

## Hunter 741

### Chapter 741: Nevermore: A Second Day At The Colosseum

The last time Jake slept, it was because he had utterly over-exhausted himself and was all out of mental energy. However, this time, it was a far more normal sleep. He even got in a good seven hours before he woke up – more than he had initially planned. Not having an alarm clock made it hard to plan out how much you wanted to sleep.

Oh yeah, that reminds me... the Sword Saint's timer.

To use a special painting infused with time magic was a nice idea, but who could have known that the very first dungeon Jake entered would take away all his items? But hey, at least the Sword Saint shouldn't yell at him if he was late, as the old man was also doing the Colosseum of Mortals along with Jake.

Wait, he probably has some overpowered internal clock skill... Jake realized. Sure, Jake also had an internal clock, but that honestly didn't work very well in circumstances like this. In combat, he could count time passing down to less than a millisecond, but when things were calm, his clock broke.

Getting out of bed, Jake stretched, feeling refreshed. He was in a small room with nothing but a pretty bad bed and a wooden table with a lantern that had what looked like red fireflies within. Jake didn't really need the lamp, but it was nice of the Colosseum to provide them for those with lesser Perception.

Jake opened the door to his room as dozens more doors stretched out to either side of him. He was in a large dormitory of sorts that seemed to operate more like an inn than an actual dormitory. The building itself was placed in a decently-sized city just down the road from the Colosseum.

He had seen it with his Pulse of Perception before but hadn't really paid it much mind. Now he realized he was probably going to spend quite some time there. Though, hopefully, with better accommodations in the future. The small room sucked, but at least it was better than where Owen was stuck.

The poor guy was sleeping in a large communal room with bunk beds. Three-layered bunk beds, even. When Jake came to get him, he didn't look like he had gotten nearly enough sleep, but he pepped up pretty quickly.

"Hey, Jake! Slept well?" he asked cheerfully.

"Could be better, but I'll manage," Jake said, wanting to at least sound a bit empathetic toward the poor guy. "You mentioned yesterday that you know about a great place to get breakfast?"

"Yeah! My old man kept talking about how great the food is," Owen said enthusiastically. "Just follow me!"

And follow him, he did. Owen led Jake to a dining hall elsewhere in the city, not far from the dorms. There, Jake had a meal he could only describe as scrumptious. Having to eat was an obvious downside to his reduced stats, but getting to eat was pretty damn sweet, and Jake had nearly begun to forget how good food was.

A diet of toxic ingredients was good for his Malefic Palate but not his regular palate.

After eating, the two of them naturally headed to the Colosseum again. It was about seven in the morning at this point, with the fights beginning an hour later. Could Jake be more efficient with his time,

optimizing his time spent? Sure, but why would he do Challenge Dungeons at all if he didn't enjoy them? Plus, it wasn't like he would actually be delayed, as far as he could tell.

Walking to the Colosseum, he looked over his menu related to the floor.

Current objective: Be promoted from Initiate Fighter to Fledgling Fighter

Current rank: Initiate Fighter (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 20

Lives remaining: 10

Firstly, was a Fledgling Fighter considered better than an Initiate? Both sounded like new fighters who sucked, but alas, if that is what the Wyrmgod decided was a good rank-up name, so be it. It was dumb, but sure.

Looking at the points, Jake had gained 2 for every win and then 10 for the promotion match, virtue of clearing the quest. Exactly how the math worked with giving points, he naturally didn't know, but he was planning on gathering a bigger data set as fast as possible.

He just had to keep kicking.

And kicking, he would.

At higher ranks, getting a match could take time, but it was normal to do several a day in low ranks. After signing up for a match, Jake took a seat as he saw it would take forty minutes before it began, as he was still a bit early for the eight-o-clock opening time.

Owen had run off to the training area to discuss with some of the other fighters while gathering information on them. Something Jake didn't see a big need for. Apparently, there were other training areas for higher-ranked combatants, and everyone in this training area was all below Fighter rank.

Sitting there on his lonesome, Jake tried to meditate a bit, but it proved short-lived as he saw someone approaching. Someone familiar.

Opening his eyes, he saw an elven woman who now wore a slightly less extravagant robe. She carried a fan that she used to cover half of her face as she walked over, her appearance making her look very out of place. Jake hoped for a moment she wasn't going toward him, but considering there wasn't anyone else on the bench he was sitting on, that didn't seem likely.

Preparing himself mentally, he looked her way. She hurried the last few steps and stopped right in front of him, the fan open and only revealing her eyes and the top of her head. To his eyes, anyway. Sphere still saw the nervous-as-hell face she tried to hide.

"Good morning, my fellow combatant. It is surely a fortunate happenstance that we would meet once more," she said in a weird-ass tone.

"I am sitting in a waiting area at the gates not far from the Battlemaster... it would be weird not to see me," Jake smirked. "But, sure, we can call it fortunate and random."

Hey, if he was going to have to wait for a match to start and she wanted to talk to him, she had to be ready for him to mess with her a bit, right?

"I... perhaps, I may have sought you out intentionally," she said, hiding more of her face with the fan. "I saw your other fights yesterday after you bested me. It was truly impressive, and your martial skills are outstanding."

"Thanks?" Jake said, not sure what she was getting at. "You are kind of getting me curious... why did you approach me?"

"Where are my manners. Before we get to that, introductions are in order. I am Pollaystrasirial Langtdumtnavn, a master sorcerer in the making," she said, doing an exaggerated bow like one of those nobles in old TV dramas. "I was hoping to perhaps build proper rapport and potentially foster a healthy long-term relationship with my fellow combatant. Your talents shown already make it clear you will go far, and I am certain I can prove myself most useful."

Jake thought for a second. "What are you peddling, eh Pollaystaia- you know what, I am just going to call you Polly."

"It is Pollaystra-"

“Polly.”

Her eye twitched slightly. “Sir, I believe keeping proper conduct is-“

“Eh, it’ll be fine, Polly,” Jake waved her off. “Name’s Jake, by the way.”

“Sir Jake, I-“

“Just Jake. Jeez, are you even the same person I nearly kicked yesterday?” Jake questioned.

“My actions yesterday were thoroughly unbecoming, and I deeply apologize,” she said, really looking like she was trying to save the situation. A situation Jake had no idea why was even happening, as he had yet to figure out what the hell she wanted outside of just making friends.

“All is forgiven and forgotten. Now, Polly, what did you want?”

“Sir, please, it is not Polly. It is-“

“We are talking in circles now, Polly,” Jake cut her off, adding in a teasing tone. “Now talking in circles, that’s unbecoming.”

"You..." she sneered slightly, trying to gather herself fast. "Very well. I come offering information and partnership. I realize that I may need more studying to truly excel at magic before I rejoin the arena, but I have researched the Colosseum for a long time and believe I could be of use."

Jake motioned for her to continue, still not sure if he needed someone to give him information. At least not the information he reckoned she could get or knew of.

"I..." she said, looking down at Jake sitting on the bench, as something finally seemed to snap. "I've had enough of you! Agh! Why are you like this? Have you never heard of proper etiquette? To remain sitting down when talking to a noblewoman? To make up a name – nay – daring to use her first name without proper respect! Let's not mention how you just left me crying yesterday, not even offering a lady your hand! Moreover, you... you..."

Her words petered out as she looked horrified at what she had just done, but before she could say anything, Jake cut her off.

"See, I already like this version of you much better," Jake smiled, partly to calm her down and partly because that was how he genuinely felt. Overly-uptight people sucked.

"I... really?" she asked in a far more normal tone.

"Yep," Jake nodded. "Also, I am impressed you only talked about how you were a noblewoman and not about this glorious wizard teacher of yours like yesterday."

"Hmph, he is more than just a simple wizard! I have been taught magic by a true expert wizard who once also competed in the arena and nearly managed to reach the rank of Champion!" she said proudly.

“Define nearly,” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Well... I can’t be sure how close he got, but definitely really close!” Polly insisted, looking a little flustered.

“Sure, sure,” Jake nodded with a smirk. “Now, you say you got good information? Let’s start with an easy one. What are the different combatant ranks, and how many are there?”

Jake wanted to know how many people he needed to kick before he would be the Champion.

She looked at him for a moment, clearly confused, as a look of realization flashed across her face. “Aha! A trick question! You won’t get me that easily. Everyone knows that only the information up to the Gladiator rank is publicly available until you reach the rank yourself.”

Jake nodded as if he totally knew that already, silently cursing at Owen for not sharing something that was obviously considered common knowledge. Why did he have to talk about herding cows for half an hour during breakfast instead of giving actually useful information?

“And what are the ranks between New Blood and Gladiator?”

Once more, she looked a bit confused until she smiled. “Surely, you jest? It is right in the pamphlet placed at every entrance.”



"I... of course, I was just pulling your leg," Jake jokingly said as he waved her off. Hurridly, he took out the unread and crumbled-up pamphlet that had been in his pants since yesterday. Quickly uncrumbling it, he opened it and saw that on the first page, it showed the different combatant rankings from now till Gladiator.

New Blood

Initiate Fighter

Fledgling Fighter

Upcoming Fighter

Fighter

Experienced Fighter

Journeyman Fighter

Veteran Fighter

Expert Fighter

Gladiator

So, ten ranks from New Blood to Gladiator... wondering how many there are in total?

"Do you... do you have any real questions?" the elven noblewoman he had decided was now called Polly asked.

"No, not really," Jake said honestly. "That was why I messed with you. I am good for now, but who is to say I won't have any questions in the future? How about you go meet up with Owen? That will make things easier if I can contact you through him and vice-versa. Ah, Owen is--"

"I am aware who he is," Polly nodded as she prepared to head off. "I won't delay your preparations any longer. And... good luck with your matches."

"Thanks," Jake said with a wave as she left.

Doubt I'll need it.

Spoiler warning: Jake didn't need it.

In fact, he didn't need any luck for the rest of the entire second day.

His first fight was against a guy with a longsword that he, quite frankly, wasn't built to wield. The guy could do some nasty swings, but dodging them was way too easy. Jake could see how someone could get caught out, though, so the guy becoming Intiate Fighter made sense. Still lost after a good kick to the liver, making him surrender as he could no longer hold his sword.

The second match was versus a water mage. This guy came prepared and carried with him a large jug of water that he threw right at the beginning of the fight. He then began to manipulate the water to try and hit Jake, at which point Jake sprinted forward and kicked him in the jaw, finishing the fight before his clothes got wet.

Having wet clothes for the rest of the day would have sucked.

The third was a standard match versus a guy with a sword. Took two kicks, that one.

During the fourth match, Jake finally met someone decent. An archer. At least Jake thought he was decent, seeing as he had a quiver. But when Jake saw him properly, he spotted it. An utter abomination slung over his opponent's back, with arrows... no, not arrows, bolts, in his quiver.

That's right, the cretin had a crossbow. That deserved punishment.

Jake began the match by running forward, and to establish dominance, he didn't show any mercy. He kicked the fake archer three times for his transgressions toward the world of archery. Five kicks total if he counted the one where he "accidentally" stomped on the crossbow while exiting the fight and the first kick where he blocked the crossbow bolt mid-flight. That one was purely to show off and to rub it on how bad crossbows were. Because, guess what? The guy never even got a chance to reload his shitty weapon before Jake reached him and gave him some good kicks.

Anyway, the fifth match was also pretty normal and was against a woman using a pike and shield. She was the one who had done the most research on Jake, as far as he could tell. She made sure to get in a good defensive position, and her eyes were firmly focused on Jake's leg area. She also started the fight defensively, having seen that Jake primarily fought opponents by dodging a strike and then counter-kicking.

A good strategy that sadly proved ineffective. Jake had learned how to attack quite well through his practice with Sim-Jake, and through a clever feint, made the woman stab her pike into the ground, wherefrom Jake proceeded to stomp on the wooden shaft to break its head off, with a second kick to her stomach sending her tumbling back.

Before Jake could even follow up, she announced her surrender, and Jake was off to his second promotion match in two days.

These five fights had taken Jake the entire morning, and it was now around two in the afternoon. Going to the Battlemaster, Jake wanted to do the next fight right away but was told that they should schedule it for later that day as promotion matches "pulled bigger crowds."

Jake wanted to complain as the Battlemaster added something that made him realize it was moot.

“Why the rush, Initiate Fighter? Even if you become a Fledgling Fighter today, you won’t have more matches before tomorrow. Those are the rules: you can’t fight any fights after a promotion match on the same day,” the Battlemaster explained.

So that was a bit of a bummer and ruined Jake’s plan of getting up two ranks in one day. Being forced to wait, Jake did some actual training and stretches to fully get used to his body. It wasn’t overly needed, but he had to pass his time somehow.

After quite a few hours, Jake did get his rank-up of the day in a promotion match against his first heavily-armored foe. He faced a large burly man wearing full plate armor, wielding a flail. The guy definitely looked menacing coming out the gate, spinning the spiked balls on the flail around.

He looked a lot less menacing on the ground after Jake kicked the back of his knee, making him fall over. With the heavy plate armor and a dislocated knee, he couldn’t stand up again either, the match ending in a quick surrender with Jake walking out, successfully promoted after only one kick.

One day, one promotion... should be Gladiator in a bit over a week, then, right?

At least, that was the plan. However, there was one thing that was far more crucial to find out...

How high of a rank could he reach using only kicks?

Chapter 742: Nevermore: To Inspire Fear

To kick or not to kick. That is the question.

Well, alright, it wasn't really a question but just Jake's default way of handling any opponent he met in the arena. He knew full well that the situation couldn't continue forever, but for now, his stats just outmatched everyone else by quite a margin.

It quickly became apparent that most of his opponents didn't even have 10 in all stats, much less 16 in even their lowest, like Jake. This meant Jake thoroughly beat any and all opponents he met just by easily overpowering them. He was – metaphorically speaking - an adult professional fighter beating up a bunch of kids to quickly advance in ranks. If simply skipping ranks was possible, he would have gone for that, and on the third day, Jake even tried to ask the Battlemaster if it was possible to meet some higher-ranked opponent for a promotion match. To which the middle-aged man answered in a totally not judgemental tone:

“Oh, I am sure you would want that. Hey, do you think anyone else here wants the same? You're confident, so surely that is enough, right? What complaints could your opponent possibly have for getting matched with some low-rank opponent who doesn't even pull in a good audience? Surely, the fight itself would also go without a hitch, and with a victory, there would be so much glory in beating someone several ranks below yourself. And who would possibly feel humiliated if they lost to someone expected to be so much weaker than themselves? Yeah, definitely no one, so let me do you a favor here and now and change the centuries-old rules of the Colosseum just because you don't feel like advancing the usual way! Who needs proper rules and a ranking system anyway? So old-fashioned. Having everyone fight everyone would be so much more exci-“

Jake cut him off after that, having gotten the point. The Battlemaster was a bit short with him the rest of the day after that, but luckily he was back to normal the next morning. However, during his first match on the fourth day, he found himself in an odd situation.

Standing ready behind the lowering gate, Jake looked at his beastkin opponent. She was a woman who was nearly two meters tall and had metal claws strapped to her hands. She definitely looked menacing and ready to pounce.

“Combatants, enter the arena!”

The moment the gate lowered, he walked forward as his opponent charged, yelling loudly:

“Heard you’re good at kicking! Let’s see you kick my claws, you pathetic human!”

With an annoyed frown, Jake looked at her and decided to get the fight over with right away. He even felt a surge of killing intent due to her comment as he considered employing the secret technique known as the dropkick. His eyes met with hers... and then things got weird. Right as their eyes met, she came to an abrupt stop and jumped back with wide eyes, hair standing up on her back.

Jake stood confused as she stared at him for a moment. Her sneer was gone, and her form lowered as she slowly backed away, looking perplexed. Jake took a step forward, making her jump back as she yelled loudly.

“I surrender!”

Wait, what?

More confused than before, he wanted to ask the beastkin what the hell was going on... but before he even properly registered that the fight was over, she had run out of the arena faster than she had arrived. Jake had no idea what was going on initially... until he got an idea.

In the next fight, he tested his theory.

Jake considered something he hadn't really thought much of for a long time. Everyone had an instinct; he knew that. It was natural, and while the enlightened races tended to have weaker ones than beasts, it was still there, with beastkin often having instincts often comparable to or even surpassing some beasts. Why did this matter?

Back during the Tutorial, Jake had far less of a handle on his Bloodline than now. One way that lack of control materialized was his presence always leaking slightly. He learned to hide it pretty quickly, though, as it was a dead giveaway that he had a Bloodline due to its peculiar effects. This leakage of presence back then didn't really have any major impact under normal circumstances, as it was pretty normal to leak a bit of aura in the lower grades, but for Jake, it had quite the implications outside of being a neon sign advertising his Bloodline.

He vividly remembered several beasts avoiding him during the Tutorial. Raptors began to steer clear of him when they felt his aura and ran on sight. Even after coming back from the Tutorial, when he claimed the Pylon of Civilization, it shrouded the entire area in part of his presence, marking Haven as his territory.

Zoning out presences was something one tended to naturally learn just by being in the, well, presence of other living beings. After reaching higher grades, Jake couldn't use his presence to directly pressure anyone around his own level of power without using Pride of the Malefic Viper, even if he had a powerful Bloodline. Not because it was less powerful than before but because people had learned to resist it. The only way he could have turned his Bloodline-empowered presence into an actual attack would have been to actively infuse it with energy and do something akin to Pride. The problem with that was how ineffective it was, and even if the quality was high due to his Bloodline, he wouldn't be able to do anything to people he wanted to fight.

Could he scare a bunch of E and even D-grades shitless with his presence? Sure, but that wouldn't be worth anything. No, the only normal application of unleashing your presence was to intimidate people and flex your power. Semi-uniquely for Jake, he could also use it to train others to resist presences faster, but he had found that just being around him seemed to do the job, though it was far slower than



active resistance training. This was, as mentioned, only semi-unique to Jake, as others could also help you train to resist presences, but Jake was the only one who could give that really qualitative training.

However, even if his presence was useless as a C-grade, there were at least three key differences between the real world and the arena. Firstly, they were all level 0, as far as he could tell. They didn't have any exposure to powerful presences and thus had no resistance. Partly related to this was the second reason: everyone's souls were weak. The third difference was Jake himself, who had realized something.

While he could use Pride as a presence attack, there were other ways to use the uniquely powerful response others had to his Bloodline. The instinctual response it instilled in anyone who wanted to fight him. He still believed a powerful foe could zone it out... but these low-ranking opponents? No shot.

Continuing his little experiment, Jake made a human guy piss himself in his next match as he unleashed his full presence and murderous intent. He even infused mana into it right as the match began, scaring the poor guy shitless. The experiment was a big success, but he also knew it had only worked because the guy was so much weaker.

In the third fight of the day, Jake didn't go as hard but focused on only one aspect of his presence: Suppression. No, calling it suppressing was wrong. It wasn't quite the concept of suppression but something else. Something far more simple and primal...

Fear.

The fear of a predator. The fear any human would experience when confronted with a bear or a lion before the system. It was the kind of fear that solicited a response from his foe. One that triggered fight or flight instantly.

During this third match, he saw that happen. He faced an elven woman with a rapier. She began with refined footsteps, and when fear gripped her, she didn't retreat. No, she chose to fight. However, she was unable to keep calm and lost her cool as her instincts took over, making her decide to charge while yelling, earning her a kick to the temple, knocking her out in a single blow.

For the fourth fight, Jake once more tried to experiment as he wanted to work on something else. Because he did have one other skill that he felt was at least tangentially related to the concept that inspired this fear:

Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

The skill allowed him to use soul attacks by looking directly at his opponent's souls. More accurately, he directly attacked their Soulshapes through an ocular connection, which was also why he needed visual contact. How exactly this concept worked, he wasn't sure, especially not considering it completely ignored distance... but hey, something to look into.

One very interesting aspect of Gaze was also how it scaled. Its effects in E and C-grade were effectively identical, and in both grades, it barely took any energy. In fact, it took a proportionally minuscule level of energy no matter what grade he was in. Instead, the true cost of the skill was the mental drain from attacking another soul.

Jake currently didn't really consciously infuse anything related to his Bloodline when using Gaze... but who is to say he couldn't? Based on the description, he should be able to.

"A hunter who has seen his gaze reflected in the eyes of the Apex Predator and now stares back with equal zeal."

Gaze of the Apex Hunter had come from the fusion of Hunter's Sight and Gaze of the Apex Predator. Jake earlier considered how he infused instinctive fear into his opponents... much akin to an Apex Predator. Which was exactly how the skill worked before the upgrade:

"A single glance, a fallen prey. The Apex Predator has grown to where their foes cower in fear as it lays its eyes upon them."

With all this in mind, why couldn't Jake do his own skill-less version of Gaze? One that was probably far weaker but had some of the same concepts, at least. This was also one of the purposes of the Challenge Dungeon based on Jake's estimations; to allow the ones doing it to truly reflect upon their paths and skills. Gaze was a prime candidate for some kind of improvements, too, especially when one considered how core it was to his Path by now.

So that is why he spent the next many matches experimenting with trying to incite instinctual fear in his opponents. Many fights still ended with him kicking his foe either because he failed or because the person resisted the fear effect. Sometimes it also just made them mad. Which did make it clear that even if he did succeed, it wouldn't be the kind of ability that would work on everyone. At least not fully.

The day passed as Jake continued his six matches a day – five regular fights and one promotion match.

Like this, a good week went by. Jake had reached Journeyman Fighter by now and had spent some time checking out other areas of the Colosseum with all the downtime he had. After becoming a Fighter, he had even gained access to a bigger training area, but he had no interest in that.

On this fateful day, he had already won five matches and was just waiting for his promotion match. Jake was beginning to feel the pressure by now. In the last two matches, he had to use dozens of kicks to achieve victory, and he even ended up getting his clothes scratched a few times as he cut things too close.

And... he had a feeling this promotion match would be the end of his kicking-only spree. At this point, he continued just out of pure vanity, with the only changes to his fighting style being his experiments with inciting instinctual fear in his opponents.

While waiting, he quickly checked his status.

Current objective: Be promoted from Journeyman Fighter to Veteran Fighter

Current rank: Journeyman Fighter (5/5)

Colosseum Points: 765

Lives remaining: 10

His points had grown quite a lot. As for why they were what they were...

Well, math time:

The way Colosseum Points were rewarded wasn't just doubling every time he got promoted, but the growth was quadratical. As a New Blood, he had gained 2 points for every victory and 10 for his promotion. That did double to 4 per victory as an Initiate, with the promotion offering 20, for a total of 40 – a doubling of points.

However, the theory of doubling died when he became a Fledgling Fighter, where every victory now gave 7 points, with the promotion match giving 35. Upcoming Fighter rank then rewarded 11 points per victory and 55 for the promotion match. With that data, Jake understood the formula.

Every time Jake ranked up, the points per victory would increase by 1 more than the prior increase. That was confirmed when he finally became a Fighter, and every victory gave 16 points – up 5 from before, with the prior increase going up by 4.

Promotion matches would always reward the same as all of the five victories combined, meaning they were clearly the most important to complete. Of course, the most important thing overall was still getting promoted fast for some of that quadratical growth to really kick in.

As an example, winning a single match as a Gladiator would give 56 points, and winning all matches and getting promoted would give 560. Of course, that was all with the assumption that his math continued to be accurate and that the rules of the Colosseum didn't change... something he could totally see happen. It was also entirely possible the number of matches you need to get promoted changed, at which point-

Jake was thrown out of his thought process as someone spoke to him.

“Hey, you’re up now,” Owen said, having just walked over after ditching Polly somewhere. The guy, despite seeming pretty damn weak, had managed to reach Upcoming Fighter himself and was honestly doing pretty well.

“Oh shoot, you’re right,” Jake said, standing up and stretching his legs a bit. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“Good luck!” the guy smiled. “May your kicks be swift and strike true.”

“Sure, sure,” Jake shook his head as he walked toward the tunnel leading into the arena. Walking in, he was both looking forward to and dreading what was about to come... and not because of the upcoming fight. No, it was because of what would happen just before the fight...

Approaching the gate, he heard it. The dreadful voice that had recently begun to haunt his dreams.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and anything in between! Today, we have a truly exciting match on our hands! A battle between an old legend and a rising star. At one end of the arena, we have a true warrior of carnage – a veteran from the battlefield. A man with the power to cleave a bull in two! An arm so strong it takes three warriors to match him. Today, he is here to once more cleave his way to victory. That’s right, it’s the Cleaver!”

Jake heard the crowd go wild at the announcer introducing the fighters making him sigh. Things were a lot different now than when he started. Thousands lined the stands, all yelling in excitement as the same damn commentator from Jake’s first match spoke.

“On the other, someone trying to do the impossible. He has had a truly meteoric rise in the ranking, getting promoted every day since he registered! However, is today the end of his streak!? Is he a meteor

that sours till it becomes a fallen star, or... will he ascend to the heavens!? Perhaps he'll even be able to kick the existing stars out of the sky! Because if there is one thing this man can do, it is kick! You all know who I'm talking about... the man with a leg of steel and a kick spelling the doom of his foes. Welcome, the one, the only, Doomfoot!"

Jake fucking hated that name.

Chapter 743: Nevermore: Windows To the Soul

To feel old again.

It was an odd sensation that the Sword Saint would frankly have preferred to do without. When the system came, he had been reinvigorated, and as time progressed, he only ever felt himself grow stronger. Outside of the backlash from his Transcendence, that is, but those circumstances were far different. Now, to regress like this... he did not like the feeling at all. It reminded him too much of before the system.

He remembered the very first time he had difficulty standing up from a chair by himself. When his grandson had to support him as he walked up some stairs. When he was convinced to finally use a cane. He remembered feeling tired more. Feeling weak. Becoming unable to lift or really do anything. Becoming unable to lift his practice sword...

To feel one's body deteriorate was truly a harrowing thing.

Now, he had flashbacks to those days. Fortunately, it was not as bad. The Sword Saint's old body did feel weaker after entering the Challenge Dungeon, but his stats were still far from ordinary. He was still healthy and still powerful, especially with the percentage increases. This had resulted in his old willow body possessing more power than even the big and brawny men in the training area.

It was also for this reason that the Sword Saint had asked for a wooden sword when he went to speak to the Quartermaster for the first time. A true blade would only serve to slay opponents too weak to truly put up a fight, while a wooden sword would allow him to quickly progress while still not killing his fellow combatants needlessly.

As the Sword Saint had just returned from his promotion match to Veteran Fighter that day, he considered for a moment how Jake was handling these early fights. This only made him chuckle, earning a few glances from his fellow patrons in the restaurant. The thought of Jake doing these battles was simply too entertaining. If the Sword Saint had learned anything from spending several decades with Jake, it was that his solution was probably less than ideal and even a bit stupid by most people's standards. Who knows, maybe he had even decided to do something weird, like seeing how many fights he could win unarmed?

Or worse yet, impose some other silly rule on himself, like using a kitchen utensil or only allowing himself to use punches or kicks.

"Now, lower the gates! Combatants, enter the arena!"

Jake walked up and into the arena, as instructed, his foe at the other end of their would-be battlefield, also waiting behind the still-lowering second gate. He was a man who did live up to his reputation as the Cleaver, at least visually.

He stood around two meters tall, with large bulking muscles showing on his uncovering arms. The only defensive equipment he had was a breastplate, helmet, and gloves, so his most vital areas were at least covered. In his hands, he wielded the weapon that had given him his signature name: a large cleaver with a long wooden handle and an edge more than a meter long. It was more of a large machete rather than a cleaver, but Jake wasn't going to correct him.



Behind the visor of his helmet, Jake met his opponent's eyes right as the gates fully lowered. He tried to incite a bit of fear through their eye contact but found the other man able to resist as Jake instead felt a wave of bloodlust returned his way.

It appeared the story of him having originally achieved his strength on a battlefield wasn't all for show. The experience only made him smile and look forward to the fight more.

Jake considered his approach. In the many prior matches, he had put down his bow at the entrance area to not risk it breaking or getting in the way, and this time he decided to do that too. He wasn't sure if kicking would get the job done today, but he wanted to at least give it a shot.

Besides, he still had his knife if things went wrong.

Walking forward, his opponent also entered the arena with steady and careful steps. They slowly approached each other as Jake considered how he wanted to handle the big guy. The Cleaver, in turn, observed Jake closely, clearly not wanting to make the first move. He had likely seen what happened to everyone else who took the first swing and knew that Jake was quite good at counter-kicking.

Very well, Jake thought as he got within five or so meters. Lowering his stance, he pounced forward with impressive speed. He quickly feinted a kick toward the Cleaver's leg but didn't get the expected response as his opponent stepped backward, making some distance. The big cleaver was still held in both hands, ready to come down at any point, making it quite hard for Jake to fully commit.

Jake tried a few more times to find an opening, and he finally found one. The Cleaver had been surprised by a double-feint, allowing Jake to land a low kick, making the far larger man stumble slightly. Trying to follow up, Jake dodged a shoulder check as he tried to land another low kick, only for the Cleaver to spin and try to backhand Jake in the face.

Committing to his attack, Jake landed the kick right as a fist hit his blocking arm. A tinge of pain shot through his arm as the impact took Jake by surprise, pushing him back and leaving a trail in the sand.

Strength... above 10.

Yep, he was definitely above 10. Jake wasn't sure if his assessment was right, but he was pretty sure this was his first time facing another real superhuman. Well, outside of all the magic going around, that is.

However, even if the Cleaver was strong, Jake still estimated he outmatched him even in the pure Strength department. The big man already looked unstable on the leg Jake had kicked twice, and moving about would be quite difficult.

Jake used this opportunity to go on the offensive immediately. He stormed in and continued to try and land kicks, the big man finally unleashing his true weapon in response. With a fright, Jake leaped out of the way as the massive cleaver was swung, cutting through the air. The power was impressive, and Jake knew he would be fucked if that ever hit him... but it wasn't going to hit him. In fact, attacking had left the Cleaver even more open, making Jake land a solid kick to his opponent's side, making him stumble.

This happened a few more times as Jake slowly gained ground, landing over a dozen kicks, small and big. He himself managed to only get his shirt slightly ripped as the man tried to grab him with his metal-gloved fists. His opponent also knew he was getting pushed and that Jake had the advantage, so he tried to make a risky move and land a finishing blow.

It didn't pan out.

Twisting his body out of the way, Jake dodged the cleaver and jumped past the man. Upon landing on his hands, he used them for extra leverage on the sand as he kicked the handle of the cleaver with the heel of his foot, doing a frontal somersault kick. The Cleaver was taken by surprise and lost grip of his weapon as Jake pushed himself off the sand and landed upright, already ready to execute his follow-up.

The Cleaver nearly fell to the ground from the uppercut kick but quickly gathered himself as he went to retrieve his weapon that had fallen a good distance away. However, with his bad leg slowing him down, he wasn't going to get the opportunity to.

Jake ran toward the Cleaver as he prepared to unleash an attack only spoken of in legends. The man barely had time to turn toward Jake as it arrived.

Jumping, he kicked with both legs as he landed a perfectly executed dropkick on the Cleaver's chest. The power of the impact dented the metal as the far larger man was lifted off the ground and flew back several meters before he hit the arena floor hard and rolled a few times before hitting a wall, kicking up sand the entire way.

Jake himself landed on the soft sand as he watched the glorious outcome of deploying an otherwise forbidden technique. One too powerful for mortal men to endure.

The downed Cleaver tried to stand, but Jake could hear his labored breathing from below the helmet and saw blood dripping from the edges of his breastplate where some of the metal had penetrated into his chest. Jake began walking over as he shook his head.

"Good fight," Jake said, knowing it was over.

The man scoffed as he spat out blood before scoffing. "On the battlefield... there is only victory... or death. Give me a warrior's end."

"Lucky for you, we aren't on the battlefield," Jake said. He felt for the guy. It had to suck getting your ass kicked – quite literally - but he did feel like the guy was being a bit melodramatic. Jake had yet to kill anyone in the arena and didn't really see a reason to start now.

The man just stared defiantly up at him. "Kill me... or no one wins."

A slight change in his tone tipped Jake off... this guy was fucking gambling on Jake not wanting to kill him, and the timer instead running out, resulting in no winner. Every single match had a limited duration, and if no winner was decided during that time, it would be considered a draw. With no referee, Jake had to either knock the guy out, kill him, or make him surrender... and knocking someone out with decent Willpower wasn't easy.

Fucking asshole.

He had probably noticed how Jake hadn't killed anyone or even inflicted mortal injuries on any of his opponents, likely making the guy assume Jake wasn't interested in killing anyone. This was a mostly accurate assessment, as Jake didn't really see any need to slay weaklings, but perhaps today, he should make an exception.

Jake squatted down as he stared the man directly in the eyes. Their gazes met as Jake felt legitimately angry. "You're sure you really want me to kill you?"

His gaze lingered as he felt like he stared into the soul of his opponent, seeing himself reflected in the man's pupils. At that moment, Jake felt like he saw something... and he pounced on it. A form of connection was formed as Jake felt an utterly insignificant pressure fall on him as he himself also lashed out, the man having it far worse.

Instinctive fear gripped the Cleaver as he lunged back in fright, a shudder going through his body.

"You...m... monster..." the man said, with wide eyes as he shivered. Jake didn't look away for a single moment as his smile grew. Partly because he had just had a breakthrough and partly because of the odd sense of pure ecstasy he felt at that very moment from making the guy realize how much of an idiot he was.

"Exactly," Jake grinned as he leaned in. "And there is no shame in losing to a monster, now is there?"

The man tried to shove Jake away as he yelled loudly. "I give up! Surrender! Get him the hell away from me!"

Jake's smile faded slightly as he stood up. "Good choice."

Walking out of the arena, he heard the clamors of the commentator behind him, deciding not to block him out... for now.

"And we have a winner! The Doomfoot once more proved himself superior, with our dear Cleaver falling, fearful of his opponent's might! Today, a new Veteran Fighter has been born, and the same question lingers on everyone's lips... how far can the legs of Doomfeet carry him!?"

Jake hurried out of the arena and slipped by Owen and Polly with a quick explanation that he had something to work on as he made his way back to town. He wasn't lying, either. Jake finally felt like he had a breakthrough with his skill-less Gaze or potential presence attack, or whatever he wanted to call it.

Once back, Jake went into the apartment housing he had been provided after becoming a Fighter. He went straight for his bed as thoughts were still running through his mind... he wanted to test more, but it would have to wait. For now, he wanted to at least mentally address his epiphany, if that was the right thing to call it.

Jake finally felt like he was truly onto something. Not just with making a type of soul attack that could work for the current him, but something that would even prove useful once he was outside and back to C-grade.

It was a common saying even before the system that the eyes were the windows into the soul. Nobody back then was aware of exactly how true that was. The eyes were indeed an opening into the soul, and there were many theories as to why this was a thing. Maybe it was because the eyes were one of the primary senses of all who had them and that the senses were related to the first layer of the soul, so making eye contact was like connecting two souls... or maybe it was just how the system decided things worked. In either case, it was the truth that the eyes were windows into the soul.

That was also why many forms of soul magic required – or at least were heavily helped by – eye contact. Some species of vampires were infamous for their mental magic and hypnotic skills, with many of those skills requiring the vampire to look into the eyes of his or her target. While Jake didn't have any skills like this, Gaze came close, as it did rely on the fact that using soul attacks with your eyes tended to be far more effective.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter was a powerful but simplistic soul attack. Jake theorized it used the delivery method it did for pure efficiency and to properly package the attack. Regular presence attacks were simply too weak against equal opponents unless you were significantly stronger than your opponent. The difference between using Gaze and trying to deliver the same paralysis effect through his regular presence was the difference between trying to stop someone from moving by either crushing them with a huge metal block or pricking them with a small needle that paralyzed them – with Gaze naturally being the needle. Sure, the impact was far smaller than crushing someone with his presence as the “package” delivering through his Gaze could hold far less power, and the only reason Gaze even worked was due to the high quality of the skill. But... what if he found a way to not only increase the size of his package but increase its quality?

The system had rules about equivalent exchange. Or, at the very least, it had rules about how the cost was usually at least related to the impact of whatever one did. This cost usually came in the form of resources like mana or stamina, but there were other ways to pay for a skill. Curse energy and mental energy were two Jake often used, with many more forms out there. But there were also other things you could exchange to not spend your own energy. Jake wasn't thinking about sacrifices, catalysts, or anything like that, but something he often used already to pay for more power:

Himself.

Or, more accurately, he increased power by suffering a backlash of some kind. His current way of doing it was very crude and mostly came to be from him having to endure too much energy, but when he looked into the eyes of the Cleaver, Jake got an idea.

When fighting, it was normal to exchange blows and sometimes even take a hit to land one yourself. Why couldn't he do this, but with a soul attack? To attack the soul of his enemy without any self-regard, willingly suffering the backlash from his opponent in return?

That's right, Jake's idea was to effectively force a confrontation of presences and souls. To, metaphorically speaking, gaze into his enemy's soul to paralyze them and welcome them to gaze back to

retaliate as they would engage in a staring competition that Jake was more than confident in winning every time.

Would this work? Maybe. Maybe not. But Jake was sure as hell excited to find out, and he had a whole bunch of unwilling test subjects, also known as Veteran Fighters, to test it out the very next day. Who knows... if it worked, maybe he wouldn't have to stop kicking quite yet.

Chapter 744: Nevermore: Fear Gaze

On the next day, Jake woke up a bit excited to get testing. It was still too early to head to the arena, though, so it was breakfast time first. After getting ready, he checked his menu quickly while getting out the door, seeing his objective for the day.

Current objective: Be promoted from Veteran Fighter to Expert Fighter

Current rank: Veteran Fighter (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 910

Lives remaining: 10

His Colosseum Points were slowly growing, and Jake had to admit he was curious about exactly what they were for. Well, it was obvious that they factored in when calculating how many Nevermore Points he would get from the Challenge Dungeon, but he also knew it wasn't that simple. Case-in-point? The points had other uses than simply being hoarded for some final reward.



Something he was confronted with that morning at breakfast with Owen and Polly. Yeah, Polly had decided to constantly stick around after their first encounter, and while she did offer help with a few different things, Jake had yet to take her up on the offer. That didn't stop her, though.

As for what else one could spend Colosseum Points?

"Jake... have you considered spending points and getting some boots or something? Maybe you can get some specially made. You should at least wear some leather greaves to avoid major injuries if your opponent manages to hit you... healing such a wound would take days, and no one wants that," Owen said with genuine worry.

That's right, you could buy things using Colosseum points. More accurately, you could buy armor and weapons. As for why one would need that when the Colosseum provided those for free? Well, because not all items were created equal, and the good stuff you had to cough up for.

Magic items.

That is what everyone called them. In reality, it was just items with mana infused into them. Proper, real items. While Jake had none of these, Owen bought one the moment he reached Fighter rank, spending 250 Colosseum Points. And what he got wasn't even that good.

[Spear of Swiftess (Uncommon)] – A spear with a flexible metal shaft and sharp tip enchanted with the power of swiftess. This enchantment makes the spear far lighter than usual and allows the weapon to move faster without losing striking power.

Requirements: Soulbound. Fighter Colosseum Rank.

Sure, it was a lot better than the basic spear, but not by such a massive margin that Jake felt it justified costing nearly the entire combined winnings of both the Upcoming Fighter and Fighter rank. Then again, Jake was kind of special... and he could recognize that good equipment could be the difference-maker.

The weapon of the Cleaver had likely been at least rare rarity and was a big part of his claim to fame. The breastplate potentially also increased Strength. Jake didn't really have any ways to check, considering all the items were Soulbound upon purchase, meaning looting was not a thing. The only reason he even knew what Owen's weapon did was that he so openly shared any and all details related to it without even getting prompted.

Speaking of Owen talking a lot unprompted, the question of getting some greaves was indeed one Jake had considered, however...

"Nah, I'm good for now," Jake smiled. "I will maybe get some equipment later, but no need quite yet."

"Are you sure? Things could get dicey if you keep fighting so risky. That is why a spear is great, you know? I win most of my fights without even taking any injuries, as I can keep a distance. I know that you only took that bow for show, but have you considered learning how to use it? You are already incredibly strong unarmed, so if you learned to use a weapon, you could go really damn far," Owen tried to convince him.

"I will pick up arms when I deem the time is right," Jake said in a solemn tone. Owen did have a point that he should get better at archery, but he did think he was at least decent already. As for melee weapons... well, there wasn't a single fight so far he couldn't have ended within five seconds if he used his knife, though that did risk also killing his opponents.

“How about magic?” Polly asked. “I do sense some potential from you, and if you show promise, I could maybe even ask my teacher to come and show you some things. But you have to prove you can actually do magic first! Have you ever considered trying to explore the magical arts?”

“I will pick up magic when I deem the time is right,” Jake repeated his answer, throwing a cheeky smile at the two of them. He had already done a bit of testing with his mana, and... well, he could have ended every fight within four seconds if he had used mana. While, again, probably killing every single opponent. Destructive arcane mana went hard.

“You know what? I am sure Jake got it handled,” Owen said in a comforting tone. “If not, then I am sure he will at least stay alive and recover. There is always time to pick up and learn other ways to fight if he truly wants to. Jake is already strong, and clearly, he is experienced at fighting, so we should trust his judgment. I am sure he will only grow stronger as he progresses, no matter what he chooses to do.”

The young man’s assessment was pretty cool-headed. He had seen a lot of Jake’s fights, too, so that had likely left an impression. Even then, Jake could not help but tease the guy.

“How about you, Owen? Have you considered trying to learn the magical arts?” Jake asked in a searching tone.

“No, I want to stick to the spear,” he said dismissively, Polly deflating a bit.

“Your choice, but it is a bit of a shame,” Jake said as he leaned in and continued in a whisper. “I get the feeling you would find magic... electrifying.”

Owen yanked away from Jake before staring at him for a few moments. “Do you... you know... know?”

“What can I say? I am quite perceptive,” Jake teased as he also leaned back. “But don’t worry, you keep doing you, and I keep doing me, alright? Who knows, maybe this is even something we have in common.”

Owen looked at him as he realized what Jake meant and smiled. “Maybe.”

“What are you two talking about?” Polly asked, confused. “Come on, fill me in.”

“Nope, classified information,” Jake shook his head.

“That’s unfair, you shou-“

“Oh, would you look at that? I am done with my food and the Colosseum beckons!”

Jake quickly stood up and, before she could say anything more, hurried out of the cantina as he made his way toward the Colosseum, leaving poor Owen to deal with an annoyed Polly.

As for what Jake and Owen were actually talking about... well, Owen was doing a bit of a Jake. While it was true he wasn’t an expert with a spear, he hadn’t quite shared anything related to his other talents. Talents that included quite the lightning affinity and what Jake estimated to be potent lightning magic.

For some reason, he kept it hidden and only used a spear to fight, but he couldn't hide it from Jake. Jake had only gone to watch two of Owen's matches as he had some downtime anyway, and during the first one, he felt it. A faint shiver in the air around his skin and an almost magnetic pull around him as he pushed himself. It was clear that the young guy was actively suppressing his own magic, and while Jake was curious, it would be a bit hypocritical for the Doomfoot – again, fuck that name - to call someone out for messing around in the lower ranks.

Anyway, after an excellent breakfast, Jake soon arrived at the arena and instantly went and signed up for another fight with the Battlemaster - a man who was a lot less of a dick than when Jake had just started entered the Colosseum.

"Already a Veteran Fighter, huh? If you keep this up, you may even join the upper echelons as a true Gladiator. But you still got a ways to go, so don't slack off now," he said encouragingly.

Alright, he wasn't exactly overly polite, but he at least treated Jake as someone worth talking to now.

Nearly an hour later, it was finally his time to fight, and with excitement, he walked through the tunnel leading into the actual arena. The crowd had grown once more, and the announcer was as annoying as always, but Jake wasn't there for either of those. He was there to instill primal fear in the poor guy standing at the other end of the arena.

Jake's first opponent as a Veteran Warrior was an elven warrior wielding two thin curved swords. He didn't wear any armor at all but only wore some light pants. Instead of armor, his upper body was entirely covered in what looked like tribal tattoos, and he did look quite fearsome, almost like he was some semi-feral forest elf.

The two of them stared at each other from across the battlefield... and as Jake prepared for battle, he felt it... no, he saw it. It was odd. When he looked at the elf with the intent to fight, it was like he could “see” weakness. He could see an opening of sorts. There wasn’t actually anything visually, just an odd feeling like there was something he could focus on that wasn’t necessarily there physically.

When the gates went down, both charged. Jake’s opponent did not have the caution of the Cleaver but instead had full confidence in his speed and superior offensive power due to his two long blades. Something he had a good reason for, as Jake instantly felt himself on the back foot.

Two slicing blades blocked off every path of attack, making it hard to dive in and land a proper kick. Not that Jake was in any major danger himself, as while his opponent was fast, Jake was faster, just waiting for his time to arrive. After about thirty seconds of Jake enduring a flurry of slicing swords from his silent opponent – a big upgrade from some of the other combatants he faced – he found his opening.

Opening his eyes wide, Jake stared at the weakness and grasped it. For a fraction of a second, his eyes glowed subtly, none but Jake himself noticing this strange occurrence... but it was proof of his success.

Jake’s gaze connected. He had initially thought eye contact was necessary to achieve a powerful effect, but the moment he unleashed the result of his epiphany, it became clear that it wasn’t needed in the slightest. The only requirement was that he could see his target. As for them seeing him... well, the moment he unleashed the attack, he could forcefully make them aware of him and “look” back at him instinctively.

Right when Jake felt the attack connect, the elf standing right in front of Jake froze, having just finished a swing. Simultaneously, two presences had clashed as one, with one coming out far superior, freezing the lesser of two beings in fear. Unlike the usual Gaze, the elf could still move a tiny bit, at least enough for his eyes to open wide and his face to contort.

Another thing that was contrary to the true Gaze of the Apex Hunter was that this wouldn't truly "attack" his foe's soul and damage it. He only targeted their Perception and instincts, not any of the inner parts of their souls. Jake innately felt that even if he was C-grade and looked at a level 0, the effect would also only be them freezing them. He was only instilling fear, after all. Not to say dying of fright wasn't possible, but if it did happen, Jake would write off all responsibility.

Not to worry about Gaze getting weaker and becoming unable to kill weaker foes. Once outside of the Challenge Dungeon, Jake was sure things would work out just fine, and he was fully aware that fully copying and improving all aspects of a high-tier Legendary skill like Gaze wasn't something he could simply do.

Back in the fight, the result was already a foregone conclusion the moment his Gaze had worked. Jake took advantage of the opening fully as he twisted his body and performed a high kick straight to the chin of his opponent. Teeth and blood flew out as the elf was lifted nearly three meters off the ground before falling down like a rag doll, landing with a thud.

After five seconds passed, it was clear he wasn't getting back up.

"And we have a winner! The Elven Twinblade Dancer looked to have the advantage, but no! No, all along, his opponent was waiting, analyzing his foe for the perfect chance to strike back. Waiting till he found his opening, and then he struck... no, unleashed his Ascending Doomkick upon his foe, ending his dance in a single move!"

Wait, was the fucker making up technique names for Jake now? Seriously, was he trying to force Jake to use other means than kicking to make him shut up? Perhaps it was some ploy by the Wyrmgod to make people show off all they had... or maybe it was Minaga who had somehow managed to get some influence. The voice wasn't Minaga's, and Jake was certain the god wasn't actively involved, as Jake knew the guy would be utterly incapable of not giving it away. Minaga was many things, but subtle was not one of them.

Anyway, Jake quickly left the arena before he could hear any more drivel from that damn announcer. A few employees of the Colosseum came in to take the elf away as Jake walked down the tunnel to the training area, finally getting out of earshot from the still-talking announcer.

After getting to the training area and signing up for his next battle, Jake found a nice quiet spot to sit and ponder till it was kicking time again.

Jake was very happy with the test result, and he didn't even feel any mental strain from using Jake's new version of Gaze. Well, another version of Gaze. The two would fuse once outside the dungeon... so for now, the "new" Gaze would be called Fear Gaze.

Fear Gaze had proven incredibly effective and had a slightly different way of freezing the target than the usual Gaze of the Apex Hunter. One that seemed ever-so-slightly less effective but lasted longer. Or maybe it just lasted longer because of who he fought. No real way to find out yet at the current place and time.

He did also feel that using Fear Gaze would be less effective the more he used it in short succession, but so was Gaze, so that wasn't really a big deal. Probably just something innate to the concept. Jake definitely wanted to test some more stuff fast, and luckily, it was soon time.

Sadly, that did also mean he had to listen to the announcer again only a bit over an hour after his first match. Fortunately, that also meant he had another opponent to test his newfound Gaze upon. Unfortunately for his opponent, she too soon felt an incredible sense of innate fear as Jake kicked the poor beastkin mage in the back of the head, knocking her out cold.

Seeing as he had knocked out two opponents in a row – something that Owen pointed out rarely happened above Fighter rank – Jake also began to suspect that his Gaze helped with that. Which



probably shouldn't be overly surprising. One had to rely on Willpower to not get knocked out even when the body took severe trauma, and if every shred of your Willpower was occupied with shivering in fear, there wasn't much to keep you conscious when someone kicked you in the head.

This seeming effect on Willpower mattered more than just knocking people out. A lot more. It was lucky that he had met a mage in his second testing match because that allowed him to learn something he hadn't even considered. When he had used Fear Gaze on the mage, the half-summoned stone bolt she was making crumbled and fell to the ground, as the fear did not only grip her body but even her soul.

One of the major weaknesses of Gaze of the Apex Hunter was that it only froze the body and didn't impede his opponent's abilities to react by controlling energy.

As for Fear Gaze?

With your Willpower suppressed... there was no controlling your magic.

It was truly a great discovery, and Jake could only look forward to continuing his kicking spree as he tried to find if there were more pleasant surprises from his Fear Gaze.

He was also confident now in achieving an utterly useless personal goal:

Completing the "Achieve Gladiator Rank Using Only Kicks" challenge.

Chapter 745: Nevermore: Gladiator

Jake believed he had reached his limit for his kicking-only challenge when he hit Veteran Warrior, but his newfound Fear Gaze allowed him to keep the streak going for at least a little bit longer. He had still been unsure if he could really go all the way to Gladiator, and after reaching the rank of Expert Warrior, he did meet quite a problematic opponent in his third match.

His foe was a large orc wearing armor covering his entire body. The difference between this guy and the other armor-wearing opponents Jake met was that his armor was of a lighter variant while still offering plenty of defense against kicking opponents. Moreover, it had one very problematic design decision...

It was covered in spikes.

Not just a few spikes. Spikes freaking everywhere. Jake didn't see a single opening where he could kick without seriously hurting his foot, and the orc clearly knew this as he went on the offensive, swinging his hatchet wildly while making sure to always keep his buckler ready. A buckler that was naturally also covered in spikes.

Jake found himself being pressured quite intensely as he didn't ever get the chance to respond. Even with Fear Gaze, he doubted he could end the fight instantly. Did he see a way to win? Well, yeah, there were a few dozen openings present at all times that would allow Jake to end the fight in a single move.

The problem was that none of these moves were kicks or required him to use magic, so they were off-limits.

After fighting for several minutes, Jake finally found an opening that was kick-viable. His opponent had gotten slower and realized he had to pace himself or get exhausted before the timer ran out, which gave Jake more time to think and figure out a way to take the big orc down.

Because there were a few places where he didn't have spikes, namely around his joints, on the inside of his thighs, the front of his helmet, and his boots. Jake took advantage of this. Without even using Fear Gaze, Jake dodged under his opponent's hatchet with perfect timing and performed an equally perfectly executed leg sweep. He had aimed for the ankle of the orc and hit right where he wanted.

The large orc was swept off his feet and fell on his side, making many of the spikes penetrate into the sand. Before the orc could even try to get up, Jake finally used Fear Gaze right as he stood up and prepared to deliver the finishing blow.

With the big guy frozen in fear, he couldn't protect his face when Jake delivered a kick straight into it. Hitting the non-spiked parts of the helmet did hurt Jake's foot quite a lot, but the orc had it far worse as his head lunged back, and Jake faintly heard something snap. That is when Jake realized he may have made a mistake.

Due to the embedded spikes, the orc had been stuck. Usually, when you hit something, the impact would be partly lessened as that opponent would get moved backward... but with the spikes stuck in the ground, the only thing capable of moving was his neck.

A neck that was entirely incapable of handling Jake's kick.

Fuck, Jake cursed internally as the orc went limp. He wasn't dead, but Jake was unsure if he was dying or not. Reacting quickly, Jake tried to stabilize the guy's neck as he held it in place while employees of the Colosseum soon rushed in. He had entirely zoned out everything but zoned back in when one of the employees took out what Jake recognized as a health potion and made the orc drink it before dragging him out of the arena.

Nearly killed him on accident,

Jake sighed as he exited the arena, ignoring the commentator. Sure, the ones he fought weren't "real people," but Jake still didn't want to kill someone like the orc when he had no reason to. None of his opponents ever seemed to strike with the sole intent to kill either, and only a few showed true killing intent or aimed solely to land lethal attacks. While it was true that Jake could still die even if his opponents didn't aim to kill him, he fully realized the other combatants had to risk killing him if they wanted a chance.

While waiting for his next match, he got confirmation that the orc had survived but would probably be out of commission for several days. Jake did know that potions were a thing even before this match, as while he couldn't really craft any himself due to the time constraint and his lack of ingredients, the Colosseum did sell them. They were not allowed to be used during matches but were only for faster recovery between fights, so he had no interest in getting any.

Feeling relieved, Jake did the rest of his matches of the day quite easily while maybe being a bit more cautious than normal that he didn't accidentally kill anyone.

The final promotion match before he became a fully-fledged Gladiator was versus a wind mage. This was his first time meeting an opponent that was truly faster than himself, and the slicing wind blades he sent out were more than a little problematic as they were fully capable of leaving nasty flesh wounds.

Ultimately, he still proved easier than the Spiked Orc, as Jake dubbed him. The wind mage simply didn't have a response to Fear Gaze, allowing Jake to catch up after dodging all of his attacks and land a good kick to his noggin.

This sent him tumbling, and Jake pounced on the opportunity and kicked the wind mage a dozen times before he finally surrendered. Overall, it was a good match and definitely more fast-paced than many of the others.

Jake's knockout rate was definitely far higher than the average due to Fear Gaze, but only the orc in Expert Fighter rank had been knocked out, the rest managing to hold on. None of them tried the same tactic of the Cleaver, though. Something he assumed was partly due to the nice side-effect of Fear Gaze.

Fear was not an emotion that would instantly pass, and everyone he fought kept showing apprehension toward him even after the effect wore off. They also clearly felt that he wasn't shy to kill his opponents if he deemed it necessary, making them not want to risk a stupid death by trying to test the apex predator that had just beaten their ass. The fact that he nearly killed that orc probably also played a part for the last few opponents.

After his victory, Jake once more returned back to the Battlemaster, as the middle-aged man, for the first time ever, greeted Jake with a wholly positive attitude.

"You bloody made it to the Gladiator rank, proving yourself a true warrior!" the Battlemaster said with a smile as Jake walked up to him. "Never once did I doubt you could do it, and I knew the very first time you walked in here that you were the real deal. Not only did you manage to become a Gladiator, but you did so without losing a single match and by fighting every single day. Take a well-earned rest, and come back tomorrow for your first real match. Your true debut. I am looking forward to seeing how far the Doomfoot can go, Gladiator."

The entire round of praise was a bit ruined by calling him fucking Doomfoot, but he had learned days ago that there was no use fighting it. No matter how much he tried to correct the Battlemaster, the guy simply hadn't cared and even commented on the name being pretty good.

Just as Jake began to wonder when his menu would update, registering his promotion, he got a message quite a bit longer than expected, as it became clear he had entered the second phase of the Challenge Dungeon.

Congratulations! You have reached the Gladiator rank, making you a true mainstay of the Colosseum of Mortals. However, this is only the beginning of your climb to the top. As a true Gladiator, you attract a crowd, and every single match is an event. Due to this, the Colosseum cannot have you fight in an official match every day.

You are limited to one fight a week against another Gladiator.

All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.

In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Gladiator opponents in Show Matches once a day. These Show Matches are against a variety of foes and have far looser rules and regulations than regular arena fights. The possible opponents one can face in Show Matches are decided daily. Winning Show Matches reward Colosseum Points based on the opponents fought. Show Matches and battles against other Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.

For reaching Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 500 Colosseum Points.

For reaching Gladiator rank in the lowest number of days possible, you are rewarded an extra 500 Colosseum Points.

Continue to fight, and claim your glory as you prove yourself the strongest mortal! Become the Champion!

There was quite a bit to unpack with this one. First of all, only one Gladiator match a week now? What? Jake already felt like only six in a day was insufficient. At least he could still do those bonus Show

Matches, even if those were also only one a day... and with the rule of not having both a Gladiator and a Show Match on the same day, Jake would only ever be able to do one fight a day from now on.

At least those Show Matches were a bit interesting as those would not necessarily be against other fighters, which made Jake guess that he could also face non-humanoids or even groups. Getting to fight a bear or something would definitely be cool. Jake had always wanted to try and fight a non-magic bear.

The bonus Colosseum Points were also a surprise he had not expected. He was only a tiny little bit miffed that the system didn't recognize the fact he didn't kill anyone and won using only the mighty power of kicking, but then again, perhaps the feeling of satisfaction from succeeding was enough. The true reward was not the Nevermore Points at the end, but all the kicks landed along the way.

Not to say the points he did get weren't great. 1000 Colosseum Points certainly weren't anything to scoff at, and it did make him wonder if there were more similar "achievements" he could earn by not losing any matches and keeping up a good pace. Guess time would tell, as that was his plan anyway.

Mentioning that better equipment and items were now available was also interesting. Primarily that the system felt the need to point it out specifically. Every single time he had ranked up, better stuff had become available, but Jake hadn't gotten any special notifications about it like this. Maybe this meant he could truly get some good or unique weapons.

Yeah, he should probably at least go take a look. The crafters were open any time the Colosseum was, so he still had time to go by and see if there was anything he would actually want to buy, as there were still quite a few hours before they closed that day. Jake wasn't delusional enough to think he wouldn't ever have to buy any equipment during his stay in the Challenge Dungeon. At the very least, he would need some proper weapons.

He had enough Colosseum Points to get some good stuff too.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 2740

Lives remaining: 10

Wait, he now also had to win ten matches to get promoted to the next rank? No, it was worse than that; he had to win eleven, including the Promotion Match... and he could only do one match a week? That was bloody horrible. To make it worse, how many ranks were there even to Champion?

Oh well, hopefully, Polly or Owen would know. He had already spotted the two of them coming through his sphere, both coming over to congratulate him on his promotion. After a bit of coaxing, they even convinced Jake to go to a restaurant to celebrate. Jake was initially not a big fan until he discovered something incredible...

They sold beer. Good beer. And Jake was no longer a C-grade with Legendary Palate of the Malefic Viper. While he could still get drunk on special alcoholic concoctions even as a C-grade... there was just something different about drinking some regular good old beer and the slight buzz that came with it. Alcohol was the one thing that had allowed him to function properly in larger social gatherings for prolonged periods of time before the system, and now that he was reduced to a near-pre-system state... yeah, he wanted to enjoy himself.



All of this is to say Jake was not going to check out the crafters that day.

As Jake sat there eating and drinking, he also finally began to understand how the estimation of Challenge Dungeons taking around two years made sense. Something like the Colosseum was its own little world where one could truly get lost and spend a long time. Even for someone so goal-oriented as Jake, the limited number of matches a day - now a week - meant he would be forced to interact with the world in some shape or form.

If the other Challenge Dungeons also had similar timed events and worlds like this, it would definitely make things drag out. Sure, these forced delays likely weren't a thing in places like Minaga's Endless Labyrinth, and it was also possible some Challenge Dungeons took a lot longer than others, but he could see this one taking quite a while when just getting past the Gladiator Rank would take eleven more weeks.

He wanted to complain, but... it wasn't all bad, and he understood why this downtime was in place. As Owen explained it, all the Gladiator matches would be scheduled a week in advance, with both knowing who they would be fighting. This would theoretically allow Jake to gather information on his opponent or even prepare specific pieces of equipment he would need. It was also considered very standard to research your opponents, and Jake remembered a talk he had with Carmen quite a while back.

Studying her opponent was viewed as an entirely expected part of the fight preparation when she used to fight semi-professionally, with pretty much every real pro doing it, or at least their teams did. Watching recordings of their prior fights and laying a strategy with your trainer was a big part of winning a one versus one fight, and going in with a pre-planned approach could give you a major advantage. Knowing your opponent's habits, ticks, strengths, weaknesses, and general fighting style were all major boons. Studying who you would fight had been hard below Gladiator, but with a week to prepare for every fight, there was plenty of time now.

Of course, this also went the other way. Jake fully expected every opponent he met from now on to come fully prepared for Jake's kicks and maybe even get special equipment or something made to fight him. Against a sword or spear, having spikes on your shield just made it awkward and heavy, plus it would make deflecting blows difficult. But against someone unarmed, only kicking, it would make the shield into a powerful tool to both attack and defend.

Jake knew all of these things... and he knew that fighting using only kicks would be quite the challenge unless he met an opponent where a foot to the face was especially effective. Honestly, he wasn't even that keen on keeping up his streak of only kicking. Seeing as he didn't even gain any bonus points or anything from winning every fight by only kicking, chances are there wouldn't be any other rewards in the future, even if he continued to purposefully handicap himself.

So... perhaps it was time. Jake had achieved his silly personal goal of becoming a Gladiator through only kicking, even if he did add his Fear Gaze. Now was a good time to stop and get more serious.

It was time to retire the moniker of Doomfoot...

And become the Arcane Doomfoot.

Chapter 746: Nevermore: Gladiatorial Debut

"Are you sure about this, Jake?" Owen asked with genuine worry as they walked back to the Colosseum the next day. "You should at least go to the crafters before the match... maybe you see something you like and decide to buy it, right?"

"It'll be fine," Jake waved him off. "I will go check out the crafters after."

"But... if you lose the match, you risk getting demoted and will have a harder time rising to higher ranks. That is assuming you don't die or lose a limb," Owen tried to convince him. "You mentioned that you wanted better equipment at some point, so why wait?"

"Let me ask you this, Owen," Jake said. "That spear of yours, will you keep using that even when you become a Gladiator? Assuming you become a Gladiator, that is. Which you really should be able to, considering... you know."

"Probably not?" Owen admitted, totally ignoring that last part of what Jake said.

"So at that point, when you buy a new weapon, the spear would just be a bunch of wasted points as you can only sell stuff back for half of what you paid," Jake pointed out very accurately. "Meanwhile, if I don't buy anything, I don't waste anything."

His logic was truly flawless. Extremely risky but flawless, nevertheless.

"Okay, okay, I'll trust you, geez," Owen shook his head. "Have you considered, at the very least, allowing Polly to obtain information on your opponents? Even if you don't want to spend Colosseum Points on proper information packets, there is still a lot to discover."

"Maybe later, but not now," Jake said with a smile. "But I will say that today's match will be different than the one yesterday. I have something new to show off."

"Oh, like that weird mental trick you use to make people tense up?" Owen asked with interest.

"Not quite, not quite. I believe it will be a bit more... destructive than that," Jake teased.

"I look forward to seeing it, then," Owen smiled, clearly intrigued but not prying.

"Destructive..." Polly, who had remained silent so far, muttered. "You haven't used any magic so far, but... do you know a bit? I heard that some spellblades combine the two..."

"Perhaps," Jake kept teasing. "All shall be revealed during the fight. Well, some shall be revealed during the fight. Revealing everything at once is boring."

After that, Jake signed up for the fight and sat down to wait for it to start. He ignored any information he could have gathered and faced the entire challenge raw.

He meditated a bit before the fight as he mentally ran through his plan for the fight, as small sparks of energy circled through his body, confirming all the pathways in his physical body and Soulshape. Soon enough, he was called for his debut match as a Gladiator, and with not a single trace of worry, he walked into the long tunnel toward a far bigger arena than the one he usually fought in.

This one would be nearly a hundred meters in diameter, with a few pillars and such placed throughout to not give magicians and ranged fighters too big of an advantage while also spicing up the battlefield and opening up new strategies. They would maybe be an annoyance to him in the future, but not today.

Walking up the first flight of stairs, it became clear the layout of how to enter the arena had also changed slightly. From there being two gates, there was now only one large mesh of bars blocking the entrance, allowing each fighter to see the arena and each other before the fight began.

Jake's first opponent as a Gladiator definitely lived up to the name, just going by looks. His opponent stood nearly two and a half meters tall, really cheating in the weight-class department. He wore a big spiked helmet, ringmail pants, bracers, leather gloves, and heavy metal boots. Most of his arms were left bare, and his chest was entirely exposed, showing off what looked like a... ten-pack? He was definitely ripped. Needed to be, too, with the giant axe he carried.

His size was naturally impossible for a normal human, but Identify informed Jake of what he was right away.

[Half-Ogre]

Jake had to admit that he wasn't sure if half-ogres were even born in F-grade – on a side note, while Jake was G-grade, everyone seemed to be F-grade – or if it was just the system or Wyrmgod that messed with the rules a bit. It was entirely possible that they were born at F-grade... Jake hadn't really met many ogres. Considering this made Jake wonder about the logistics when an ogre and human or elf had a kid, but those kinds of questions were for a drunk conversation with Villy.

"Today, we have gathered for a debut match! An old veteran of the gladiatorial arena, the Crushing Edge, will take on an up-and-coming Gladiator that only yesterday reached his rank! A figure I am sure many of you are excited to see in the big arena... that's right, it's the master of kicks, a martial savant, and someone described as the scariest person they have ever faced by his defeated opponents. The one, the only, Doomfoot!"

More than ten thousand people cheered loudly, Jake using a single Pulse to see that Owen and Polly were also both in the crowd. He had no idea where the hell all these people came from, as while the city could house that many, did everyone there go to watch Colosseum matches every day? Wouldn't that get boring?

"However, even if he is a truly fearsome newcomer... do not sleep on the Crushing Edge. He has earned that name for a reason. Standing as one of the tallest fighters the Colosseum has ever seen, with muscles able to crush bones, he has won nearly all his matches by landing one devastating blow! One single Crushing Edge!"

Listening to the brief explanation was all the information Jake really needed on his opponent as he had a good idea of what he was facing.

"Now, who will win!? Will Doomfoot be crushed, or the Crushing Edge meet his doom? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"

As commanded, the horizontal mesh of bars first disappeared before the vertical ones lowered into the ground. Right when there was enough space to go out, Jake's opponent began jogging toward him from the other end of the arena.

Casually, Jake placed the bow on the ground as he stepped into the arena.

Jake began walking forward slowly at first, as he slowly picked up pace and began running. While running, a shiver of energy went down his right leg. Stamina tinged with his arcane affinity infused every vein, every muscle. If one could see beneath his pants, one would see faint veins of pink-purple covering his skin, surging with destructive potential.

Applying arcane energy to his physical moves was extremely easy, even with his reduced stats. In fact, it was far easier now than before, as there wasn't as much to control, while his pure level of skill in controlling energy was virtually unchanged compared to before the Challenge Dungeon. His energy control as a C-grade was already viewed as monstrous, so having that same level of control as a level 0 G-grade was complete and utter overkill.

Also, while Arcane Supremacy was gone, he still remembered the sensations of increased control, and even if he didn't have skills, Jake rarely ever used skills when he used his mana to begin with.

So to infuse parts of his body with extra stamina and wrapping his foot in a faint shimmer of protective arcane energy and the rest in pure destruction? Easy as pie.

The two of them approached each other as the crowd went even wilder than before. The half-ogre roared as he swung his giant axe toward Jake.

Jake, still running at full speed, jumped into the air as he spun his body around. A trail of arcane energy swirled around his foot, leaving a trace of color as he kicked, delivering a spinning roundhouse kick.

His foot connected with the head of the half-ogre as a metal helmet met leather boots. A small localized explosion of arcane energy rocked the arena as metal spikes from the helmet flew everywhere. The giant half-ogre was sent airborne and flew nearly five meters before hitting a pillar, his neck broken and head crooked.

Jake landed on the soft arena floor, feeling the sand between his toes on his right foot. The leather boots were shredded to pieces upon impact, leaving him with only one shoe left.

More powerful than expected,

Jake noted as he checked and saw that the half-ogre was still alive, though, without healing, it was doubtful how long that would be the case.

Deafening silence filled the entire arena for a few seconds before Jake turned around and began walking toward the exit. As he moved, the arena came back alive. Medical staff ran toward the half-ogre, and the crowd began screaming, with the announcer also finally doing his job again.

"Doomfoot does it again! With a single kick, the Crushing Edge had his dreams crushed by a debutant! But I am sure you are all asking... what was that!? What power does the kick of the Doomfoot truly hold? Has he been hiding his power all this time? Suddenly had an epiphany? What is the true depth of his power? Ha! Who cares!? The only real question is... when will Doomfoot ever meet his match!"

Jake didn't know if he should be happy or annoyed that the announcer made it clear no one cared if you hid your power. Owen would definitely still ask, but at least he wouldn't face questions from others. Not like it would have mattered even if he did – this entire Challenge Dungeon was just about arena fights, nothing more, nothing less.

Walking out of the arena to the cheers of the audience, remembering to pick up the bow on the way, Jake walked straight to the Battlemaster, who somehow seemed to be aware of everything that had happened in the arena despite not having moved a single step from where he stood when Jake accepted the match.

After some praise and a backhanded compliment, Jake went outside of the Gladiator training area as he waited for Polly and Owen, who predictably came over right away. After stalling for a bit, Jake finally went to a nice little corner where the questions began. Polly was the first to go.



"That... magic... what was it?" Polly asked with wide eyes. "I... I've felt powerful spells before, but that mana, that power, I--"

"My own magic," Jake simply answered. "Asking me about it will not help. It is innate to me, and even if you trained from now till the day you die, you wouldn't ever be able to learn it."

"Why did you hide it?" Owen questioned, just as Jake had expected. Also, he really wanted to point out the hypocrisy of that question but assumed the guy had his reasons. Same as Jake had his.

"What would it have helped if I revealed it earlier outside of making the fights even more boring? It would also have been too much and risked killing several of my prior opponents. Unless my previous opponents disagree... hey, Polly, would you have liked for me to have used that kick on you?" Jake asked the mage.

She stared at him with even wider eyes. "I... I would be dead..."

"Exactly," Jake nodded. "As I said, all shall be revealed in time. Just assume that as the level of challenge increases, so shall more be shown. And we're still in the early stages of these revelations."

"Can I ask... how are you this powerful?" Polly questioned. "Do you have a great master or something?"

"You can ask, sure. But I won't answer. Anyone that may or may not have had an impact on my Path is not anywhere near here and will not show up in or around the Colosseum, so no reason to even think about it," Jake tried to explain everything away.

Going into detail on how he was so strong also wasn't that interesting and not something that could be replicated. The truth was that he was actually a C-grade. The true difference all came down to one simple thing:

Conceptual power. The sheer power and depth of the concepts in Jake's arcane affinity made it far more powerful than it had any right to be. It wasn't as simple as an Arcane Awakening-level powerup... it went far above that during the moment of kicking.

Through sheer control, he could stabilize destruction and stability until, at once, he would unleash it all into one wave of pure destructive force through his foot. In prior fights, Jake hadn't even actively controlled his stamina during the fights, but now it was time to get a bit more serious.

What's more... that one roundhouse kick wasn't even close to Jake's limits. If he wanted to, he could pour every single shred of mana he had into one singular attack. Doing so wouldn't make much sense, though.

It wouldn't just have killed the half-ogre if he did that. There wouldn't even be a head left, as all would have been consumed by pure arcane destruction.

Jake was genuinely looking forward to facing an opponent he could go full-power on. Alas, he had a feeling it would still be quite a while before that happened. Especially now that he was limited to one match a day.

However, there was at least one positive change in the points department. Based on Jake's math, then every win as a Gladiator should have rewarded 56 points, but he instead saw his points had increased by 250 from one victory. That was frankly a massive jump... then again, if he could only fight once a week, it had better give more points. It did also give some hope for this Show Matches, though.

Checking the menu, he saw how many points he had, and it was starting to add up.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (1/10)

Colosseum Points: 2990

Lives remaining: 10

"Enough talk about how awesome I am," Jake put a stop to Owen's and Polly's questions. "Didn't you two want me to go look at equipment before the match? Let's do that now since we got the time. Can't walk around like this forever."

Jake showed off his bare right foot, which was already plenty dirty from wandering around after the fight. Plus he had sand everywhere, and everyone knows the bad rep sand had, being all coarse, rough and irritating.

"Yeah, good point," Owen agreed. "You know where to go, right?"

"I can figure it out?"

"Just follow me, then," Owen said with a sigh.

"Don't you have matches today?"

"I only got one fight left before my promotion match, so I plan on doing those two today. That still gives me plenty of time," Owen explained.

Jake nodded as the three of them walked toward another section of the Colosseum. On the way, as they were walking down a long, populated hallway, Jake suddenly felt something from behind.

Two eyes staring into his back. No unusual... except there was something else.

An aura. The most powerful he had felt in this arena so far.

Turning around, Jake looked directly back and spotted the figure more than a hundred meters away. A lithe figure, wearing a cloak covering the entire body.

[Dark Elf]

The female dark elf smirked as Jake spotted her, as shadowy magic surrounded her, making her disappear the very next second. Not just from sight... she was truly gone, even in Jake's sphere.

"What are you looking for?" Owen asked, trying to follow Jake's gaze.

"Something fun for the future," Jake smiled in response as he turned around and kept walking. Always fun to have a scripted encounter hinting at a later opponent.

Chapter 747: Nevermore: The Merciful Doomfoot

Shopping trip time! Well, kind of. For the very first time since leaving the Tutorial, Jake wasn't loaded and had to actually think twice before spending haphazardly. It wasn't even sure he wanted to buy something, despite the urgings of both Polly and Owen.

Not long after the encounter with the mysterious dark elf that was totally not a teaser for a fight much later in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake and company arrived in the section of the Colosseum that dealt with selling items.

This part looked like a huge shopping district still placed within the massive structure itself. Despite having spent over a week in the Colosseum so far, Jake had far from explored close to everything, and he knew there were even restaurants and stuff somewhere. It was a big place, which it kind of had to be with the many different arenas and huge training facilities.

Luckily, one didn't have to shop around for equipment. There was one place to go, where everything was gathered. It was a large shop with what looked like magical screens where one could simply search for items and browse for anything they wanted as long as it was on sale.

As a Gladiator, Jake had unlocked a lot better items than before... and maybe it was time to spend some points. Not all of them, though. He did need some new shoes for sure, and after searching through the footwear for a quarter of an hour, he settled on a pair he liked.

[Fleetstep Boots (Rare)] – Leather boots enchanted with powerful magic. These boots are incredibly durable and were created to make their wearer quicker on their feet, allowing them to go in and out of combat more easily. The enchantments placed on these boots make your steps lighter and increase Agility. As a rare item, these boots are insured, so should they be destroyed or lost, you can instantly get a replacement. Enchantments: Insured. Fleetstep. +1 Agility.

Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.

It was a bit funny that boots were the first item he bought. It was an investment for future fights, and if Jake had to spend one and a half to two years more in the arena, he would need equipment at some point anyway. Something like boots was something he could get now and keep till the end. Especially boots like these that offered not only a bit of Agility and proper durability but even a lightness effect. That was pretty nice when fighting on sand.

Moreover, they were insured. A very silly name, but the gist of it was there. This meant that even if Jake ended up destroying them – something his destructive arcane energy had a tendency to do – he would get new ones. That was far better than Owen, who would just lose his spear if he ended up breaking or misplacing it.

This entire insurance thing seemed a bit out of place thematically, but Jake could see it being necessary to entice people like him to buy anything before they began losing their lives.

“How do they look?” Jake asked after putting them on. The boots were made of thin, lightweight leather he could barely feel on his feet, and when he stepped down, it felt a bit odd. It was like he had indeed become lighter, but only from the perspective of the ground he stepped on. That is to say, Jake wasn’t actually lighter if he decided to kick someone in the face, but if he walked on sand, he wouldn’t sink in as much as before. Overall, good stuff.

“Decent,” Owen nodded. “Definitely better than no boots. Also, are you seriously wearing leather boots without socks on?”

“Yes,” Jake answered with a deadpan expression. That is what he had gotten used to, and he was not going to stop.

“Now that is just weird,” Owen shook his head. “Also, have you considered looking into any weapons or-”

“Kicking is good for now,” Jake cut him off.

“How about a wand to make use of your-” Polly tried, Jake once more unreceptive to the suggestions.

“Kicking good.”

Both of them looked exasperated, but Jake was steadfast in his opinion.

Now, Jake would admit that buying a weapon would have made what happened the next day a lot easier and a lot less... messy. Alas, hindsight was twenty-twenty.

After spending a thousand points, Jake stuck around and watched one of Owen's matches, where he saw his dungeon-buddy struggle for a good five minutes before finally itching out a victory. He considered staying for Owen's promotion match but instead headed back to the training area for Gladiators to work on his own stuff.

Usually, outside the dungeon, Jake filled all his downtime with doing alchemy or playing with his Puzzle Box, but here in the Colosseum of Mortals, that wasn't an option. Instead, Jake would focus on things he usually neglected. One of those had been internal energy control and familiarizing himself with his weakened body and, of course, the practice and creation of Fear Gaze, but he had one other thing he wanted to practice pretty badly.

For melee combat, Jake got extremely lucky with the Myriad Paths event and got a perfect teacher and sparring partner in Sim-Jake, allowing him to train in melee fighting. Even if he didn't have a specific melee fighting skill outside of Fang of Man, he was undoubtedly better at melee combat when it came to pure technique compared to his preferred weapon.

Even Minaga had pointed out that Jake seriously needed to practice his archery. So Jake went all the way back to the basics – something only possible due to the Colosseum of Mortals.

It seemed counterproductive and useless to improve shooting an arrow as a normal human, but from talks with the Sword Saint and even Sim-Jake, it became clear he was very wrong. Jake had been good at archery before the system, yes, but he hadn't been an expert. He hadn't been a complete monster with the bow, the same as the Sword Saint was a beast with a sword.



That pure level of skill and understanding of the basics had transferred to conceptual power far beyond anything Jake had for the Sword Saint. So, while it was a bit late, Jake wanted to shore up some of the fundamental flaws in his basic archery.

To do that, he had booked a private shooting range. A privilege of being a Gladiator. It wasn't a big place, but it was big enough for Jake to set up targets and, with his bow and practice arrows, do the most basic of basics:

Target practice.

With no pressure from being in a fight, Jake could focus on every detail of his movements. The position of his feet, the way the muscles in his shoulders moved, the fluidity of motion when he drew the string, and his method of aiming. Jake had most of these basics down already, and as mentioned, he was pretty good... but if Jake wanted to reach the top, "pretty good" was far from enough.

Several hours later, Jake left the training room as he had to go and get dinner before sleeping to regenerate his resources and rest his sore body. He ate with Polly and Owen, who both seemed interested in his practice, especially as Polly had discovered that Jake had gone and gotten a huge batch of practice arrows and even an extra bow from the Quartermaster through her basic information-gathering.

Neither seemed to seriously consider Jake could be an archer but nevertheless encouraged him to train with a weapon. The brainstorming on how Jake could sew arrows to his boots wasn't that welcome, though, and no, it wasn't a "great way to add penetrative power to his already strong kicks."

Jake had already tried that and knew it wouldn't work.

The next day, Jake could not do another Gladiator Match, but that did mean he could try out the other option. Show Matches. Sure, he could only do one of them, but he felt a bit excited to see what he would be able to face.

Going to the Battlemaster, the man only nodded as Jake said he wanted to do a Show Match.

“This is your first time doing a Show Match, so I have some words of wisdom for you. Don’t think it is like a normal duel. This is a true fight. Also, I know you aren’t a fan of killing, but for the Show Matches, there often isn’t a choice. Your opponents won’t show any mercy to you, either. I don’t even think they know the meaning of that word. You can’t surrender either; it’s kill or be killed in there,” the Battlemaster warned.

Jake nodded, pretty much having his suspicions confirmed as to what kind of fights these Show Matches were.

“Here, let me illustrate the point. These are the options for opponents you have available today. Remember, you can only pick one fight a day, so take your time to consider the options. Oh, and the higher up on the list they are, the harder the fight is, which should be pretty obvious, considering the rewards are also higher,” the Battlemaster continued as he handed Jake a list written on a thick piece of parchment.

He wasn’t going to question why the words on the list looked like they were printed with a modern printer.

Show Match Opponents Available:

1. Goblin Hunting Squad (6x opponents) – 300 Colosseum Points

2. Feral Orc Berserker – 250 Colosseum Points

3. Zombies (3x opponents) – 200 Colosseum Points

4. Sharpclaw Badger – 150 Colosseum Points

5. Wood Puppet – 100 Colosseum Points

“I take option 1 against the Goblin Hunting Squad,” Jake answered instantly. It wasn’t really a choice. He would just pick whatever gave the most points.

“Hm, not surprising considering your track record, but do be warned. There are five regular goblins and one hobgoblin leader. They will all have different weapons too, so even if you are stronger than each of them individually, if you mess up, things can get messy quickly. Especially considering you are not wearing any proper armor,” the Battlemaster explained. “Group combat is also very different to duels, so watch out.”

“Got it, chief,” Jake nodded with a smile.

“Alright then. Gate three, the match begins in thirty minutes... unless you need more time or have reconsidered?”

“I’m good,” Jake waved him off as he went and waited for his match to start. He saw the timer above the gate appear and begin counting down. Half an hour later, he walked through the large tunnel toward a slightly different arena than any he had been to before.

This one was about the same size as the Gladiator arena but had a lot more clutter spread around. Badly built five-meter tall wooden towers, parts of walls, with there even being a few rusty weapons and pieces of armor in piles around the perimeter.

However, the most noteworthy aspect of this place was the sand. It had an almost black color, dyed from the blood of countless creatures who had died there.

Jake stood behind the gate, looking at a large cage on the other side of the arena with six goblins inside. One hobgoblin with a machete, two small goblins with bows, two with spears, and one with a club. Just by looking at them, it became clear these were not the same as the goblin Jake had fought in his very first fight. They instead looked almost feral.

The Battlemaster had indeed been right. He was effectively fighting non-sapient monsters. There was only one way to truly win that kind of fight.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome! Today, we have a very special Show Match for you, one of new beginnings or untimely ends. I am sure you all already know. In fact, it’s why you’re here, isn’t it!? That’s right, it’s Doomfoot’s debut in the Show Match Arena! He will be facing off against six ferocious goblins captured while trying to raid a village. Their judgment has been passed down... but will Doomfoot be able to carry it out?”

Jake wasn't surprised to hear the same announcer also worked in the Show Match arena, though he did wonder when the hell the guy slept, assuming he was even real. Okay, he definitely wasn't real, as Jake even heard the same guy commentate Owen's matches, but Jake did wonder if a person had put their voice to it or if it was an army of projections or something.

Anyway, tangent aside, it was interesting that the announcer gave context as to why these goblins were there and even gave a justification for killing them.

"Doomfoot is known for not having killed a single opponent so far, but today there is no choice. Will Doomfoot be able to overcome his merciful nature and be their executioner, or will the rising meteor stick to his principles and crumble to dust? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"

In retrospect, the entire situation was a bit funny.

For Jake to be known as someone merciful that didn't kill, and for the announcer to ask if he could overcome his nature? It was definitely bizarre. Jake was certain that Villy was laughing somewhere at the insinuation, as while Jake was many things, someone who refused to kill wasn't one of them.

And it was time to make that clear to the Colosseum of Mortals too.

The second the gates lowered, Jake stormed forward, his new boots allowing him to run even faster than before on the soft sand. At the command of the hobgoblin, the smaller goblins reacted fast as two arrows were loosed the second Jake got within range.

With a single sidestep, he dodged both as he closed in. Two spear-wielding goblins met him first. Their weapons were raised to stop his charge, not realizing how inadequate their stances were. Arcane energy had already wormed its way into Jake's legs as he clashed with the two goblins... though to call it a clash wasn't exactly fair.

With a single sweep of his leg, two spears were broken in half, and with a spinning motion, Jake brought down his foot in an axe kick, squashing the skull of one of the goblins. The other one couldn't respond in time as Jake kicked it in the stomach, sending it flying toward one of the archers, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

The archer was hit by the corpse of his comrade and fell over before he could nock another arrow. The club-wielding goblin was next on Jake's list as he sprinted over. He tried to swing his club, but Jake kicked it, making the weapon smash into his own head, embedding itself.

Ignoring the hobgoblin, Jake ran past him as he took out the archers next, saving the best for last.

Seconds later, a broken bow flew into the air along with a decapitated goblin head. A foot was brought down and crushed the skull of a second archer who was still prone from his comrade hitting him. Leaving only one.

Turning toward the hobgoblin, Jake saw only fear in his eyes, mixed with pure feral instinct. His opponent screamed loudly, charging with reckless abandon, the machete raised over his head, ready to be brought down. Jake simply shifted his feet a bit as he got into a stance. The hobgoblin closed in, and right as he got within a few meters, Jake took one step forward, as he rotated his hips, and performed a rear kick.

His offensive move had surprised the hobgoblin so much he didn't even have time to swing down. The kick hit the goblin in its side, his entire body bending over like a folded lawn chair as Jake's kick continued, leaving a trace of crackling arcane energy in its wake.

Jake spun all the way around as the resistance he met was less than expected, and as the shower of blood from the rapidly spinning bisected upper body of the hobgoblin rained down all over him, Jake remembered one of the reasons he had held back on killing his other opponents.

It could get bloody messy – pun fully intended.

“And we have a winner, no, an utter dominator in the arena! Who said Doomfoot was merciful? Who said he was unwilling to kill?”

You did... Jake grumbled internally as the announcer said some more fluff that Jake zoned out, only really listening in to the last part as he walked back out of the arena again.

“The kick of doom has brought justice! Now go, valiant combatant. Rest, recover, and I think I am speaking for everyone here when I say... return to fight another day!”

Trying to look at least a little dignified despite his messy appearance, Jake walked out of the arena with steady steps, the sand a slightly darker hue than when he entered.

Fifteen minutes later.

“Jake... what are you doing?” Owen asked as he looked confused down at Jake.

Jake grumbled to himself as he sat in a big washroom, wearing only a wet shirt and underpants in front of a basin of water, trying desperately to clean his blood-covered pants, boots, and armor. The shirt also still had marks on it, but that one had at least been under his leather armor. Seriously, why wasn't Self-Repair a thing here? The cleaning function of that was just awesome.

Looking up at Owen and Polly, Jake wanted to complain to them as he stopped what he was doing.

Suddenly, he looked at Polly with a sinister smile. “Hey... I remember you saying you wanted to help me, right?”

Polly pepped up. “Have you finally decided to take me up on the offer? I am sure I can be of great assistance!”

Jake nodded slowly as he turned back and looked at the bloody water. “I have a great job assignment for you.”

Chapter 748: Nevermore: An Unexpected Opponent

Jake was truly a genius. Why hadn't he thought of using Polly earlier? It was such an obvious solution! Sure, he could also have asked Owen, but Polly had been keen on finding some way to help him for a while, and this was such a prime opportunity.

After he had gotten his clothing situation fixed through Polly – partly by cleaning it, partly by buying some new stuff - he headed straight back to a small townhouse that served as housing for Gladiators. Later on, he met back up with Owen and Polly to eat before going home and to bed. When he woke up



and opened the door to the small house, he saw his clothes there, neatly packaged by the professional cleaning company.

What? He hadn't actually made Polly clean them. With her whole young mistress vibe, she clearly never washed her own clothes either, so Jake had asked her where she got her clothes washed and had her escort him there. It was quite the high-end place based on what Jake could gather, specializing in cleaning armor and weapons for the combatants. As they already knew Polly, things went smoothly, and he didn't even have to pay for anything. Not that there was a way to pay for anything without using Colosseum Points, and not even the Wyrmgod was cruel enough to make people in Challenge Dungeons spend points on not having dirty clothes.

Jake's third day as a Gladiator was spent practicing with his bow, doing a Show Match, and working a bit on energy control when he was too physically tired to do any more target practice. The Show Match in question was versus some weird six-legged mammal creature that had died from just a few good kicks to the head.

The fourth day and onwards was very much the same as time passed. Archery practice was the name of the game, and he quickly got into a routine. Others would likely get bored doing the same things over and over again, but Jake had always been good at hyper-focusing on tasks until his body physically told him to stop. When that happened, he would just switch to working on something that took brain power instead until he was wrung out mentally too.

What rest he did need, he got through sleeping or during his rendezvous with Owen and Polly as they went out to eat, or Jake watched one of Owen's matches. Speaking of Owen, he pretty quickly also reached Gladiator rank, with even Polly beginning to do some matches after finding herself inspired by Jake and Owen. She still had a long way to go, but she did at least begin to win some matches after learning some basic melee fighting along with her magic.

Jake wasn't exactly surprised when she turned out to be pretty good at both. Her stats were clearly not ordinary; the only real problem was her lack of actual practice and fighting experience. Polly wasn't

going to become a Gladiator or anything like that before Jake left, but she could definitely get a few more promotions.

Everyone slowly got stronger, and soon, around nine entire weeks had passed since Jake had become a Gladiator, with nothing that exciting happening during this time. Jake just did one match every day, and as he slowly made progress, he realized that his math had been a bit off.

As he could do a Gladiator Match on the second day as a Gladiator, it would actually only take nine weeks to finish all ten fights. This resulted in a total of 54 Show Matches rewarding 300 Colosseum Points each, as well as 10 Gladiator Matches. So, just a single day over nine weeks. Which had allowed Jake to rake up quite the points.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (10/10)

Colosseum Points: 20440

Lives remaining: 10

His daily point gain was still worse than it had been the day he was promoted to Expert Fighter due to the limited battles, but he wasn't really complaining. It was still a lot of points. Moreover, Jake had gotten some damn good practice during his downtime. It was still slow-going and early days, but he felt like he was making some progress.

Ah, but not when it came to the actual fights. The Doomfoot was still dominating everyone he met. Well, okay, the domination had gotten less the more time passed. Even if the Show Matches and gladiatorial matches didn't reward more points, they sure as hell got a lot harder. He could still win every fight by kicking, but as his opponents became more and more aware of his skills and just got stronger, he was beginning to face some annoying issues. That is to say... he couldn't keep up his kicking-only challenge forever, no matter how funny it would be to reach Champion rank through kicks only.

Despite feeling a bit sad about that, there was also one pleasant surprise on the day he got done with his tenth Gladiator fight.

"Your streak just keeps going, huh? Can't say I am surprised; I do have a keen eye for spotting talent," the Battlemaster said, speaking the usual fluff. That is, until he added the next sentence. "Seeing as it is you, I assume you want your Promotion Match tomorrow? You can, of course, take some rest days if you want."

"Wait, I can do the Promotion Match tomorrow and not in a week?" Jake questioned with surprise.

"Obviously," the Battlemaster scoffed.

"I thought matches against other Gladiators were limited to one a week," Jake muttered.

"It is limited to one a week against others with the Gladiator rank. Did you think you would be fighting with a combatant of your own rank for promotions? Hah! No, you need to face a real Veteran Gladiator to get promoted to one! This is the big leagues now," the Battlemaster said, for some reason thinking it was really funny.

Jake just stared as he went back and checked the message he had gotten several weeks ago. And... fuck him if the wording wasn't ambiguous.

"You are limited to one fight a week against another Gladiator."

So, apparently, Veteran Gladiators were not the same as Gladiators. Who would have known! Jake sure as hell didn't! Not that he didn't welcome the opportunity to move on faster and climb those ranks.

"But... I wanna warn you. If you decide to sign up to fight tomorrow, you will meet a rather difficult opponent. The one you will be facing was promoted to Veteran Gladiator only a week or so ago, and he has only been here in the Colosseum for a month or so more than you. Which is to say, he also isn't someone who has struggled or lost a single match. So be careful and consider if you wanna fight him. Moreover, he is a martial artist like you, so I am unsure how good that matchup is for you. Either way, the choice is yours," the Battlemaster said in an uncharacteristically serious tone.

Jake, at first, thought this was just more fluff to build up another pretty easy opponent... until the system made it clear it wasn't.

Bonus Objective gained.

Your rapid ascension through the ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals couldn't have been swifter. If you wish to keep this streak going, you will have to defeat an opponent with power out of the ordinary for this ranking.

Failing this bonus objective will lock out many similar future bonus objectives.

Bonus Objective: Defeat the Benevolent Monk.

He had definitely not expected a random bonus objective, but he wasn't against it either.

"So, what say you?" the Battlemaster asked.

"Definitely going for it," Jake smiled.

"Alright, I'll sign you up for tomorrow then. I would recommend that you get a good night's sleep and prepare properly," the Battlemaster warned him one final time.

Jake decided to take his advice and skipped the archery practice for the day as he went back and relaxed in his little townhouse. He didn't even go out and eat that day but ate something he had stocked up.

For a brief second, Jake did consider spending some Colosseum Points on improving his equipment but decided against it. Perhaps it was a bit reckless, but he wanted to face this challenge with what he already had.

The next day he returned to the Colosseum and, after the usual brief wait, found himself entering the tunnel leading to the arena itself. Checking over himself one last time, he confirmed he was in peak condition as he ascended the stairs, the coming battlefield appearing before him.

“Welcome, to the arena! Today, we have an exciting bout on our hands. On one side, we have Doomfoot, a rising star of the arena who has not missed a single opportunity to fight for us! And why would he? For he has never lost either, his foot spelling the doom of all who meet him! It’s the one and only Doomfoot!” the announcer yelled right as Jake walked up to the bars blocking the entrance to the arena.

Looking across the arena, Jake could barely make out his opponent. He saw a humanoid shape, though, from the current distance, he couldn’t quite tell if his opponent was a human or an elf. Luckily, his Identify answered that for him.

[Human]

As he Identified the man, the announcer continued.

“However... his opponent, despite his humble appearance, is not simple. Far from it. Hailing from an unknown land, this man walked barefoot into the arena only a few months ago, and so far, it doesn’t look like anyone has been able to make him leave! With a palm of mercy but a fist of indomitable power, he stands undefeated and unchallenged. It’s the unstoppable Benevolent Monk!”

The announcer definitely did make Jake’s opponent sound impressive.

“Without further ado... let the two undefeated martial artists clash! Let them finally decide who the true master is! Lower the gates!”

Jake carefully stepped forward as he observed his opponent closely. The man wore only light pants as he walked calmly out of his entrance area. His head was entirely bald, and he walked with steady steps as he entered the arena. His breathing was calm too, and he had a light smile on his lips as he regarded Jake.

His feet were indeed bare, and outside of those pants, he was entirely naked. The powerful, lithe muscles on both his arms and chest made it clear that the man was trained, and his muscles were definitely not for show.

The monk walked toward Jake before stopping a good ten meters away. Just as Jake wondered what he would do, the monk held his right fist in his palm and bowed deeply.

“This lowly monk greets he who is known as Doomfoot,” he said in a light and relaxed tone. “I thank you for sharing with me this moment on such a beautiful day. I hope our fight can be memorable for both of us and that we both may find joy and inspiration.”

Jake was a bit taken aback by his entire demeanor. Usually, he would get a bit annoyed by that kind of attitude, but this monk was different. His voice only carried pure sincerity, and his level of conviction felt unshakeable. Jake found himself getting carried along and decided to respond in kind, also giving a small bow to be polite. “Let’s have a good fight for sure.”

“If I may... would you accept imposing some honor rules upon ourselves? I do not wish to see more violence than necessary, and I hope doing this could lead to a more fruitful encounter,” the monk proposed, making Jake frown a bit.

“What did you have in mind?”

He wasn't entirely against the idea. Spicing things up could be fun. Moreover, he did have the feeling that deciding to agree was the best course of action.

“Rather than risk death, how about we instead agree on this: the winner shall be the first to land ten hits successfully or be the first to draw blood,” the monk proposed with a smile. “We shall naturally agree mutually what counts as a hit, both doing so with honor.”

“You know what?” Jake said after thinking a bit. “I'm in.”

Jake smiled as he prepared himself. The monk looked at him one final time as he sighed. “Alas, I know that you only use your legs usually, but I will refrain from placing such limitations on myself. I hope that is acceptable.”

“I would be insulted if you limited yourself like that,” Jake shook his head. “Let's enjoy yourselves, now shall we?”

The monk smiled as he bowed. “I understand. Indeed, let us proceed to exchange pointers.”

Under normal circumstances, Jake wouldn't entertain something like a limited duel with rules such as this. Instead, he would just aim to win the fight quickly by brutally kicking his opponent in the head with an arcane-empowered foot. However, this situation was a bit different. First of all, the monk did really



strike Jake as a nice and pleasant guy to be around, and he sincerely looked like he wanted to place these rules to avoid causing unmercenary harm. Secondly...

Jake's danger sense was practically screaming at him from the moment he laid eyes on the man, making Jake both excited and apprehensive.

Vilastromoz frowned as he looked at the arena where Jake stood in front of the monk. The fights so far had all been fun and games to the level of it getting kind of boring. Not that the practice time was any better, not after he worked on that ocular soul technique. Watching Jake shoot a target with the thousandth arrow of the day just wasn't that interesting.

However... this was not expected.

Turning to the Wyrmgod, the Viper threw a questioning gaze. The other Primordial obviously noted as he sighed. "It isn't as it seems."

"Yeah, it really isn't," Minaga agreed. "That monk is placed this early on in the Challenge Dungeon for a reason, okay?"

"But you do acknowledge why I question the appearance of someone like that, right?" the Viper said, shaking his head. "I will admit I never truly bothered learning how to make dungeons properly, and if the system agreed with this design choice, perhaps it is fine... but I still question it."

"I do indeed acknowledge this is a unique situation, but I believe in your Chosen... though it may be hard if he doesn't get serious with the tools he chose to bring into the arena. Rather foolhardy of him to go in without any preparations despite the warning," the Wyrmgod said.

“Well, that’s Jake for you,” Vilas sighed. Though he did agree. This wouldn’t be an easy fight for Jake when he didn’t have a weapon. His opponent was simply too out of the ordinary and not someone the Viper would have ever expected this early on in any Challenge Dungeon.

It was a person Vilas recognized. Someone he had once fought with, even if the monk had been with his comrades at the time. What stood in the arena was an image of a pinnacle being of the multiverse:

One of the twelve Daolords of the Dao Sect – the Soulfist Daolord.

Or at least an image of the monk that would one day become the Soulfist.

Chapter 749: Nevermore: Benevolent Monk

The air was still as Jake closely observed the monk. His opponent had yet to even take a stance but still simply stood in a relaxed pose with his palms held against each other. Yet, even so, Jake hesitated to attack.

No openings.

It didn’t matter what Jake thought up. No matter what, his intuition told him whatever he did had a low chance of not ending with him getting a punch to the face. Jake considered dragging out the time and if that would be good or bad for him, but considering the nature of the monk, it wouldn’t surprise Jake if the guy was happy with a tie where no violence occurred.

Not feeling like he had much of a choice, Jake stopped delaying and moved in. Arcane energy entered his legs as he went for a low-committal low kick to start with. He did so with the expectations of the monk dodging the foot infused with destructive arcane power.

That isn't what happened.

The monk braced himself and lifted his leg to block Jake's kick. A wave of destructive arcane energy that had sent every other opponent reeling back smashed into the man, but Jake felt none of the usual feedback. Instead, he felt like he had just tried to kick a streetlight, the monk not moving a single inch from the impact.

"I hope we both agree that a blocked hit does not count as one landed... though I would be willing to give you one point," the monk said as Jake looked at him with surprise.

"Actually landed hits only," Jake clarified.

The monk smiled, and Jake instantly leaped backward to avoid the incoming attack. The raised leg the monk had used to block smashed down into the sand, making the ground erupt all around them. With the same motion, the monk exploded forward along with the wave of blinding sand, a kick aimed at Jake's stomach.

Quickly, Jake reacted as he blocked with his own leg. At least he tried to. The monk purposefully missed him by a few centimeters, and rather than land a kick, he instead hooked his foot around Jake's leg and pulled, throwing the still mid-air Jake off balance as he was dragged back.

What the-

Jake didn't even have time to think as he instinctively responded to a fist descending down toward his chest. Both his arms were infused with stable arcane energy as he crossed them just in time. The fist smashed into his arms, making Jake feel like someone had just hit him with a baseball bat, blasting him down into the sand as the air was temporarily knocked out of his lungs.

The pain went through his body as Jake felt true danger for the very first time in the Colosseum... and he was all for it.

Right after he hit the sand, Jake twisted his body, landing a kick to the side of the unprepared monk, making him stumble to the side. This time it didn't feel like he had hit a bloody wall, but actual human flesh. Sadly for him, he didn't have the time or thoughtfulness to add any destructive energy of note to the kick.

It still gave him the time to do a handspring to get back on his feet.

"What are we seeing!? Doomfoot was swept off his feet and, for the very first time in the Colosseum, used something other than his legs to block!? But who can blame him after that awe-inspiring power displayed by the Benevolent Monk! There sure wasn't any benevolence in that first!"

Jake didn't need to have it pointed out, but yeah... the kicking-only challenge was officially over now. In one brief exchange, it had rapidly become clear there was no way he could have kept that going without having the stuffing knocked out of him.

Regarding his opponent, he saw that the monk stood with a bright smile. Jake momentarily panicked as he wondered if he was bleeding anywhere and thus lost, but that wasn't the case.

“Rarely does one have such a wondrous opportunity... I believe it is 0-1 in your favor,” the Benevolent Monk said.

“Make that 1-1. I count that as a landed hit, as I didn’t fully block it,” Jake corrected him. His kick had barely done anything but briefly throw the monk off balance while Jake’s back still ached. It was only fair.

Besides, with the explosive power the monk had just displayed and Jake’s own offensive prowess, there was no fucking way the fight wouldn’t end with some blood being spilled on either side.

“Very well,” the monk bowed as he shifted his stance. “This time, I shall go on the offensive.”

Jake prepared himself as the monk stepped forward with small, measured steps so as to not leave any openings before he was within range to strike. Every move was calculated, and there was not a doubt in Jake’s mind that the monk was a more experienced fighter than any he had faced before in the Colosseum.

It gave him flashbacks to fighting the Sword Saint...

But Jake was no slouch either. The first move of the monk had taken him by surprise. That wasn’t going to happen again.

Finally, the Benevolent Monk got in range to attack. With a big step, he moved forward and struck, aiming to land a fast palm strike on Jake. Responding quickly, Jake stepped out of the way of his opponent's attack as he totally threw away all attempts at sticking to his personal challenge by throwing a jab at the monk. The brief opening from the palm strike did not prove big enough, and Jake found his hit blocked and countered, only for Jake to counter the counter.

Arcane energy revolved through his body as every single strike was infused with destructive energies, yet the monk neutralized every blow. Jake did not understand how the monk at times seemed to become as immovable as a fortress yet, at others, was light as a feather and clearly still a human that would crumble from a single well-landed blow.

Odd concepts were at play that Jake could not fully comprehend... but it was also clear the monk couldn't grasp what Jake was doing either, as he was taken by surprise several times due to the destructive potential infused into Jake's punches and kicks or when his arm suddenly had a stable barrier covering it to block a hit.

They exchanged blows for more than a minute, kicking up sand all around them as the arena became a mess, yet despite over a hundred small and large moves, not a single blow that any of them would define as a "landed hit" occurred.

That is, until they both presented fake openings at once, attacking in concert.

Jake was hit in the chest by a palm as he managed to kick the monk in his stomach. Both of them tumbled back, Jake sent momentarily airborne as the stable arcane mana that had helped protect him shattered from the blow that seemed to send odd waves through his body.

The monk wasn't much better off as he smashed into a pillar, hitting his back hard before landing on the sand and falling down on one knee with a sizzling wound of destructive arcane energy on his stomach.

Yet somehow, neither of them shed a single drop of blood.

Getting back up, Jake scoffed as he ripped off his already torn shirt. By now, it was just a hazard and somewhere the monk could potentially grab onto. He seemed like the honorable type who wouldn't do that, but one could never be too sure.

It was 2-2 now, and Jake dove right back into it. As time passed, Jake did begin to get some semblance of feeling for what the monk was doing. In some ways, what he did reminded Jake a bit of himself. When he defended, the monk could seemingly make his entire body utterly immovable and impervious, while when he attacked, he sent out odd destructive waves. However, after quite a few more traded hits, setting the score to 5-6 in the monk's favor, Jake finally understood his initial assessment was wrong. The monk's concept was not similar to Jake's arcane affinity. It was both simpler and infinitely more complex at the same time.

When the monk blocked a hit, he did not truly nullify Jake's blows. He absorbed it instead. Rather than the physical body, he made it so Jake struck the monk's soul directly, sending destructive energies through that. However, even if he did so, the monk managed to remain unaffected. Even if he did lose energy from taking hits, it was minuscule compared to actually getting hit. As for why others didn't do something similar...

Jake had tried to suffer from soul and mental attacks before. Getting hit in the soul was a special kind of pain, unlike anything that could ever be inflicted on the body. Moreover, it was like getting punched in the brain every single time one was hit. Like taking a mental attack every time... yet the monk did this repeatedly without a care in the world. At least he didn't show it but kept a serene expression.

All of this is to say... the monk had an innate will and inner calm that was utterly monstrous. His level of mental energy was simply on another level, to the point of it not truly making any sense.

Given enough landed hits, the monk would still fall. He still lost energy every single time Jake hit him, after all. Likely all three resources at once due to how the soul tended to work. The monk also needed to actively “shift” to doing his odd soul blocks and couldn’t move while doing so, creating plenty of openings.

The real way Jake found out how the monk’s ability worked wasn’t just through his own landed hits but those he took. He felt the odd waves go into his body every time he took a hit and soon identified them as soul-affecting attacks.

Jake himself was no weakling when it came to his soul and had thus barely noticed. But that didn’t mean the monk’s ability was useless, as it did allow him to deal more damage with every blow, as he could effectively infuse a soul-damaging concept into every punch.

One thing was clear... this Benevolent Monk was far beyond what anyone at his level should be. Shit, he was probably above where most C-grade should be in pure understanding and conceptual control.

But Jake still had confidence. One of the core tenets of his fighting style was to read his opponent, and as the fight proceeded, Jake did just that. Even as he fell behind and the score became 6-8 for the monk, he slowly began to edge out an advance, bringing the score to 7-8 in the very next moment by landing a fast job to the monk’s liver.

They were approaching the end of their duel... and they both knew it.

Jake was breathing heavily as he backed off a few steps, sweat dripping down his brow. The monk was also far less still than before, having to heave for breath himself. Every muscle in Jake’s body ached from



what had only been about ten minutes of fighting total, with the true number of exchanged moves well into the hundreds.

Even so... no blood had been spilled yet. Jake had blue marks everywhere, his arms were especially looking bad, and the monk didn't look in good condition either. But, as long as the blood stayed as internal bleeding, it didn't count. With neither of them using any weapons and both able to control and strengthen their body, it was far more difficult than normal to create any open wounds.

Looking at this opponent, Jake saw the monk's calm eyes and smile. Despite his labored breathing, he looked confident in himself. The monk clearly had more in the tank and probably still something hidden up his... well, he didn't have sleeves, but he definitely had something hidden somewhere.

Jake also had one more trump card to play. One attack he had purposefully not used in the entire fight so far, as he was looking for the perfect opportunity. One technique that could shift the entire bout in a single moment:

Fear Gaze.

And he knew it was soon time to use it. Both of them were getting tired, and their bodies no longer moved exactly as they intended every time. This meant more minor opportunities to attack, and Jake was waiting for one of those opportunities.

In concert, both of them seemed to agree to resume their fight as both stepped forward and entered each other's range once more. Jake winced with pain every time he blocked but didn't let it distract him as he tried all he could to land a blow. He finally managed to land a punch as he himself was kicked.

The score went to 8-9 for the monk as the opportunity arose as the monk's kick had put him slightly off balance.

Jake leaned his head to the side, avoiding a quick jab as he moved in for the finisher. The opening he had been waiting for had finally presented itself, and there was no way he wasn't capitalizing fully. Using the same motion he had to dodge, Jake threw a haymaker – an attack the monk would have easily dodged under normal circumstances, but this wasn't normal circumstances.

As he lunged forward, he activated Fear Gaze at full power to send an arcane-empowered fist with all of Jake's momentum baked into it, barreling toward the momentarily frozen monk's face. He only needed the monk to be frozen for less than a quarter of a second, less than any of his prior opponents, and-

It fell short by a fraction.

Jake's arcane-infused punch swept across and nicked the monk's chin as he, barely in time, moved his head to the side while landing a counter-attack of his own. Jake had no response but to brace himself, having put everything into his attack.

The Benevolent Monk's body exploded with power as he stomped down in the very same second his palm hit Jake in the stomach, sending a shockwave through Jake in both body and soul. Reverberations went through him as he flew back, his entire body wracked with pain as blood pooled in his mouth before he smashed into one of the many pillars.

A crack was heard as the pillar was filled with fractures, Jake coughing up a mouthful of blood on impact as he fell to the ground, heaving. Internal wounds ravaged his insides, forcing him to cough up even more blood. He had barely managed to strengthen his back using his arcane energy, making the stone break rather than his back, but it was still cut up everywhere and filled with a mesh of deep scratches. With everything put together, Jake struggled as he tried to stand, failing to do so.

Fuck...

“Alas, one cannot win every bout in their lifetime but only carry with them the lessons from a loss,” the Benevolent Monk said in a sentimental tone, making Jake grit his teeth. He had messed up and overestimated hi-

“I surrender. Thank you for this experience. It was indeed an exquisite experience that I hope bears repeating,” the monk finished, making Jake look up in shock despite the pain.

The monk stood there with a smile on his face... with a small cut on his left cheek from Jake’s punch, a single drop of blood rolling down before dripping onto the sand below. Still smiling, the man walked over and offered Jake a hand.

Without thinking, Jake took it as the Benevolent Monk helped him stand and gave him a solemn nod before turning around and walking out of the arena, Jake still just standing there with a body that felt like shit and an even shittier feeling in his stomach.

I... didn’t win shit, Jake cursed internally as the commentator went wild, seemingly not questioning the highly questionable outcome of the fight. The only comfort Jake could find was that he was certain of one thing...

There was no fucking way he wasn’t going to meet that monk again in the Colosseum for a proper rematch.

Chapter 750: Nevermore: Concepts

Jake barely managed to drag himself out of the arena. Nearly every one of his ribs were broken, and he had enough internal damage to kill most people. If he was not a system-changed creature, he would have been dead already.

After stumbling out of the arena, medical staff came. Sadly for Jake, they only checked if he would live, and while Jake was in a horrid condition, his life was not in danger. Seeing no other real choice, Jake bought a healing potion from one of the staff members for 100 Colosseum Points to try and at least recover a little. Instinctively, he identified it when the medical staff happily sold it.

[Colosseum of Mortals Recovery Potion (Unique)] – a potion from the Colosseum of Mortals. This potion will restore a small amount of health to stabilize the condition of anyone who consumes it while boosting the natural recovery rate of all resources for a day (24 hours). This effect only works out of combat. You can only consume one recovery potion a day.

It was a potion that was clearly made just for this Challenge Dungeon, and with it, he would maybe be able to fight the next day. Hopefully.

After drinking the potion, Jake sat down on a bench and stared into thin air for a while. He hurt all over, had a visible imprint of a palm on his chest, and he felt like shit. Jake had “won” the fight, sure, but it sure as hell didn’t feel like a victory.

If it had been a fight to the death, Jake would likely have lost his first life. Maybe he would have been able to drag out the time for a tie, but as he was currently, he didn’t see any path to victory. Not with the tools he had entered the arena with.

Magic wouldn’t have been an option, either. It was too slow to cast and use. Everything would be telegraphed, and the monk would have easily blocked it.

Despite being called it all the time, Jake was not a martial artist. He was no unarmed fighter. Every single hit from the monk left Jake reeling even when he blocked as the soul-affecting part of his strikes still went through. Meanwhile, Jake did far less damage even with his arcane energy, as, quite frankly, punches and kicks were not a good way to deliver arcane destruction. His entire fighting style was also created with the assumption that his counterattacks would be deadly stabs from katars and not just a damn punch.

This meant Jake had to dodge rather than block nearly all the time. That was his fighting style, but a dodge took way more energy and effort than blocking something. Usually, dodging would then at least allow you to take advantage of an opening as you didn't use an arm or a leg to block and could strike with it, but what did that help if the attack you could land barely did anything?

No... he would need weapons if he wanted to stand a chance.

Gritting his teeth, Jake just sat there, partly to let the potion do some of its work and partly because he didn't feel like getting up.

"Hey, Veteran Gladiator," he heard as he looked up and saw the Battlemaster had walked over. "You look like shit, but I guess you won anyway. Congratulations on that and keeping your streak going. Now, you strike me as rather preoccupied, so I'll leave you be. Get healed up, yeah? And keep up the good work; I doubt you will meet another monster like that any time soon."

Jake slowly nodded. "Thanks, I guess..."

The Battlemaster gave him a tap on his shoulder, making Jake wince a bit in pain. He had rolled a lot of punches off his shoulder, and it was still sore as hell, with it feeling like half the muscles within were ravaged. Didn't help that he had overstrained them with arcane energy, either.

The Battlemaster walked away as Jake stayed sitting, leaning back against the wall as leaning forward sure as hell wasn't an option with the current state of his ribs.

With a sigh, and to try and distract himself, he decided to check the damn system message he had gotten after the Battlemaster came and talked to him. It didn't really make him feel better.

Congratulations! You have reached the Veteran Gladiator rank, truly cementing yourself as a regular of the Colosseum of Mortals. As your notoriety and fame grow, so does the strength of your opponents, and you have begun to catch the eye of some of the more powerful entities involved with the Colosseum of Mortals.

As a Veteran Gladiator, you are still limited to one fight a week against another Veteran Gladiator.

All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.

In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Veteran Gladiator opponents in Show Matches once a day. These Show Matches are against a variety of foes and have far looser rules and regulations than regular arena fights. The possible opponents one can face in Show Matches are decided daily. Winning Show Matches reward Colosseum Points based on the opponents fought. Show Matches and battles against other Veteran Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.

The difficulty of all Show Match options has been increased.

For reaching the Veteran Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 5000 Colosseum Points.

For defeating the Benevolent Monk, you are rewarded an extra 10000 Colosseum Points.

Continue to fight, and claim your glory as you prove yourself the strongest mortal! Become the Champion! Or, perhaps, something above even that?

The message was just much of the same stuff he had been told after getting promoted to Gladiator, with some wording changes here and there. The only new things were the mention of Show Match options having their difficulty increased and the final part with the very obvious hint there was something above the rank of Champion.

Looking at the 5000 points for reaching Veteran Gladiator without losing, and especially the 10000 points from "defeating" the Benevolent Monk, left him with a sour taste in his mouth.

Jake realized it was his own mistake. The Colosseum of Mortals had just been way too easy for too long. He had fought every single day for more than ten weeks and had yet to face a single battle that made him feel actually threatened. One where he didn't always know, in the back of his mind, that he had another card to pull out and win if he so desired.

One could argue the difficulty spike had been too sudden, but Jake could only blame his own hubris.

He wouldn't say that the monk offering the honor rules had been lucky, though. It was clearly by design, either made like this by the Wyrmgod or the system directly. For the first major difficulty spike like this to be against someone literally called a Benevolent Monk? Someone who didn't want to kill his opponents and even offered rules that would make most people far too weak to challenge him lose instantly? Yeah, definitely not a coincidence.

This fight was a warning of those to come. A reminder there were other monsters out there who possessed power defying the limitations of stats. People who were able to control concepts beyond what any F-grade should ever be able to.

Jake had to admit that he had never really understood what concepts were, and based on what Villy had said, with the Path he was walking, he likely never truly would.

Still, Jake tried to at least get a basic understanding. Based on the Primordial, concepts came in two forms. The "logical" and the "nomological." It was a bit more complicated, but Jake did like to simplify things.

Logical concepts could be understood through intense study. They could be endlessly practiced and understood, like a researcher delving into a particular subject. With how deep the pit of knowledge went on nearly every topic after the system appeared, to truly try and comprehend something was a lifetime goal, even for gods. It was like there was always more to learn, even if you felt like you had seen anything. As if there was always one deeper layer one could dive into, one more level of understanding.

Nomological concepts were nearly the opposite. These were concepts that could not be explained logically by the person who used them. Nomological concepts were often of the more mysterious kind, and some concepts simply had no truly logical aspect to them. One could try to do a logical analysis of how everything related to a nomological concept worked and its effects, but one could never truly find a satisfying answer. The point of nomological concepts often was that there was no true answer.



A great example of a purely nomological concept was the entire Avarious and Horizon-chasing concept. The one that made him deal more damage to people higher level than himself didn't have any logical groundwork; there was no theory of how it worked; it simply was. Even if someone made a skill like that, they would have no way to properly explain how it worked. They could say how they did it, the effects of the ability itself, but that didn't in any way make it replicable.

Even if this distinction seemed rather strict, most top-tier concepts were a mix of the logical and nomological, though some did lean far more in one direction than the other. This did result in two people being able to learn the exact same concept, with one taking a logical and the other a nomological approach, but reaching very similar results.

Jake was a person who leaned very much in the direction of the nomological. He never truly "understood" how concepts worked... but in some way, he still kind of did. He understood how they felt to use, the experience of having a certain kind of energy running through his body. He could experience them. In the same vein, when he saw a concept used, he could understand what it did and, from there, attempt to replicate it, not through arduous research but pure trial and error.

Of course, the final aspect of all these concepts even working was the system that often helped put all the pieces together.

The monk Jake had thought was also someone Jake was certain walked a Path of purely nomological concepts. Just being a monk, Jake already connected him to the Dao Sect – or at least a similar place – and the Dao thing sure as hell wasn't an institution rooted in logic. Instead, it was about meditating for endless years, thinking about something until suddenly you received enlightenment.

On the note of enlightenment, there were a few theories as to how or why they appeared. Based on what Villy had said, it was a mix of receiving a genuine epiphany of understanding and the system then coming in to assist by filling in the gaps, even with things not necessarily related to skills. It wasn't just understanding the fundamental truths of the universe, but instead getting an idea that the system then approved and helped make a reality.

Ah, but there was one kind of “true” enlightenment. People who had those were called Transcendents. Where their epiphany went beyond the confines of the system, and rather than help, all it could do was try and accommodate their Path.

Anyway... concepts. An easy way to view concepts was as amplifiers of sorts. If the Sword Saint “understood” better how sharp his blade was, he could thus make it sharper. This meant that should he clash with an opponent who lacked understanding, the old man would come out on top every time as his blade would simply be sharper.

Mind you, this was only truly the case when talking about fights without skills. If both of them had the same stats and used the exact same skill, things would be near entirely equalized, even if one party understood the concept far more thoroughly. That is because concepts were baked into skills, and if the concept you infused into a skill improved enough... that’s what skill upgrades were for. Sure, there could still be variance even within the same skill if one person was closer to upgrading it than the other, but if both had, as an example, just selected the skill during a skill selection and both only used the skill with the basic instinctual knowledge provided, they would be roughly equal.

This didn’t mean high rarity skills could entirely replace conceptual understanding. A lot of fighting did not directly involve skills, and using skills all the time was a great way to run yourself out of mana or stamina. Usually, you also wanted your skills to be better than what a regular attack only infused with conceptual understanding did. Finally, upgrading skills required understanding them.

What did this ultimately mean? Well... Jake running around with a high conceptual understanding of his arcane affinity meant that every single kick or punch he threw was the same as an ancient or even legendary skill for a G-grade.

The monk was the same, except more extreme. He was like a G or F-grade walking around with at least a powerful mythical skill and the mental training of someone far above a normal C-grade. Jake had a hard

time trying to understand if the man was just someone created by the system and the Wyrmgod or if he was an image of a real person. Perhaps a mix of both. But if he was indeed a real person who had that kind of power as a G-grade... no, that wouldn't be possible. Jake was positive about that. He would have gotten levels or something, right?

It was far more likely that should he be an image of a real person, he was just a C-grade who had been turned level 0, the same as Jake.

Yeah... that had to be it.

Jake tried to comfort himself a bit with the thought, but it didn't really help much. Fact still was Jake had his ass handed to him, and not just because his opponent was monstrously powerful, but because he had been a reckless and overly-confident moron.

The system even fucking warned me, he scolded himself, shaking his head. He just hadn't taken it seriously, as all prior warnings hadn't really led to things actually getting hard.

No... there was no reason to dwell on his own fuck-up. Better to act on it.

A good twenty minutes had passed by now since Jake had fought his battle, and through his sphere, he saw Polly and Owen walking over with hurried steps. Still sitting on the bench, leaning back against the wall behind him, he turned his head and looked toward them.

"Are you okay? It looked rough out there... and you definitely don't look that good either," Owen said curtly with some genuine worry as he rushed over.

"I don't think okay is the right word to use in this case," Jake shook his head. "Not going to sugarcoat it, I look like shit outwardly, but it's way fucking worse on the inside."

"That monk... did not belong at Veteran Gladiator rank," Owen sighed as he tried to comfort Jake. "In fact, I don't think he belongs in any of the different Gladiator ranks. He is one of those monstrous people you just hope not to meet as they climb the rank ladder. Same as you."

"Yeah, I know... I knew before the fight," Jake admitted. "I fucked up by not preparing properly this time around, even if I had a warning."

Polly, seeing Jake being down, shifted the topic. "Any... anyway, are you okay otherwise? Have you consumed a recovery potion yet? If not, the medical staff sells them..."

"I have," Jake smiled. "Thanks for the concern, I should be back in top form within a few days, and hopefully, I will be fit to fight again tomorrow. Though I will ask. Polly... can you figure out if my next opponent is also an anomaly?"

"I already did, and as long as you get your first Veteran Gladiator fight done within the next two weeks, there are no outliers, just regulars," Polly said instantly.

Jake was about to say something but just sighed. "Thanks again."

Moving forward, he wanted to at least check if he would face a similar situation. He didn't know if the system would only warn him the first time he faced an anomaly or if it just sometimes happened randomly, and you had to figure it out yourself. Either way, Jake wanted to know and be ready. In more ways than one.

Checking his Colosseum Points, Jake had gained a lot.

Current objective: Be promoted from Veteran Gladiator to Master Gladiator

Current rank: Veteran Gladiator (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 35340

Lives remaining: 10

And he knew what to do with them too.

"Owen, Polly," Jake said to the two of them. "You two wanna go shopping tomorrow morning when they open? If I am feeling in shape for it, that is."

"You're finally going to get some proper equipment?" Owen asked with interest.

“More than just a pair of boots, at least,” Jake smiled in response. “But that is for tomorrow... for now, I just need to relax.”

The one good thing about Jake’s recklessness was that he had fought first thing in the morning. It wasn’t even noon yet, and he had the entire day ahead of him. It was an entire day to do whatever he wanted, and he knew exactly what to do with this time too:

Be at home laying in his bed.

Because right now, just breathing fucking hurt.