-grade while fulfilling all Records requirements, but seeing as you didn’t have sufficient Records previously, I brewed this instead,” Duskleaf said in a casual tone.

Meira’s eyes opened wide as she saw the bottle. She tried to Identify it but failed entirely.

“Next up is this,” he said, holding up the marble. “It is the core of a rather special star that I collected a while back. I have partly sealed it to make it safe for your current level of power, and It should suit your Path nicely going forward. Integrating it into your Internal Garden right before evolution should do nicely.”

Meira once more nodded. Her Internal Garden was a Legacy skill of Duskleaf himself. It allowed one to have a greenhouse within their soul to store treasures and energy, and based on what he said, it was partly derived from Palate of the Malefic Viper, but rather than consuming, it was created for nurturing.

At the urging of Duskleaf, she integrated the core and, right before evolving, drank the contents of the bottle. In the very final moments, before she accepted the prompt, Duskleaf smiled and took her hand. She felt a warm rush go into her body, as she knew he had just gotten her True Blessing.

Entering the evolution itself, things went better than expected. At least, Meira thought it did. Many of her old skills had already changed over the last few years, away from their slave origin, but her class and profession remained the same. Both had made it clear that even if she had been freed, she had still been a slave. Now, the word was entirely shed from her status menu.

Status

Name: Meira Dawnleaf

Race: [High Elf (C) – 200]

Class: [Dawnstar Saintess – 200]

Profession: [Principal Disciple of Duskleaf – 200]

Reading her status, the very first thing she saw was naturally her name. Meira never had a last name. She had always just been known as Meira. This wasn't really due to her being a slave but due to her clan's old customs, where it was only when one became D-grade that they became worthy of using the clan name.

Duskleaf had insisted that she needed a last name as not having one would just complicate things, and since she didn't have one and had no interest in taking up her family's, he just made one up for her. One that fused her Path and the name of her teacher while also communicating this was a new beginning for her. A new dawn, so to speak.

Her class was one that combined her light affinity with the power of life, while her profession was self-explanatory. She had even managed to successfully become a High Elf, something she never thought possible.

However, the one thing that stuck out the most was another new addition to her status menu.

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Shattered Dusk Emperor (Blessing - True)]

"Uhm... Teacher, in the Blessing section, it says-"

“Ignore that,” Duskleaf waved her off in a stern voice. “I should have known it would go with that considering it is a True Blessing. No, scratch what I said, do more than ignore it. Consciously put it at the back of your mind, and don’t even speak it out loud. You know there is power in words, and some things are best left unspoken.”

Meira looked at Teacher and his unusually strict demeanor before nodding. “Okay.”

His serious expression fell away as he smiled. “Now, let’s go test your new skills. Have you ever made an artificial sun? Jake never got around to doing it, so you should at least beat him to it.”

Chapter 737: Nevermore: Time Skip Status

On reflection, Jake’s sense of time had truly gotten warped since after the system arrived.

He had spent decades training with Sim-Jake, and while that had indeed felt like it had taken a while, it didn’t feel longer than a few weeks, tops. This was odd because the Tutorial was still clear in his mind, and if he was asked how long that had taken in comparison to that training session, he would have said the Tutorial was definitely longer.

The same was true for the Treasure Hunt, which had been even shorter than the Tutorial by quite a deal, yet still felt long... maybe because something was happening all the time. Nevermore was a bit similar to this, though it did also have a lot of nothing in there. Floor after floor proved challenging in different ways, and whatever downtime he did have could be filled with alchemy or experimenting. Even when that was not an option, and things began to drag on, he had pretty good company to talk to.

Jake was speaking of Sylphie, of course.

In conclusion, Nevermore was an odd mix of feeling extremely long and extremely short at the same time. Somewhere in between the Tutorial and Sim-Jake duel. Even if he logically knew it had taken a while, he was still kind of surprised when they left the in-between room and entered yet another city floor as the Sword Saint made a comment.

“Just a bit under three decades already, huh?” he muttered partly to himself. “Time certainly flies.”

“Truly, it has already been thirty years? Hmm, I suppose the last few floors did take longer than expected,” the Fallen King commented.

“Yeah,” Dina nodded to both the comment about how long they had been inside Nevermore and how these last few floors had taken much longer than they had wanted them to. Floor seventy had ended up taking them nearly two full years due to how damn annoying it had been.

“Damn, you are right,” Jake muttered. “Doesn’t feel that long, huh?”

As they were talking, an expected notification popped up in front of them.

At least Jake had thought it would be the expected one...

Congratulations! You have arrived on the Fourteenth City Floor of Nevermore.

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

You have successfully completed the second portion of Nevermore and is now entering the latter floors of the C-grade section. From floor seventy-one onwards, all floors will be even larger in scope. All basic floor completion bonuses will be increased twofold to compensate for the increased floor sizes moving forward.

Challenge Dungeons' growth limit has been reached. All available Challenge Dungeons have been unlocked.

Jake stopped walking as he read the message. "Second portion completed? Damn, I was sure it would be after floor eighty."

"Not entirely unexpected," the Sword Saint commented. "This may indicate there are a hundred C-grade floors in total."

"Even if that is so, we have two decades left," the Fallen King added. "Clearing more floors will net more points, but we should reconsider if that is the best approach."

"Ree?"

"Yes, exactly," the Fallen King nodded.

Jake considered, and Sylphie was probably right. Alas, before they would have to make a decision, they wanted to go check out the Leaderboards.

No one came to meet them on this floor, which was also a bit surprising as, on most prior ones, someone from the Order had appeared. They even had someone from the Pantheon of Life pop up at one point to talk to Dina and give them some basic intel.

Moving toward the Leaderboards to check how they were faring, the Sword Saint made another comment.

“Just got a telepathic message with an update,” he said, Jake frowning. He hadn’t even noticed anyone out of the ordinary observing them.

“Who? And why just send it to you?” Jake questioned.

“Shyness perhaps? It is another follower of Aeon. Anyway, the latest scoop is that...”

He gave them a brief update on the latest happenings as they quickly reached the pretty empty city square and saw the big Leaderboard.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-70): 336,381

Yeah, none of them really had any comments on this. It was damn low; what else was there to say? Was the number kind of big? Sure, but one must remember that the basic floor completion bonuses had increased significantly. Just completing floors forty-one to seventy would net 166,500 Nevermore Points, so to only get around a hundred thousand and fifty thousand above that from the prior forty floors and all kinds of bonus objectives... yeah, it was pretty bad. Of course, one also had to factor in that any party that could even make it this far wouldn't be in any way ordinary.

As for the Current Points Record, well, it was actually only a bit more than double the average.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-70): 744,673

Jake and company had kept the top spot. After floor sixty-five, they also had it, and not losing it was great. Of course, not everything was great. The Sword Saint had gotten an annoying update on other people also doing Nevermore.

As far as they were aware, a bit over a dozen groups they knew of were ahead of them, most of which Jake had no idea who was, but apparently, that beast group that had overtaken them a few times was one of these groups. Another one of those ahead he, unfortunately, did know quite well was Ell'Hakan, who had managed to cheese far more of these floors than they had been able to. The fundamental problem was that most floors had people on them, and Ell'Hakan's Bloodline was simply too well-suited for those kinds of situations. In places where Jake and company had to act solo or purposefully avoid the attention of B-grades or others too powerful to handle, Ell'Hakan had been able to actively enlist them.

As for how they knew this, for sure? Well, through the guy bragging openly and spreading the news. He simply beat floors faster than them and was thus ahead.

The only good thing was that he appeared to get far fewer points. Likely because convincing B-grades to help you wasn't unheard of, even for a C-grade. Now, convincing a god, that was awesome. But

Ell'Hakan hadn't bragged about getting those Starcross Twins on his side, so Jake assumed he had failed or possibly not even dared to try.

Besides that, they suspected Eron's group was also ahead of them. They knew pretty much every other group they knew was not, and many weren't really going for high spots on the Leaderboards anymore. Caleb and Maria had both communicated they were just trying to do as many floors as possible for levels, while Carmen and Jacob's group wanted to go for high-tier placements.

Jake had no bloody idea what Arnold was up to.

Overall, Jake would still expect pretty much all the groups he knew to make it to around floor seventy. He would rate floors forty to seventy rather disappointing in the challenge aspect, and they had only gotten a single more Grand Achievements outside of the Dark Witch one. That one also "only" provided a 5% bonus at the final calculation, making the Minaga one still stand out. Then again, the Minaga fight was still the biggest challenge so far, even thirty floors later.

It had certainly gotten harder, with many foes above level 300 appearing, but fights worth comparing to Minaga were few and far between. The final boss on floor seventy had been stronger than Minaga, true, but the thing is, so had Jake and everyone else in his party.

It had been more than two decades since Jake battled Minaga. Two decades was not a long time to a C-grade, but it was a long time for Jake and his party members, especially considering they were actively progressing all throughout this time. As they were walking toward a small house to discuss future plans, Just to put things into perspective, he compared his current status to his status shortly before the Minaga fight.

And there had been quite the development.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – 222 --> 253]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – 219 --> 256]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – 226 --> 251]

Health Points (HP): 139,110/139,110

Mana Points (MP): 298,921/298,921

Stamina: 149,651/149,770

Stats

Strength: 10922 --> 17707

Agility: 15391 --> 23894

Endurance: 10476 --> 14977

Vitality: 11053 --> 13911

Toughness: 8986 --> 11062

Wisdom: 14357 --> 19131

Intelligence: 11698 --> 16021

Perception: 30882 --> 40308

Willpower: 12336 --> 16664

Free points: 0

He had gotten a lot of levels and stats; no two ways about it. Jake also continued to lick his Perception marble throughout, which was part of the reason why he had gotten such a massive growth in Perception. His Strength and Agility had also both grown immensely, which was of great benefit in combat. This came very much due to his high level of investment of Free Points. Jake had only chosen to put Free Points into Strength, Agility, and a bit into Endurance during this time, as while Perception was indeed the stat, he didn't like the feeling of seeing the Sword Saint slowly begin to catch up to him in speed and power, so he had to invest some stat points to stay ahead.

However, even if he knew he had gotten a lot stronger and gained many levels, Jake still considered it pretty subpar at times. It felt slow, especially during the last few levels. After he reached level 250, it felt like leveling slowed down even more than before – which was really saying something, considering how it had already slowed to a crawl before he even reached that point.

One could well and truly say he was over his initial C-grade growth spurt. They all were, including even Sylphie. Sure, she had reached level 267, making her the highest-leveled one in the party by quite a bit, but that she wasn't higher was proof of how much slower levels became with time.

The Sword Saint and Fallen King were the ones who handled this slower leveling the best, with Sylphie and Jake both being pained the most. Dina was kind of neutral, having clearly expected it and not carrying any particular feelings on the matter. She expressed that it was normal for growth to slow down as life matured and that as long as one didn't begin to wither but kept growing, there were no causes for concern.

So, yeah, asking a damn tree lady about impatience in growth was a bad idea.

Overall, even if Jake complained, he had to admit he was a lot stronger now than when he fought Minaga. In fact, while Jake couldn't say it with certainty, he would estimate that should he face Minaga alone in his current form... he would have a legitimate shot at victory, and not only due to his stat growth. Because while numbers had certainly gone up, his skills hadn't been entirely stagnant, and he looked through his skills menu while mentally highlighting those that had improved or been added since the fight with the Unique Lifeform.

Class Skills: [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Bestial Hunter's Tracking (Epic)], [Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)]

, [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Ancient)], [Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter (Mythical)]

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

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

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

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

Five class skills and six profession skills had improved since that fight, though during the last twenty or so floors, only one class skill and three profession skills had seen any improvement. And the improvement on pretty much all of those was far from interesting.

Arcane Powershot had gotten upgraded as Jake pushed the skill further and further, partly due to Arcane Supremacy, and his understanding slowly deepened, allowing him to pour in more and more energy. He simply fired so many of them that the feeling of the arcane energy moving through his body became so familiar, and as he actively sought to improve it through his ever-increasing understanding, the skill upgraded. Once more, there was no functional change. The skill was just better in its wonderful simplicity.

It was definitely still his favorite archery skill.

Brew Potion was far more boring than that. He hadn't even expected the upgrade; he just got it the moment he crafted a mana potion that restored more than 100,000 mana for the very first time. So that was kind of nice, and even if it was surprising, he really shouldn't have been. That upgrade was purely automatic, and out of every single skill Jake was aware of, it had by far the most well-defined upgrade path. Well, besides maybe Concoct Poison, but the two were super similar.

Craft Elixir was not as similar, and the upgrade came to be from Jake being his party's only damn source of elixirs. Could they buy it on a city floor? Sure, they totally could have, but the Fallen King and Sword Saint agreed that Jake could easily just make it for them, considering all the natural treasures he was hoarding. Jake had semi-reluctantly agreed, as getting in a bit of elixir practice once in a while was fine, and he kind of wanted a break from working with Curse Fragments at the time. Working with fragmented curse energy representing the concept of insatiable hunger could be mentally taxing, after all. Who knew?

No, the only exciting upgrade had been Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist. There were plenty of chances to interact with rituals throughout the years, and he had honestly been in for an upgrade for a while with both the Vesperia ritual and the Dark Witch one. Especially so as Jake dove further and further into the Curse Manifestation skill, and he began to see ways to utilize the fragments

in rituals. After a while and a bit of testing, he upgraded the skill to work even better with curse energy, though he still felt like he had a ways to go, as he still wasn't able to do a big ritual with Eternal Hunger as the power source.

As for why he wanted to do a massive curse ritual using Eternal Hunger? Well, to see if he could, obviously.

Having gone through all his skills, the only menu he hadn't bothered addressing mentally was his titles, as nothing had really changed there.

In conclusion, two decades spent in a mega-dungeon led to some solid-ass growth. However, Jake also knew that things would only get slower from here unless he could find some truly challenging fights. The kind that put his life in legitimate danger.

Perhaps floor seventy-one would have that as they could now enter the third portion. However, with twenty or so years left to go, perhaps it was high time to consider another aspect of Nevermore they had neglected so far.

Challenge Dungeons' growth limit has been reached. All available Challenge Dungeons have been unlocked.

Reaching a house, they could sit down for a discussion on if it was time to decide that perhaps if they couldn't find proper challenges on the regular floors, it was time to do some Challenge Dungeons. Challenge Dungeons had to have good challenges, right?

It was literally in their name.

Chapter 738: Nevermore: Challenge Dungeons

It was inarguable that the main portion of Nevermore was the many floors that seemed to continue endlessly. One had to remember the primary function of the mega-dungeon was to be a great leveling spot, and the entire Leaderboards part was just a fun extra event for an extremely small portion of those who attempted the C-grade version of the World Wonder.

If Jake didn't care about the Leaderboards, he could have entered Nevermore alone and probably done quite a few floors in fifty years. Shit, due to how his Path worked, he would potentially even have gained more experience faster that way, though it would have meant missing out on any exclusive rewards from getting a good record on the Leaderboards.

Other versions than C-grade Nevermore – as a general rule - didn't even have any Leaderboards, but it was just a bunch of floors that people tried to either solo or do in parties. It was even considered pretty normal for people to do as many floors as they could solo before then joining up with others to progress further.

However, in the C-grade of Nevermore, they had one more essential thing than just city floors and regular floors.

They had Challenge Dungeons.

Apparently, one could also find Challenge Dungeons sometimes in later grades, but they naturally wouldn't be part of some Leaderboards evaluations. Instead, they just existed to test the people doing them. To challenge themselves and allow them to improve in some way.

Then there was one more type of Challenge Dungeons that the Wyrmgod had temporarily closed off access to due to the Leaderboards competition. Legacy Challenge Dungeons. Ones like the one Jake had entered to get his profession and put him on a collision course with the Malefic Viper.

Some gods would enter agreements with the Wyrmgod and be allowed to place a Legacy Challenge Dungeon on a city floor that people could attempt. The god could then use that as a recruitment tool or even as a way to find students worth personally tutoring.

Dina mentioned that a god had once even placed a Challenge Dungeon in the S-grade portion that was just a glorified dating show for her to find a partner. Apparently, the Wyrmgod got more involved in controlling what Challenge Dungeons would and would not get accepted after that.

Jake's money was on Minaga having been the one to approve the dating dungeon.

Anyway. Challenge Dungeons were considered the solo portion of Nevermore, as one could only do those alone. It was also an important aspect of raking up points, and it had long been said that the final positions on the Leaderboards would ultimately be decided by who did best in the Challenge Dungeons.

Right now, Jake and everyone in his party had the exact same number of Nevermore Points. After the Challenge Dungeons, that would naturally change, and they all knew that. Which, to the surprise of no one, only ignited their competitive spirits.

Sitting in the house, discussing their plans, it pretty fast became clear what they wanted to do.

"So we are all in agreement that we are tired of seeing each other's faces and need time apart?" the Sword Saint asked in a teasing voice.

“I wouldn’t say that...” Dina muttered. “But... taking some time to focus on individual improvement will likely be a good idea.”

“These Challenge Dungeons should add apt opportunities for self-improvement in a relatively safe environment,” the Fallen King agreed.

Oh yeah, that was another important aspect of Challenge Dungeons. You couldn’t die inside of them. If you died, you would just be reset to the last “checkpoint” and have one less life. Once you ran out of lives, you would be thrown out, and your Challenge Dungeon time was over.

This meant one could do far more risky things. For example, one thing Jake planned on doing was to be more reckless if he ever found himself facing an opponent too powerful to beat and push Arcane Awakening further than before. Doing that anywhere outside of a Challenge Dungeon was just too damn risky.

Sure, you could make it safe by doing it under the protection of someone powerful enough to save you should you fuck up, or maybe even in some specially prepared formation, but none of those things could compare to a true life and death battle – even if death wouldn’t be permanent.

“True, true. I do have a few things I wanna test,” the Sword Saint smiled. “Sadly, I have been informed the system will not allow me to go all out as death will not reset the repercussions from a Transcendence. I guess that also counts as a warning to you.”

He said the last part talking to the Fallen King, who nodded in acknowledgment. The unique special abilities of Unique Lifeforms were borderline considered Transcendent skills and would not be reset

either. There was even a chance something like Jake's Eternal Shadow wouldn't be fully reset due to the mental drain. Alas, he would find out.

"Do you all know which Challenge Dungeons you will be going for first?" Dina questioned.

Jake looked at the painting from the Sword Saint that looked a lot like a whiteboard, as he considered. There were five Challenge Dungeons in total. Each of them had their own themes and, as far as he knew, an endless number of "levels" until you became unable to continue and gave up or lost all your lives. This endlessness only became a thing after they reached floor seventy, mind you, which made this a great time to do it.

"Ree," Sylphie answered as she also joined Jake in staring at the list.

Challenge Dungeon available:

1. Colosseum of Mortals
2. Neverending Journey.
3. Test of Character (Limited)
4. Endless Minaga Labyrinth

5. House of the Architect

All of them had names that didn't exactly spell out what they were about but did give some hints. The first was obviously some kind of arena; the Neverending Journey was probably a travel-based one or maybe even one filled with different quests or something. Test of Character was a weird one. The only thing they were all confident in was that it wasn't a social type. In fact, there were no profession-focused Challenge Dungeons. One had to remember these were not just for enlightened but beasts too, so all were combat-related in some ways, or at least concerned skills not about crafting or professions. That would just be unfair, the same as it would be unfair if there was a Challenge Dungeon all about absorbing and finding natural treasures or something like that.

Endless Minaga Labyrinth was self-explanatory. Jake just wondered if Minaga himself would be the-

Ah, who was he kidding? Of course, he would be.

Finally, there was the House of the Architect which could be many things but probably was related to energy control or something like that. Honestly, who bloody knew?

Well, the ones who had done the Challenge Dungeons knew, but they couldn't tell due to Nevermore and its love of not allowing the sharing of information. Again, probably an aspect of Nevermore that assisted Jake, as others were way better at taking advantage of it, but Jake still liked to complain.

"I may just do them in order," Jake said after reading them.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked.

“Hm, good point,” Jake nodded.

“Indeed, the Colosseum of Mortals and the Endless Labyrinth do strike me as similar in nature. Considering it is a Challenge Dungeon, perhaps some special circumstances are applied in one of them?” the Fallen King theorized.

“You forgot to factor in the constant mental attacks from the live commentary during the Minaga Labyrinth, which is a difficulty modifier in its own right,” Jake grinned.

“If that truly returns, then I shall concede trying to get the best performance there,” the Fallen King said with a sigh.

“Yeah...” Dina nodded. “I just hope I do okay.”

Dina was the one facing the toughest situation in the Challenge Dungeons. As a healer, she was naturally less powerful in single combat, but she at least did have some solid offensive options. She was also damn durable and probably had the largest survivability of them all. Outside of Jake fighting foes he could dodge, that is.

“I am sure you’ll do fine,” the Sword Saint smiled to comfort her. “But what timescale are we looking at?”

“Based on prior eras, it usually takes between seven and twelve years for an elite to run out of lives, with elites usually taking longer,” Dina shared. “Considering there are five Challenge Dungeons, I think dedicating two years per dungeon should be a safe bet.”

“Ree?” Sylphie questioned.

“If someone is doing better than expected and will need more time, they can naturally stay longer but hopefully still leave once they reach a checkpoint to at least inform us of what is happening,” the Sword Saint answered. “Not using all your lives in every Challenge Dungeon where death is a possibility would be a wasted opportunity.”

Jake nodded. Two years per dungeon seemed fine to him. Of course, they would have to figure out a way to properly organize their meeting time after as the Challenge Dungeons would split them up not just spatially but in time too.

Challenge Dungeons tended to have more time dilation than the regular floors. Jake didn’t know exactly how much more, and he honestly hadn’t bothered trying to find out either. All he knew was that, based on his estimates, they would probably not even spend three years in Nevermore from the outside world’s perspective. Which was honestly a pretty good level of time dilation considering the lack of any downsides.

“So, ten years based on internal clocks, right?” Jake asked the group.

“Yes,” the Sword Saint nodded as he took out five small blank pictures and handed them one each. “When inside the dungeon, infuse mana into the picture. The paint used to paint it will fade in exactly ten years after being revealed, so that should function as a fine timer.”

“You came prepared, huh?” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Had to make myself useful while you were making my elixirs. Speaking of which...”

Jake sighed and tossed the old man a few Strength-increasing elixirs in case he would get some levels. He also gave the others whatever they wanted. Intelligence for Sylphie, Willpower-increasing for the Fallen King, and finally Vitality-increasing for Dina. This was not necessarily the stats they had the most of, but just what they wanted elixirs for these days.

One thing did bother Jake a bit, though, as he asked the old man. “Did you already know we would dedicate ten years to Challenge Dungeons?”

If he had already prepared the pictures, that had to mea-

“No, I just made a few dozen variations while practicing,” he answered casually.

“Oh, alright. Yeah, that makes sense...” Jake muttered.

“Should we get going already?” the Fallen King questioned. “If we dedicate ten years now, we will still have ample time afterward to try and get a few more floors down to get higher Leaderboards positions.”

“Yeah, we should really get moving,” Jake smiled as he stood up and stretched. “Or does anyone have anything to add?”

“Ree?” Sylphie said, a bit worried.

“Hm, good point,” Jake nodded seriously. She had a point. The Union Oath Jake and Sylphie had formed so long ago with the help of Stormild had slowly been weakening for a long time, and while it didn’t seem to go faster just because they were in Nevermore – likely because it was facilitated by Stormild and thus worked on Realtime – it was still reaching the end of its lifespan.

Sylphie was worried about what would happen. Especially if it dispersed while they were both in their own Challenge Dungeons. The bond had become second nature and was something they didn’t really think or talk about. It only really materialized by allowing them to sense each other’s locations, while the rest of its effect was behind-the-scenes Records stuff, as far as Jake knew.

“I don’t think it will hurt you or me, will it?” Jake asked.

“Ree.”

“Right, Stormild can’t exactly answer when we are inside Nevermore...” Jake muttered as he looked up. “Hey, Wyrmgod, can you or Minaga, who I am sure is also around somewhere, ask the Viper if he knows if anything bad will happen? This entire situation is partly his fault, after all.”

A few seconds passed as Dina looked at him.

“I don’t think that-“

Space itself cracked in front of them as an aura fell over the room as the voice of Villy echoed.

“It’ll be fine. You can always redo the oath at another time, though I would recommend that you wait until after Nevermore. In fact, if it expires while inside a Challenge Dungeon, you will barely feel it considering you are already separated. Also, I have seen what the Challenge Dungeons are about and... yeah, I know I can’t tell him, but... just a little... no, I told you already tha-“

The connection cut off as the hole in space disappeared. For a moment, their party of five just stared as it suddenly returned, this time in an odd warped state as it looked like the Viper had torn it open himself.

“Jake, Colosseum, own that place; I made a bet that you would at lea-“

With force, the space collapsed as the entire house shook.

Seconds passed as Jake turned to Sylphie. “Sounds like things will be fine. Should we all get going?”

Dina just stared as the Sword Saint questioned him. “Aren’t you going to address... you know?”

“Oh, right, yeah, I am doing the Colosseum first, I guess,” Jake shrugged. “Something I already planned on doing, for the record.”

“Ree?”

“We can talk about making a new oath after Nevermore for sure,” Jake smiled as Sylphie looked relieved. She jumped up as Jake caught her in his arms.

Despite being the age of a fully adult woman, Sylphie was still as much of a little hawk as she had been thirty years ago when they entered Nevermore. Sure, she had gotten smarter and wiser, but she was still – and perhaps always was going to be – a little goofy featherball.

Jake wouldn’t have it any other way as he rubbed her head, making her snuggle up to him. “You go create some carnage in those Challenge Dungeons, okay?”

“Ree!”

“Damn straight you will,” Jake grinned as Sylphie jumped out of his embrace and landed on his shoulder.

The old man and Dina smiled as they began to walk after Jake, who headed toward the entrance to the Challenge Dungeons. The Fallen King was the last to leave, as he muttered from behind.

“Are we truly going to ignore two Primordials having a scuffle over a bet?”

That is exactly what they were doing, as everyone ignored him while they walked to the Challenge Dungeons.

On the way, Jake did a final check-up of things as the others casually chatted.

Arcane affinity growing in influence within the Soulflame Cradle? Check.

Potions stocked? Check.

Poisons ready? Check

Void marble licked? Check.

Equipment not upgraded for thirty years but still good enough? Check.

Yep, everything seemed good to go. Jake's injured Palate stomach had even healed quite a while back, making him all ready to go.

Reaching the Challenge Dungeons area, they finally saw other people. A few hundred C-grades were gathered in the area, with a few booths even set up not far away selling different things. Jake and the others weren't interested as they looked at the five giant gates in front of them. Each had a motif on the gate. One was a grand Colosseum with what looked like two gladiators standing within.

Another was what looked like a road continuing infinitely. A third was a large square building of sorts, while a fourth was a single person sitting in meditation.

The final one was just a picture of Minaga's face.

Very professional.

Jake couldn't help to smile as he looked at it. Doing a bit of solo labyrinth fun was appealing, but alas, Villy apparently had a bet for him to win by doing... something.

"Where are you guys headed?" he asked the group.

"I think I will do the Labyrinth," Dina said, surprising Jake a bit, though he didn't really question it. He was sure she had her own plans.

"Ree," Sylphie shared, having decided on just doing the House of the Architect first. Definity struck him as random.

"I shall do the colosseum, too," the Sword Saint stated. That one made sense.

"Test of Character," the Fallen King said, not wanting to elaborate.

Jake nodded, and after a final snuggle with Sylphie, he walked toward the Challenge Dungeon gate. Putting his hand on it, he looked back at this party. "See you all in ten years!"

Chapter 739: Nevermore: Colosseum of Mortals

The Sword Saint had joked about them not wanting to see each other's faces anymore, and while Jake wouldn't have phrased it like that... it wasn't that far off from how he actually felt.

Not to misunderstand. Jake liked his party. Sylphie was naturally always a joy, and Dina liked to stick by herself when possible, so she was also great. And, sure, the Fallen King could be a bit uptight, and the Sword Saint liked to take on the demeanor of an old lecturer, but things had been good overall if he said so himself.

However, he also had to recognize that some alone time was more than welcome. While he did get some time alone here and there while on the different floors, they were still always connected through their Golden Marks and had frequent check-ins.

Now, in the Challenge Dungeons, Jake was back to it being just him, and he was all for it. He did recognize that there would likely be other characters in there, but no people he had to actually interact with outside of the bare minimum unless he wanted to. He didn't have to consider social decorum much and could just go with the flow and focus on whatever challenges appeared before him.

After saying his temporary farewells to his party members, he entered his very first Challenge Dungeon.

Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!

Jake only managed to read this single part of the welcome message as he was assaulted by a wave of weakness. His legs lost strength, and he fell to his knees. He felt his knee hit the stone, and a tinge of pain hit him as the rough linen now covering his body didn't help much.

Wait, pain?

How could hitting his knee like that hurt him? What was going on...

As he was trying to figure things out, he luckily had a system message that explained everything.

You have entered the Colosseum of Mortals. A battleground for the weak where only the truly skilled will prevail.

As a new arrival, you are nothing but a New Blood that must prove himself in the arena. Fight, conquer, and advance through the ranks as you qualify for promotion matches. Who knows, perhaps one day you may even become the Champion.

During this Challenge Dungeon, all base stats are normalized and set to 10. Base stats cannot be increased while in the Colosseum of Mortals. All current items and equipment have been confiscated and shall be returned upon exiting the Challenge Dungeon. All usage of items and equipment is heavily restricted. All skill use is heavily restricted. Further restrictions may apply.

Objective: Achieve victory in the Colosseum as many times as possible.

Current objective: Be promoted from New Blood to Initiate Fighter

Current rank: New Blood (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 0

Lives remaining: 10

Jake read through it all and had a pretty damn good idea what this was, and the name Colosseum of Mortals also made quite a bit more sense now.

This was the kind of Challenge Dungeon where one couldn't just take advantage of overpowering everything with pure stats, high rarity skills, or great equipment. It was one where everyone was equal, no matter their Path, and it was all about skill.

Well, kind of. Because upon looking at this updated Status, something didn't quite add up.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (G) – 0]

Class: N/A

Profession: N/A

Health Points (HP): 170/170

Mana Points (MP): 170/170

Stamina: 160/160

Stats

Strength: 16

Agility: 18

Endurance: 16

Vitality: 17

Toughness: 16

Wisdom: 17

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 20

Willpower: 16

Wait, it said all my stats were set to 10? Jake questioned, confused. While he was not a math Wizz, he was pretty sure none of those numbers were the number 10. However, he soon realized what was going on. Base stats had been set to 10.

Looking at the rest of his status menu, he did indeed see that while all of his class and profession skills were gone, his titles were left untouched.

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer XV], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Marquess], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)]

At least they were untouched for the most part. All the flat stat bonuses obviously didn't count, but all percentage amplifiers did. This meant that Jake had far higher stats than normal base humans, putting him firmly at the level of a superhuman despite the effects of the floor. It wasn't that extreme, though, but a nice advantage.

Checking further, he also saw that at least his race skills were mostly the same.

Race Skills:

[Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Meditation (Common)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Meditation and Identify had both been downgraded, but the rest were the same. Wisdom of the Hunter still gave him a percentage amplifier to some of his stats, and Shroud of the Primordial was completely unaffected. At least, he assumed it to be that because, with his current stats, he was pretty limited in his ability to check it out.

However, even with everything going on, one thing remained untouched. One thing that, even when Jake did Villy's Challenge Dungeon, wasn't affected in the slightest:

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

Deciding to scan his environment, Jake closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception. The entire space around him was laid bare before him as an area more than three-hundred kilometers in diameter was revealed to him. His mind was absolutely fine, too, as even if the system had nerfed him, it had left his Truesoul untouched.

It was more like it had put a barrier around it. A barrier that only let through whatever the system allowed – with the Bloodline having a nice little backdoor.

He did have the problem that properly memorizing the entire mental map was difficult, but at least he got an idea of where to go. Not that he needed it, as a young man approached him from behind, walking down the cobblestone road leading toward the Colosseum with what looked like a panther of some sort. Over his shoulder, he wore a travel bag and had quite a cheery look on his face as he also spotted Jake.

“Oh, hey there!” he greeted Jake with a light-hearted smile. “Are you here to join the Colosseum too?”

Jake had already stood back up and inspected himself briefly. His clothes were gone, and switched for a simple linen shirt and pants. Having the mask gone kind of sucked, but he would manage. Looking at the young man, he smiled in return. “Yeah, that was the plan. Though I will admit, I am pretty unfamiliar with how things work around here.”

“No worries there,” the young man said as he looked in his bag and took out a small pamphlet. Jake graciously accepted it as the young man asked: “Wanna go together and see the Battlemaster to sign as combatants?”

Seeing as that was his objective in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake naturally agreed with a smile as the cheery-looking man told him all he knew about the place as he showed Jake the way into the grand Colosseum.

As for how grand it was?

Well, grand enough for even a fully powered Pulse to be utterly incapable of seeing the entire structure and the seemingly thousands of arenas within.

“The Colosseum of Mortals. A testing ground where skill takes precedence over pure power. The individuals doing it shall be returned to their starting point, only empowered by rare stat percentage modifiers, and, through the directive of the system, face opponents,” the Wyrmgod said, partly explaining the place to the Viper.

“I reckon designing that yourself would have been borderline impossible,” Vilastromoz nodded. He was already aware of how these kinds of Challenge Dungeons worked himself, having tried to make quite a few in the past. He also knew the biggest challenge they faced.

“Impossible is an understatement,” Minaga scoffed. “People say I am impossible, but have you ever tried balancing a Challenge Dungeon like that? Actually impossible. Everyone has different starting points and grades in which they begin... on-the-fly adaptation and individualization is required, making no two Colosseum of Mortals alike.”

Vilastromoz nodded. This was indeed the major challenge when one “nerfed” the people doing a Challenge Dungeon like this, especially when in a competitive environment. Jake would do it as a G-

grade, as that was his starting point. Meanwhile, someone like the Unique Lifeform in his party would start as a level 100, as he was born in D-grade, making that his starting grade. All the other restrictions would still apply, such as those on skills, but he would have normalized stats for the grade. The actual stats would be lower than pretty much any level 100 D-grade, balancing even different variants.

Well, not truly balancing. As a Unique Lifeform, he would still have his titles, including the special Unique Lifeform title. Even if the Wyrmgod wanted balance, absolute balance within the dungeon was never the goal, hence why they were allowed to keep such bonuses.

When it came to balancing creatures that were actually a higher grade, things got truly complicated. As an example, the Sylphian was born at level 0, yes, but that did not make her an F-grade at any point. No, she was truly a far higher grade. One she hadn't even reached yet. Hence the system would simply make her level 200 – the “latest” starting point she had hit.

Was this the best solution? One that truly balanced the relative level of challenge and ensured the integrity of the Leaderboards, even if everyone ended up ultimately facing entirely different individualized versions of the same Challenge Dungeon?

Yes. Yes, it was. Because it was all handled by the omnipotent system.

“What weapon do you usually use, Jake?” Owen asked as they walked toward the Quartermaster. “My old man trained me to use a spear, but I am pretty good with a sword and buckler too.”

“Hm, I usually use bows and katars, but I have also used swords and knives for a bit. Oh, and a staff on rare occasions,” Jake answered the young man he had met outside of the Colosseum.

Despite being fully aware he was just a dungeon character, Jake still got talking with the guy, and he was far more animated and real than most other people. In fact, Jake couldn't place anything off about him at all, to the level of him needing to confirm he wasn't actually a real person by asking him about the Challenge Dungeon aspect of where they were. That confirmed he was indeed a character innate to the place, as he didn't respond or even seem to react to it.

After they had entered the Colosseum together, they had gone and registered with a very uninterested Battlemaster who told them that if they wanted to fight, they had to go talk to the Quartermaster about getting weapons and armor first.

"That's... a lot. Man, now I feel inadequate. Though I do also kind of know how to use a pitchfork well. I once fought off a big boar all on my own a few years back using one," Owen tried to regain some clout.

"Hey, you said you know a few schools of magic," Jake cheered him up. "I can only do one kind properly."

"Right, right," the young man nodded enthusiastically.

The panther he had arrived with had left them right after meeting with the Battlemaster, by the way. It turned out the beast Jake had expected to be related to Owen in some way was just another fighter who wanted to sign up for the Colosseum whom Owen had met on the way and was now off to talk to a monster-specialized Battlemaster.

Reaching the Quartermaster, Jake found that they could pretty much ask for any weapon or equipment they wanted and some-fucking-how, the guy would have it inside his store room. After a while of talking with the guy who looked like the stereotypical blacksmith out of any game – despite being a Quartermaster – Jake and Owen both left with a set of equipment each.

The first to get his weapon was Owen. He received his requested wooden spear with a metal tip that looked quite well-made, along with a set of armor. Looking at the spear, Jake was happy to see that his Identify skill at least worked.

[Flexible Spear (Common)] – A flexible spear made of wood and metal. Sharp and durable, with relatively weak mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

It truly was as simple as it came, but with their current stats, did one need better? When it came to his own weapons, Jake got it a bit later. He had requested just a bow, a quiver, and a knife. None of them was anything special either.

[Shortbow (Common)] – A shortbow suited for fast drawing and shooting of arrows. The body of made of wood and a string of tough sinew. The wood is relatively durable but is not made for taking direct impacts. Low mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

[Quiver (Common)] – A simple quiver capable of holding twenty-four arrows. The arrows are with simple fletching and metal tips, great for penetrating lighter defenses but weak against heavily armored foes.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

[Hunting Knife (Common)] – A hunting knife made of metal. Sharp and durable knife, but it has an edge that easily dulls if used repeatedly. Relatively low mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

Armor had come in light, medium, heavy, and very heavy variants. One could have just gone with robes or many other designs if they preferred that, but Jake had chosen to go with the light armor, while Owen got the medium one.

[Light Leather Armor (Common)] – A complete set of light leather armor, offering good protection against slashing attack, but is weak to stabbing and blunt damage.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

The armor was pretty well made but also simple. It was functional over everything else too, and while not perfect, definitely better than nothing. Plus, it didn't affect Jake's movements at all after he made a few light modifications, where he made a few cuts around the joints and stuff. He wasn't planning on taking many hits with it either way.

As for why he hadn't opted for his katars or bigger melee weapons... well, weight was now suddenly a problem he had to consider. Plus, swapping weapons was harder now as he didn't have any spatial storage. Katars were great weapons when magic was involved, but they took some time to put on if he had to switch from his bow mid-fight. No, a sheathed knife was way faster there. Sure, maybe he could have tried to go with a hidden blade or something too, but a knife seemed like the simplest and easiest option. Plus, this would be for the first fights, which he predicted to be relatively easy.

Needless to say, Jake would have preferred to use his own stuff, but he would have to settle with whatever the dungeon would provide him. Again, he understood why it worked like this, but that didn't mean he couldn't complain about it internally.

Jake had tried to pull out his Eternal Hunger. The mythical item was in a weird position in that it was both merged with his soul, but also a piece of equipment, so he didn't know if that would be gone. His attempt had ended with him only pulling out a bit of curse energy while mentally draining himself significantly. He had wanted to continue practicing, but something told him that should he even manage to summon Eternal Hunger, his entire body would explode from its energy, wasting a life.

Having low stats seriously sucked for any and all kinds of experimenting and imposed several annoying limitations. What made it all worse was that Jake's mana and stamina pools were both so damn low now, and it wasn't like Jake had potions to quickly regenerate them, so he had to be a bit careful with wasting energy outside of fights.

Speaking of fights, he and Owen were both making their way back toward the Battlemaster to begin their first fights.

"We should go sign up to battle at the same time," Owen said with a smile.

"No, let me go first, and you can observe, okay?" Jake said.

Yeah, he was not falling into that trap. It would be very cliché and kind of fucked up if he would meet someone nice and friendly, spend time getting to know him, sign up to battle at the same time, only to face each other in a duel, forcing Jake to kill him.

No way he was going to do that shit.

"I guess we can do that, too," Owen nodded. "Oh, damn, if we had done that, couldn't we have risked meeting each other in the arena? Yeah, that would have been bad, wouldn't it? Yep, definitely awkward to kill a friend."

Jake stared at him a bit. "You are surprisingly calm, considering you might have just been killed if you decided to go up against me."

"I have confidence that I can win enough fights to at least become a Fighter," Owen smiled proudly. "Though I am not quite sure if I could beat you, true. How about you? What are you aiming for? You sound kind of skilled, so maybe you can even reach the Gladiator rank..."

Jake just grinned at him. "Champion or bust."

"I... I don't think that's very feasible," Owen said, scratching the back of his head. "Like, I commend the spirit, but..."

"You're right," Jake nodded. "There is definitely gonna be some hidden Grand Champion rank or something above Champion, right? That seems like a more realistic goal."

As the saying goes: go big or die ten times in the attempt and be forced to go home.

Chapter 740: Nevermore: Kicking Off The Colosseum Arc

“Welcome to the Colosseum! Today, we have two New Bloods, both here to prove their worth! As they set foot on the sand soiled with the blood of their predecessors, who will come out on top!? Who will have a chance to move forward!? Perhaps... no! Not perhaps! Surely, today is the first match of a coming champion!”

The voice of the announcer echoed loudly throughout the entire arena as Jake stood behind a fenced gate leading up to the arena itself. After talking to the Battlemaster, the guy had looked him over once before agreeing he was ready and sent him down one of the many hallways leading into an arena. These hallways were a mishmash of spatial distortion, taking you pretty much anywhere in the arena without you even noticing. No one around seemed to comment on it either, as everything was indeed very low-fantasy. There weren't even teleportation gates anywhere, and regular gates had replaced magical barriers everywhere. He also had to admit that everything large-scale magical going on could only be detected by him due to his sphere.

“Combatants, enter the arena!”

Jake began walking forward, bow in hand and ready to go. He quickly made it up to a still-lowering second meshed gate, his opponent directly ahead of him.

“Go Jake!” he heard yelled from the stands as he saw Owen there.

The arena was entirely circular and pretty small, only about thirty meters across, the ground covered in sand. Jake knew that as one moved up the ranks, arenas got bigger and grander, but for a starter arena, this was honestly pretty good. The stands all around were just benches, but there were surprisingly many in the audience. Though, Jake quickly came to realize they weren't humans. They were instead small green creatures.

Jake stared at his opponent at the other end of the arena as he cursed internally. Really?

[Goblin]

The goblin looked exactly as he would have expected. It was not even a meter tall and carried with it a wooden club that it held over its shoulder, trying to look intimidating. This was Jake's first time encountering a goblin that truly personified a starter mob, and he honestly had no idea what to expect from the fight.

He knew goblins came in many different forms. They were an enlightened race as they had professions and classes like humans and elves but rarely reached high levels. If a goblin reached D-grade, chances are it wouldn't be a goblin anymore but, at the very least, some kind of hobgoblin. Jake even heard that goblins sometimes evolved into orcs and ogres or other such races.

As for the audience? Yeah, it consisted of ninety-five percent goblins who were all cheering and hollering loudly at their fighter. The crowd definitely wasn't on Jake's side.

Right as the mesh was about to fully lowered, the announcer spoke one more time:

"Let the battle begin!"

Without hesitation, the goblin charged toward him, having no doubt realized he would have a better chance in a melee. Jake had a bow, and the faster the goblin got close, the fewer shots he could get off. Additionally, Jake only had a knife for melee combat, which would make it very difficult to block a club.

The goblin knew all this and quickly ran across the arena, closing in at an impressive speed. The sand barely seemed to slow him down as he sneered at Jake, soon getting within only a few meters with Jake yet to nock a single arrow. The goblin prepared to swing its club the moment he entered striking distance, with Jake still yet to respond.

“Oh no! The goblin is simply too fast for the human to respond in time and draw his bow! How will he-“

Jake kicked the goblin.

His small green opponent tumbled to the ground, losing grip of his club. The little guy tried to get back up and find the club but stumbled again. After a dozen seconds, Jake just sighed as the goblin had managed to stand back up, even if he looked wobbly on his feet, barely able to hold onto the club.

“If you try to hit me again, I will kick you harder than last time.”

The goblin stared at him for a second.

“I give up!”

Silence persisted for a good three seconds as the announcer yelled loudly.

“A perfect victory for the archer... no, the martial artist! A glorious display of misdirection to bring a bow and confuse his foe! Truly brilliant!”

Jake tried to ignore the announcer guy as he walked back the way he came. He raised his hand and waved as the goblin bowed while Jake made his exit to the excited yells of Owen. Reaching the tunnel, he checked his menu and saw it had been updated.

Current rank: New Blood (1/5)

Colosseum Points: 2

Lives remaining: 10

Alright, one victory down... if you can even call that a victory.

Yeah, his first fight was a bit disappointing. Luckily, he hadn't had to actually kill his opponent to win. The rules of the Colosseum were rather simple in regard to obtaining victories. One could win in one of three ways: kill your opponent, knock them out, or have them surrender. Apparently, in higher ranks, the rules could change, forcing some matches to be death matches, with others even having referees.

Winning a match would give you one point toward promotion. Getting five points – at least for now – allowed you to do a promotion match and reach the next rank. If you lost a match and survived, you would lose a point, and if you went too much in the negative, you risked getting demoted to a lower rank. All in all, a simple system that made it quite easy to see that Jake just had to keep winning matches.

Anyway, getting out of the tunnel leading to the arena, Jake went straight to the Battlemaster, who congratulated him and told him to take a rest before coming back for another fight. Before Jake could protest, he heard running from behind as Owen arrived. The Battlemaster threw Jake a look, making him back off and sit on a bench not far away as Owen ran over.

“That was awesome!” the young man said excitedly and slightly out of breath as he stared at Jake with starry eyes. “I didn’t know you were a martial artist! Those are super rare.”

“I’m not,” Jake shrugged. “I just didn’t want to use a weapon... it felt like that would have been overkill.”

“You don’t need to be shy,” Owen smiled. “That kick was clearly practiced. You hit him right on the chin, too, and the timing... definitely not something you just did on a whim.”

But... it was, Jake said internally, knowing he wouldn’t get anything out of saying it out loud.’

Owen talked for a bit more before Jake decided sitting there was too boring.

“Anyway, I think I am going for another match,” Jake said as he stood up.

“Already? Well, I guess you don’t really need any rest...”

“Nope,” Jake said as he walked up to the Battlemaster. “Let me fight again.”

The Battlemaster looked at Jake. “Hmph. Don’t get overconfident just because you won one fight against a goblin, New Blood. Plus, I heard you revealed to everyone your special kicking technique, so expect your next opponent to know about it.”

Jake really wanted to point out how he literally just kicked the goblin normally but nodded solemnly. “I will keep that in mind. So will you let me fight?”

“Alright, just don’t embarrass me for giving you permission,” the Battlemaster scoffed as he pointed at the tunnel for him to enter once the timer above it was done. Which would be about half an hour, it seemed. This time was given for a few things, including studying your opponent using stuff from some of the many information brokers around, but naturally, Jake didn’t feel like he needed or wanted that. At least not yet.

How no one pointed out that there were hundreds of tunnels leading out of the training area was really fucking weird, but not anything worth commenting about. Also, who the hell was in charge of all those timers? How did they even know how long something would take? Of course, he knew it was all just system-fuckery, but he still kind of wanted to know if the system would at least try and offer up a feasible explanation.

After the timer was done, he began walking down the tunnel. He soon found himself in a nearly identical arena, ready for his next match. Everything proceeded as before, as it was even the same announcer who went wild and introduced them both as Jake reached the second meshed gate. At the other end, he saw his next opponent.

It was an elven woman wearing an overly elegant dress that Jake suspected was against regulation. She held a simple wand in her gloved hands, looking incredibly full of herself - something her words that sadly interrupted the announcer also made extra clear.

“You are but a brute whose only skill is thoughtless kicks! I have been training under my revered master for years, and your meager martial arts will prove no challenge!”

Not a martial artist.

The moment the mesh was down, the woman walked slightly forward as she held out her wand.
“Behold! The power of true magic!”

Jake began walking into the arena at a casual pace as he saw mana slowly begin to gather, glad that even if he had been pushed to G-grade, he could still easily feel it. Then again, if he couldn’t feel it, other G-grade humans also wouldn’t be able to, which would make any and all casters utterly fucked in the Challenge Dungeon.

Anyway, Jake kept watching as a fireball about the size of a basketball condensed over the next dozen or so seconds, as the elven woman looked incredibly strained. She kept her eyes trained on Jake, who kept walking, and as he passed a bit over the halfway point, she yelled again.

“Try to dodge this!”

He did.

The fireball flew straight for him, and Jake pretty casually side-stepped it as she stared wide-eyed as the fireball hit the sand and left a nice black burn mark. It didn't even explode.

"Not yet!" she screamed with determination as more fire mana began to gather. Jake sighed a bit as he kept walking until he got within three meters of the elf, and she looked right at him again with a triumphant smile.

"Hah! At this distance, you cannot possibly dodge in time!"

He could.

This fireball flew straight by him as he dodged and kept flying before it, already half-fizzled out, hit the back wall of the arena behind Jake. Now, standing within a couple of meters of the elf, she looked at him with wide eyes.

"If... if you let me win, I am sure my master will-"

Jake walked one step closer, slightly raising his leg.

"Please don't kick me."

Jake looked at her and raised his eyebrow as she looked about to cry.

"I give up!" she yelled loudly as she stumbled back and fell down on the sand. Before Jake could even do or say anything, she began full-on ugly crying.

Jake stared for a moment before quickly scurrying out of the arena again, sighing mentally on the way.

Get me out of this...

He nearly felt bad about that last fight; the lady clearly had no damn fighting experience.

Making his way back to the Battlemaster, he was once more told not to get cocky. Alas, at least the guy wasn't a complete idiot as the middle-aged man allowed Jake to fight again immediately, and on the way back to the arena, he only said a quick hi to Owen, who had also decided to do some matches himself.

Entering the arena for the third time that day, he had another quick victory, all the build-up taking far longer than the fight itself.

As for how he won?

One kick.

The fourth and fifth fight was the same, both of them going down with single kicks. All three of his last fights had been humans, and all had gone down the same way. Honestly, it was amazing how good a quick kick was at convincing someone that continuing fighting was probably a bad idea. His fifth opponent did look like he wanted to quit before the fight even started but still allowed Jake to get in a good kick before he surrendered.

This finally allowed him to make actual progress. That's right, it was time for a promotion match.

Alas, this promotion match proved to be quite a lot more challenging than the fights prior. In fact, it took twice as much effort than any of those prior:

Two kicks.

When he got down from his grand promotion match, the Battlemaster had a smile on his lips and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Good job, New Blood... or should I call you, Initiate Fighter. Who knows, if you keep this up, we might one day make a proper combatant out of you!"

Owen, who somehow seemed to always be around, also quickly came over, looking a bit worse for wear. He had bandages wrapped around his right upper arm, and his forearms were also wrapped in some green half-seethrough gauze to treat what looked like burns.

"You managed to get promoted already!" Owen said with a smile. "I only won three matches myself, but I am getting the hang of it!"

Jake just smiled in return, not wanting to ask how the hell the guy managed to get himself injured against the kind of foes one could meet in these first five matches. They were all either people too weak to put up fights or didn't have an iota of fighting experience. Even the guy Jake met for his promotion match barely knew how to raise his arm to block with a buckler. Which was how he managed to handle two kicks, by the way.

"You aren't even injured," Owen whistled. "Damn, you really are a pro martial artist."

"Not a martial artist," Jake corrected him.

Oh, right, sure," Owen grinned, giving a wink. "I understand perfectly."

"I don't think you do," Jake sighed as he looked toward the Battlemaster, who was talking to some other young chump. "Oh well, I guess I can go for one more match."

"What are you talking about?" Owen asked, confused. "The Colloseum is closing in half an hour. No way you got time for one more fight."

"Closing?" Jake questioned. It closed? Jake wasn't used to things closing anymore.

"Yeah, it closes every night at ten and reopens the next morning at six, with matches starting at eight," Owen explained. "Getting here early means you can often get in a morning fight."

Jake slowly nodded. Damn, it sounded like the Colosseum did really close, and looking around the large training area filled with target dummies and different kinds of equipment, he did notice the place was emptying out.

Then what the hell am I supposed to do? Jake wondered.

“Do you already have a room booked, by the way? I heard that as an Initiate Fighter, you can get a small room to yourself,” Owen asked after seeing Jake just standing there in thought.

“Hm?” Jake humphed. “No room booked, no. But I guess we can go check that out.

“Nice,” Owen ever-cheerfully smiled as he showed Jake the way.

Jake shrugged and followed. While walking, he stretched his arms a bit as he yawned, stopping mid-yawn.

I’m tired?

Next, something else struck him as his stomach rumbled slightly. And hungry...

Plus, his mouth did feel a bit dry...

Jake had forgotten a lot of human things that had apparently returned, and suddenly the breaks made a lot more sense. He needed to eat, drink, and sleep. While he was still a superhuman by all reasonable standards, making such aspects of life less of a problem for him than many others, he was not immune to these woes.

Oh, and then there was one final big challenge to his continued desire to fight endlessly. Without potions and a shitty meditation skill, Jake found himself struggling in the resource department.

Health Points (HP): 169/170

Mana Points (MP): 162/170

Stamina: 32/160

He had not strained himself at any point throughout the day, yet his stamina was low. Simply living and walking around drained stamina, but usually, Jake could easily regenerate that by quickly meditating or consuming a potion. Even without these, he could easily go for months or years without running out of stamina from just existing.

When it came to sleep, as a C-grade, Jake never had to sleep. Sleep could still be done, mind you, as it was by far the best method to regenerate mental energy. So good that some beings who were born without having ever needed to sleep – and thus lacked the natural ability to – learned to sleep just for this regenerative ability.

To need sleep again was kind of a bummer, but it wasn't that bad. In fact, Jake was sure there could be a lot of benefits to reconnecting with how he was in his early days. He could work on the very basics without high stats or any skills...

Especially the not-having-skills-part was significant because it allowed Jake to develop and try some things he couldn't before. To potentially even understand some of the skills, he did have better than ever, as he could learn aspects of them without the influence exerted from possessing the skill and the accompanying system assistance.

Yeah... on second thought, maybe this downtime between fights did have some benefits. Jake definitely had things to do or look into when not in the arena. There were even a few plans popping up in his mind. But first thing's first:

It was sleepy time.