

## Hunter 751

### Chapter 751: Nevermore: Monk Beating = Colosseum Loot

Sleeping was truly an overpowered passive ability. It was like using the Meditation skill on steroids and helped regenerate the body at a quite frankly insane pace compared to any other non-magical means. However, even if this was the case, Jake still woke up feeling like shit.

Looking at the window in the small Gladiator townhouse, he saw that it was still pitch-black outside, indicating it was still in the middle of the night. That was not overly surprising, considering he had gone to bed around noon the day before, meaning he had likely still slept well over twelve hours.

With a groan, he pushed himself to sit upright on the bed. He still had a bruise on his chest where he had been punched, and he still felt sore all over, but otherwise, he did seem to be in a pretty good condition compared to the day before. It was a good idea he had gone straight home with the help of Owen after leaving the Colosseum and, after getting inside, flopped down on the bed.

Gotta change the bedsheets tonight, Jake sighed as he looked at the messy linen. He hadn't felt like cleaning himself the day before, which could definitely be seen on the bedsheets that had been white once upon a time.

Forcing himself to stand, Jake knew lying in bed wouldn't help much anymore. The soreness would go away with time, and actually moving about should help get some of the stiffness out. Still feeling pretty dirty from the day before, he headed straight into the bathroom with a big basin of water to clean himself. Jake would have preferred a proper shower, but sometimes you just had to take what you could get.

Before putting on some of the new clothes that Polly had helped get him, he began doing some stretches in the living room to get some of his mobility back. After that, he sat down and meditated, focusing on healing but also trying to grasp the opportunity to feel the effects of the odd recovery

potion he had consumed. This was his first time drinking one of those, and not taking every opportunity would be a waste of time.

Besides, what better things could he do? It was the middle of the night, and the Colosseum had yet to open. Plus, he had agreed that Owen would stop by the next morning before he headed to the Colosseum to check if Jake had died in his sleep. At least that was how the spearman-that-totally-wasn't-some-lightning mage-prodigy phrased it.

Hours passed, and soon enough, there was a knock at his door. After putting on some pants, Jake opened the door to see both Owen and Polly standing there. Polly stared for a moment before turning her head away while Owen sighed.

"Could you put on a shirt?"

"You guys watched me fight shirtless yesterday and even carried my shirtless ass back here afterward," Jake very accurately pointed out.

"Yeah, but this is different, so put one on," Owen shook his head.

Jake didn't get it but went and put on a shirt. Pulling it over his head did kind of hurt, but it wasn't as bad as it was even when he woke up. He still hoped to do a match that day, as he could do his very first Veteran Gladiator match right off the bat. Chances are that would be fine, though he would have to wait until later in the day before signing up.

Which was fine as his first plans of the day weren't to get into any fights.

Because it was shopping time.

After breakfast, of course. A healthy meal was a vital part of the healing process, after all.

Walking to the Colosseum after eating, Owen really couldn't hold himself back as he teased Jake.

"So, you're actually determined to get some proper equipment this time around?" Owen asked with a bit of a cheeky smile. "I guess it just took some old monk giving you a few good punches to knock some sense into you. And before you say anything, Polly, I can make fun of Jake now because he can at least walk straight now, while I would have felt bad if I did it yesterday."

"Still a bit mean..." Polly muttered.

"Yeah, Owen. Stop being such a bully," Jake agreed wholeheartedly.

"Apologies, I didn't realize I hurt your fragile feelings," Owen kept teasing.

"It's fine. I guess I was just a little shocked that you, of all people, would do that. It came like a lightning bolt from a clear sky, but I guess the experience was just too electrifying to pass for you," Jake said in a tone that may or may not be interpreted as threatening based on who heard it.

Owen threw him a glance as he slowed down walking, Jake feeling pretty pleased with himself. He still didn't know why the guy was being so secretive about it all. Polly was also confused, as she didn't seem to get it... until it looked like she did.

"Why did you say it like that?" Polly questioned. "Does Owen or someone he knows have the lightning affinity or something?"

Jake froze momentarily, Owen now glaring daggers.

"Eh, it's just a very common saying where I come from; it has nothing to do with Owen," Jake tried to explain it away.

It clearly didn't work... but Polly seemed to understand it was a touchy subject and didn't ask more. Luckily, things didn't have more time to get awkward, as they soon reached the Colosseum that had just opened for the day. As always, it was buzzing with activity, though the number of people that came and went seriously didn't correspond to the number of people in the audience. Not even close.

Making it to the shopping district, Jake didn't hesitate as he went straight to where one could spend their points.

During the morning, Jake had considered a lot about what he wanted to buy, and in the end, he had settled on... everything.

It was time to stop fucking around and to get some proper equipment. Even if that meant Jake would end every fight within a minute, all that would mean was that he had more time to practice, and if he did happen to meet another outlier, he would at least be ready.

Jake ended up spending more than an hour putting together a list of purchases while sticking to his budget, all with the help of Polly. When they were done, Jake nodded with satisfaction as he began the shopping spree. First on the list were his melee weapons.

[Aersteel Katar (Epic)] – This katar is made of a metal called Aersteel, making it incredibly light yet equally durable. The design of the weapon is simple and, due to the material used, has exemplary mana conductivity. Potent wind affinity energy is infused into the steel, making the weapon not suffer any wind resistance while increasing penetrative power. Enchantments: Insured.

Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 5000 Colosseum Points.

Two weapons, 10000 Colosseum Points spent. Jake had thought about just getting some rare katars for a third of the price but had ultimately gone with the expensive solution. He wanted to use these weapons for a long time, and they truly fit what he wanted. Plus, he had more ideas for them later on... and if those ideas didn't pan out, he could always return them and get half back.

Next up was a pair of gloves.

[Gloves of Hardening (Rare)] – Durable leather gloves created to allow the user to block some blows directly with their hands. If one infuses mana into these gloves, they harden and become far more

durable, but does so the user cannot move their fingers. Enchantments: Insured. Hardening.  
Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.

Nothing really exciting here; they just reminded him a bit of the gloves he used in C-grade. Jake liked the ability to make his gloves far more durable when blocking blows, even if this effect was a bit subpar, especially if one compared it to his old legendary gloves.

Now it was on to items that gave stats. Potentially the most important part of this whole gear acquisition trip.

Jake had a total of 152 stats combined after he had been reduced to level 0. The rule for stats from equipment was that you could only get a 20% increase in any individual stat, with the total combined bonus from all items not surpassing more than 15% of your total stats.

This meant Jake could only get 22 extra stats from more equipment. However... things weren't all that simple. Because with the rule that one could only gain 20% to each individual stat and the fact that the system didn't do fractions while always rounding down, there was a bit of math to be done. Looking at his stats – without counting in the +1 Agility from his boots - this became pretty clear.

Stats

Strength: 16

Agility: 18

Endurance: 16

Vitality: 17

Toughness: 16

Wisdom: 17

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 20

Willpower: 16

With at least 15 in every stat, Jake could get a total of 3 extra in each, with the one outlier being his Perception, where he could get 4. That added up to a total of 28 potential stats Jake could get from equipment. With only 22 to actually get, there was thus 6 stats to filter out.

Jake quickly decided where he wanted to cut and where he wanted the stats. Getting +3 to Agility and Strength was a given. Next on his list of priorities were Intelligence, Wisdom, and Endurance. All of those were essential, too, especially when he was at such a low level. Longevity in fights was usually very limited, especially for someone like Jake, who could drag out far more energy than a normal G or F-grade.

No, the places chose to cut the 6 stats were somewhere unexpected. Jake had made the very controversial decision he would only get +2 to Perception and only +1 for Toughness and Vitality. He had considered just not getting anything in Toughness and Vitality but still decided on +1 for each.

Perception was still the best stat, and it would still be his highest even if he didn't get equipment for it... but he also recognized that he didn't have most of the things that made the stat so good. He didn't get the scaling from his skills, and the concepts behind said scaling was at a level far above what Jake could replicate himself.

Moreover, most of the regular effects of Perception were lost on Jake. Perception allowed one to better sense energy and such, and the better you could sense anything, the better you could control it. Jake was not bottlenecked by his senses but by his stats and limited resources.

When it came to combat, Perception was what allowed you to see attacks coming and react in time. And, well, Jake still had his Bloodline that was working as if he had more than 40,000 Perception despite being nerfed to only 20. This was probably the system's way of not instantly killing people with Bloodlines like him, as if the system hadn't done this, Jake could have potentially appeared in the Challenge Dungeon with his sphere several hundred meters in diameter, resulting in a swift death from a not-so-pleasant brain aneurysm caused by pure overload.

It was a difficult decision to skip out on more Perception, but sadly the most logical one in the moment. Ah, but if there had been elixirs giving Perception, Jake may have totally taken them, as he could at least have justified that by saying he had the biggest percentage bonus to Perception out of all his stats. Alas,



elixirs were not a thing in the Colosseum... not that Jake thought they would have even worked on someone level 0.

So he would have to settle for stats from equipment... and an excellent foundation to get him to the stat cap was quite an interesting ring.

[The 1 Ring (Epic)] - A ring rumored to be of elven origin. Enchantments: Insured. +1 to all stats.

Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 8000 Colosseum Points.

The name of the ring was a bit on the nose. He did also wonder why it even needed to be insured. The ring would merge with his body when he put it on, and even if it didn't, it looked pretty damn durable, to the level where he doubted anything could destroy it, save for throwing it into a volcano or something.

Anyway, having this ring gave 9 stats total, and with his boots, he only needed 12 more overall. Something his next two pieces of equipment helped nicely with.

[Exceptional Leather Vestment (Rare)] – A high-quality leather vestment made by a skilled craftsman. This armor is very durable and especially resistant to slashing attacks. Due to the innate power of the beast that supplied the leather, the wearer becomes more agile and has enhanced Endurance. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Agility, +1 Endurance.

Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 2000 Colosseum Points.

[Exceptional Leather Pants (Rare)] - A high-quality pair of leather pants made by a skilled craftsman. This armor is very durable and especially resistant to slashing attacks. Due to the innate power of the beast that supplied the leather, the wearer has enhanced Endurance and Strength. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Endurance, +1 Strength.

Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 2000 Colosseum Points.

These two were pretty much a set and matched one another. Buying them even meant the shop threw in a free belt that didn't give any stats or even counted as real equipment. The designs of the two pieces of armor were simple and straightforward, with no decorations or anything. The leather did look like what he thought was called boiled leather, but Jake was no expert, and wasn't it all magical anyway?

Either way, this was 4 more stats. 8 to go, 2 of which came from the next thing he had bought.

[Bracers of Counter-Deflection (Rare)] – Durable leather bracers created to better allow the wearer to deflect attacks and counter. Enhances the user's Perception to allow them to better see the incoming attacks and the power of their physical counterattacks. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Strength, +1 Perception

Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.

The bracers were pretty simple and had a name Jake didn't think had overly much to do with the fact that they gave Perception and Strength. Then again, it could also be because of the design, as both bracers were created to deflect blades rather than block them. Who knows.

Now, Jake had wanted to go all-out with what he bought, which didn't really seem to match him buying so many rare pieces of equipment. The reason he hadn't bought better was pretty simple... he couldn't afford to due to the next two items.

[Necklace of the Hopeful Enlightenment (Epic)] – A well-made necklace once worn by a monk who sought enlightenment. The material of the necklace itself is unknown. Grants inspiration from the monk's attempt at receiving enlightenment to the user, allowing them to better analyze the movements of their own internal energies. Enchantments: Insured. Hopeful Enlightenment. +2 Wisdom, +2 Intelligence, +2 Willpower.

Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 5000 Colosseum Points.

This necklace made up the last stats Jake had to gain from equipment, effectively capping him. In addition to that, it also provided him with that weird Enlightenment effect, which Jake barely noticed, but hey, any bonus was a good bonus.

Finally was an item Jake had looked for far and wide for the last time he had been at the store. Finally, he was getting it.

[Ring of Deft Hands (Epic)] – A ring created by someone once known as a powerful thief who often had a need to switch tools in the middle of a job. Allows the wearer to store up to five items within the ring that can be retrieved to the hands of the wearer. All items must be pre-registered.

Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 4500 Colosseum Points.

Was this a spatial ring? Well, kind of, but not really. It did store an item inside a small space, but it didn't have a storage space per-se; it was more like it could absorb up to five items at once that all had been pre-marked by it. It was, by all means, one of the shittiest versions of spatial treasures available, but it should get the job done. At least this would help Jake with his combat style, where he liked to switch weapons, which he also assumed was why it was even sold. Some people would simply be too fucked without the ability to switch weapons in the middle of combat. A bit suspicious one had to be Veteran Gladiator to unlock it... but then again, if you couldn't even make it to Veteran Gladiator, you probably weren't going that far anyway.

Now, an astute observer, such as Owen, did notice the lack of a certain item he had expected Jake to buy:

A bow.

But... its absence was very much a purposeful decision. Jake was practically out of points after buying everything else, and he knew that should he get a bow, he wanted a good one. Moreover, he still had the basic bow that could do an acceptable job... if he even wanted to use it.

Katars were more than sufficient for now. Jake would get a bow at some point, of that he didn't doubt. He also had a helmet or mask to gain, along with maybe a cloak or something. Considering he didn't need more stats, he could get special equipment there with special abilities.

For now, he was pretty damn settled, though.

Looking at his updated status after everything was equipped, there was indeed quite a difference.

Stats

Strength: 19

Agility: 21

Endurance: 19

Vitality: 18

Toughness: 17

Wisdom: 20

Intelligence: 19

Perception: 22

Willpower: 19

But, these stats had come at a cost. Quite literally. It had nearly bankrupted Jake of Colosseum Points.

Colosseum Points: 1840

Jake had spent more than ninety percent of the points he had saved up for the last nearly quarter of a year. 33500 points.

He didn't regret it, though. He knew that some of the equipment, like the rings and necklace, could be used for the rest of the Challenge Dungeons, with the katars likely also the same if his plans panned out. Everything else could be sold back to get him half the points returned, so even if he had spent over thirty-three thousand, one could say he had only actually spent around seventeen thousand, with another seventeen thousand owed.

Also, even if it had taken him a long time to get these points, he was confident in earning them back and more. Shit, he had a feeling that winning a single match toward the end of the Challenge Dungeon would give him more points than he had spent on all his equipment. At least if the 10000 he had gained from "beating" the Benevolent Monk were anything to go by.

Jake was ultimately still in the earlier stages of the Challenge Dungeon, time-wise.

Jake was overall happy with what he had bought. Because, standing there with the improved equipment and a katar in each hand, Jake didn't feel any trepidations for the future, but only confident about one thing:

If he met the Benevolent Monk again, the outcome would be far different.

Chapter 752: Nevermore: A Man With A Plan

Jake was not the only one experiencing the Colosseum of Mortals or who had at least experienced it prior, for that matter. There was, of course, the Sword Saint, who was also hard at work, and as a far wiser man, had heeded the warning upon being confronted with the Benevolent Monk. He had responded by buying a good sword as well as some basic equipment, which had ended with him drawing blood early on in the fight without taking any major damage himself. This didn't mean the fight had been easy... just that he had offensive prowess allowing him to easily bypass the challenge.

Carmen had also chosen to enter the Colosseum as that appealed to her far more than any of the other Challenge Dungeons. Losing her variant human race and becoming a G-grade once more did shock her at first, as suddenly becoming a soft shell of her former self was difficult to accept... but then she adapted.

She had been an okay boxer before the system arrived, and she was acceptable for her age group and weight class but still firmly an amateur. But now? Now, she would have been able to beat the living shit out of every single boxer that had ever lived pre-system. Not just because her physical specs matched any male boxer if they had equal stats, but because of the sheer quality difference between pre and post-system martial arts.

All stats equal, Carmen was superhuman with conceptual empowerment in every single one of her punches or kicks. Even without her skills, she could still imitate some of the weaker ones she had in lower grades, and even if her body had become far less durable, she knew how to make up for that with proper equipment. A good pair of gloves and high-quality bracers could go a long way for any pugilist.

Was reaching the rank of Champion possible? Hard to say, but she was sure as hell gonna give it a shot.

However, there were people who had a far harder time. Caleb had attempted it but quickly found himself facing difficulties. His fighting style simply didn't fit the Colosseum, and while he could go decently far, he was in no way a contender to become the Champion. It was a bit embarrassing to say, but Matteo, who Caleb was doing the dungeon with, performed way better, being a skilled fighter even before the system.

Casper was much the same. In fact, he had it harder than Caleb, as adapting to his level 0 body was more difficult for him than others. He hadn't become human again, but a level 0 Risen, something he had never tried to be before.



Even if he had been able to adapt, his fighting style also sucked. Plus, he didn't have Lyra with him anymore, nor could he properly wield his curse magic, use his traps, or his dungeon architect skills. All of this is to say the guy was fucked.

Maria fell into a weird middle ground between Carmen and Caleb. She was a skilled archer even before the system and had only gotten better. Plus, fire magic was known for its power, even at low levels, making her pretty strong even at level 0.

And then there were two more individuals of note when talking about people from Earth. Both were considered monsters and pinnacle geniuses in their C-grade forms, but when they were reduced to only G-grade... well, the outcome spoke for itself.

Arnold was thrown out of the dungeon after getting promoted to Initiate Fighter, having already lost two lives as a New Blood from goblins clubbing him to death. Eron, having lost all his skills and being too used to being effectively immortal, had no idea how to fight at all, and while he did manage to reach Fledgling Fighter due to his arcane affinity and having some basic knowledge of vital points due to his former life as a surgeon, he also flunked out spectacularly.

This was a very important part of Nevermore. Most people simply did "okay" in the arena, even among the top geniuses. Many believed it was unfair that some were put in worse situations than others due to the nature of their Paths, but they all had missed one vital purpose of the Colosseum: adaptability.

If they had truly wanted to, Eron or Arnold could not have fought every day but spent time training with weapons. They had the stats to fight and were still C-grade, with insights and developed Paths far beyond what any G or F-grade could ever have... but perhaps they both knew they didn't have the talent to become skilled in combat and thus chose to focus their efforts elsewhere.

When looking at people of note, not from Earth, there were many outstanding individuals, but also many who did far worse than expected. People like Ghost King Azal did just as well as expected, cleaving through the ranks while happily building up power by consuming the spirits of every single opponent he met in the arena to use them as resources for when times got tough.

Others from the Dao Sect also did well, as expected, while Arnold's party of void freaks were hard to figure out. Many other elite groups also entered, with the difference in performance varying widely between each individual member.

Ah, and when speaking of notable people who did the Challenge Dungeon, there was also Ell'Hakan, who performed as expected. As for what this expected performance was, not even the Malefic Viper knew. Because the Wyrmgod refused to show him.

Anyway, this stark difference in performances, not just between groups but every individual in each group, was one of the primary reasons why it was often said that the true winners on the Leaderboards would be determined in the Challenge Dungeons, not the regular floors.

It eliminated some people entirely as they were weak as individuals and only strong in groups. Naturally, those who were only strong as individuals but sucked in a group had a harder time on the regular floors, and it wasn't like these Challenge Dungeons could make up the difference. Not truly.

Additionally, one had to remember there were five Challenge Dungeons in total. Each of them tested different things and had different themes. Reaching the top of the Nevermore Leaderboards wasn't just about being the strongest in a fight but about having well-rounded abilities and the ability to adapt. Some would perhaps claim this was unfair, as being at the top of the Leaderboards didn't even mean you were strongest, just that you were good enough in many different fields while naturally still being extremely strong. But, ultimately, this was the Wyrmgod's domain, and if that is what the Primordial deemed to be the true criteria for being recognized as a genius, no one dared complain.

Jake, despite not being a person many would describe as well-rounded, was multi-talented and skilled at adapting. That is one of the reasons both he and the Malefic Viper had confidence Jake could do well on the Leaderboards.

Of course, there was one more thing to consider with the relationship between these Challenge Dungeons and the Leaderboards outside of the top contenders needing to be multi-talented. One big difference-maker that in many prior eras had led to people taking the top spot:

Someone performing so much better than everyone else in a Challenge Dungeon that it made up a mediocre performance in the others.

Doomfoot had been a legend in the lower ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals. He was a true master of kicks who had become a Gladiator by only using his feet. Even when he evolved to the Arcane Doomfoot, he was still a martial artist and a connoisseur of the art of kicking... but that all ended the day he met the Benevolent Monk.

On that fateful day, Jake had used his hands, and there was no going back from that. Not that anyone in the audience, nor the announcer, had expected the Jake that entered the arena the day after his "victory" over the monk. Nor did they expect how the fight would go.

Jake had still been hurting from his injuries despite waiting till the evening before he fought, so he didn't want to drag things out. Based on his opponent's movements, the orc also seemed to realize Jake was still injured and wanted to capitalize. Jake couldn't really blame him and invited his eager opponent to try and finish the fight quickly.

He had allowed his opponent to get to him first as he didn't want to waste energy running around. Dodging the first strike from the orc's sword, Jake stepped forward and punched once, his katar penetrating the chainmail of his foe and knocking him back with a massive bleeding wound on his

stomach. Jake didn't even need to do a follow-up as the orc promptly surrendered, probably not wanting to bleed to death as Jake had hit more than a few important places internally.

The following days proceeded much the same as Jake returned to peak condition, keeping up his streak of fighting daily. Every single fight ended nearly instantly as Jake was done playing around. He had nothing to learn from his opponents in the arena, and it wasn't even worth it trying to practice there. Hence why he just viewed it as something to get done every day as he practiced other things.

He did consider buying a bow once he saved up enough points but wanted to wait till Polly informed him he would face a tough opponent to get the best thing possible. That was another big change from then till now: information gathering. He even once spent a few points to buy information on an opponent Polly warned could have been dangerous. The elven mage didn't turn out to be that strong in the end, but he didn't regret being a bit more cautious than usual.

Weeks passed, and soon enough, he once more found himself at ten wins and ready to meet his next opponent for a promotion. When he went to the Battlemaster to schedule his Promotion Match for the next day, something very familiar happened.

Walking up to him and requesting the match, the Battlemaster looked a bit befuddled as he sighed loudly.

"I don't know how this happened... but it looks like we got a similar situation on our hands as we did when you were about to be promoted to Veteran Gladiator. Another big anomaly stands in your way, this one a dwarven mage that also hasn't faced any real difficulties in his ascension through the ranks," the Battlemaster warned him. "There is no way to tell if he is stronger than the Benevolent Monk, but he doesn't strike me as the sort to enter a similar deal, so it will be a full-on fight without any honor rules outside the Colosseum's usual ones."

The Battlemaster made it sound like this scenario was truly out of the ordinary, but Jake had fully expected it. How couldn't he? The bonus objective last time had very heavily hinted at him unlocking these kinds of fights as long as he managed to win against the Benevolent Monk.

But, this time, Jake would not go in blind.

"I naturally accept the fight. But do you have any information on what kind of mage he is, or should I just gather it myself?" Jake questioned.

"Can't tell you if you need research or not, but I can give you some basic information. It's a dwarf using some nasty earth magic, and he is real good at it. As I told you, he has yet to face any problems so far, simply because no one can break through his stupidly robust defenses, and if you mess up just once, you end up with an earth spear through your gut. Ah, but he doesn't seem to be able to control the sand but has to fuse it into larger rocks before he strikes with it. At least he has done that in all prior fights," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake nodded along to the man's explanations as he also checked the notification he had received from the system about a new bonus objective.

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 Earthborn Faithful.

The Earthborn Faithful. Jake wasn't sure what to make of the name, but he sure wanted to find out. He had a full day before he would fight the dwarf and spent that time researching with Polly to make sure he would walk into the arena fully prepared.

A day later, he did just that as it was time for his promotion match to Master Gladiator. With good luck wishes from Polly and Owen, Jake walked into the arena with confidence and a plan.

"Welcome, to the arena! Today, we have a fight between two rising stars, two absolutely outstanding Gladiators! On one side, we have the Earthborn Faithful, a dwarf of one talent and one talent only: crushing every single foe with the might of the earth! However, his opponent today is no simple man and surely not one who would willingly see himself squashed," the announcer began as Jake reached the top of the stairs.

Looking at this opponent on the other side of the arena, Jake saw a somewhat stereotypical dwarf. Small, bulky, big beard and what looked like stone armor that covered everything except for the lower side of his head. Probably to make space for the beard. In his hands, he held a metal staff filled with gemstones, giving Jake the vibes of quite a powerful weapon.

"What do we even call him these days? Doomfoot? One-Stab-Kill? The Katar King? A man of many talents and many names, so who even cares what we call him? He sure doesn't... for I think he cares for no names but to walk out of here called the victor! Let's find out if he can do just that! Lower the gates!"

Jake internalized his complaints at the incredibly dumb names the asshole announcer had given him throughout the last few weeks.

"Oi! I heard ya beat that damn monk in his little competition a while back! Don't think this'll be as easy!" the dwarf yelled from across the arena in an incredibly loud voice right as the gates began lowering. "Ya could just surrender now and save yaself the trou-"

Jake jumped over the still-lowering bars the second he could and charged forward, stopping the dwarf in his tracks. He responded instantly as he slammed his staff into the ground, creating a wave of sand that condensed into a rain of stone shards flying toward Jake.

Dodging around a pillar, Jake disjointed all of them as he also proceeded to dodge several more attacks as he closed in, deflecting whatever stone shards he couldn't dodge with his katars or bracers. Getting within less than five meters, he felt what the dwarf was preparing and used his prepared countermeasure.

Taking a large stride, Jake's entire right foot was enveloped in dense arcane mana. With a stomp, Jake diffused more than two-thirds of his entire mana pool into the sand, hardening it. The dwarf who was about to unleash the spears he had prepared beneath the sand found himself unable to use his attack and instead tried to defend as an earth wall appeared out of thin air... but Jake had already jumped, having expected that response.

Right as he vaulted over the large wall, two spears shot for him, which Jake barely managed to avoid as he fell down toward the dwarf. Frowning, the dwarf slammed his hands together as a shell of stone covered his body while he also stomped, sending a wave of earth mana into the ground that broke the stabilized sand. Then, he used another spell, and he began falling into the sand as if it had suddenly turned into water.

With a mental command, Jake executed the crux of his plan.

The reason why the dwarf had been problematic for every other opponent was primarily due to three reasons. First was his offensive powers. Stone spears just fucking hurt, okay? Second was how durable he was defensively. Stone was also very hard, after all. The third, and likely the biggest reason, was because of his ability to travel through the sand to escape if he ever did get pinned down.

As the dwarf was half-submerged in the sand, Jake flipped the stability in the arcane mana that filled the sand all around them from stable to destructive. Instantly, the sand in a large area around them erupted as the arcane mana exploded, sending the surprised dwarf flying into the air through his own earth shell that his phasing ability made him pass straight through.

What he couldn't pass through were the two katars coming for his chest. In the very last moment, the dwarf empowered his stone armor to try and block the blow... but with everything else going on, he was off his game, and a Fear Gaze sealed the deal and stopped his final attempt to save himself. Two arcane-covered katars penetrated into the chest of the dwarf, tearing his armor apart and sending him flying through the air with two streams of blood trailing after him, mixing with the sand that was still falling from the arcane explosion earlier.

Jake landed on the ground a second later, sand still falling all around him. Looking at the dwarf, he looked like he struggled for a moment until he yelled in surrender. All in all, the fight had taken not even a full minute, the dwarf never truly getting a chance as Jake managed to near-perfectly execute his plan.

It was amazing how much proper equipment and going in with an actual plan could do. Who could have known?

Chapter 753: Nevermore: Gladiator No More

"Oi! That was bullshit out there, pure bullshit, I tell you! How can you even call that a proper fight, huh?" the annoying dwarf yelled at Jake, who was just trying to enjoy his sandwich in peace.



"You're just mad because you lost," Jake muttered.

"Damn straight I am! What was that shit out there? You aren't a bloody mage, so why do you use magic like that? You didn't even give me a chance to do anything! Do you have any idea how much time I spent on making this staff and each of the stored spells in the gems? You only gave me time to use one of them! One!" the dwarf kept complaining as Jake hunched down his food.

"Sounds like a severe case of skill issues," Jake said in a deadpan tone.

"You..." the dwarf muttered. "I swear, we'll meet again for a rematch, and next time I'll also come prepared! Mark my words!"

With a huff, he walked away, limping slightly due to the big bandages covering his chest. Jake just kept smiling to himself. While he did find the situation amusing, he also took the threats of a rematch very seriously.

Jake was fully aware he had won that fight far too easily due to his preparation and a bit of luck. The dwarf had done exactly as expected at every turn, falling into very much the same trap Jake had found himself in before his fight with the Benevolent Monk.

Every single fight for the Earthborn Faithful had been far too easy, and nobody had managed to even injure him due to his high defenses. As Jake was doing before, the guy was just going through the motions, expecting easy victories.

So when he met Jake, the dwarf was taken by surprise. As he had alluded to, he had far more to show off, but Jake had just never given him a chance as he had struck fast with deadly precision.

That was something else to consider in these G or F-grade fights. As a C-grade, ending a battle in a single blow when there wasn't a massive disparity in power was incredibly difficult. Piercing someone's heart, blowing off a part of their body, or stabbing them fifty times wouldn't necessarily kill them, and even if you cut tendons or hit vital organs, it wouldn't really impact their movements... primarily because neither of those things really mattered to C-grades anymore.

G and F-grades were different. A stab to the heart would kill you nearly instantly, a hole through the stomach would result in bleeding to death, and just a few good stabs could easily lead to death. Not to talk about the far lower average pain tolerance. This meant fights could easily end with a single attack, something Jake was fully aware of, considering that is how he won nearly every single fight after he began using katars.

Having to only land one good hit meant that even the weaker of two combatants could easily win if they got lucky or went in with a good strategy. A single mess-up from the stronger of two fighters could mean their loss or even demise. The tools one had to fight with as a level 0 were also simply incomparable to a level 200+, further exasperating any small fuck-up..

Perhaps this was Jake's biggest advantage in all these fights... the lack of tools others had. Because when it came to melee combat especially, Jake never had a lot of tools to begin with. He had always relied on his Bloodline, something he still possessed even in the Colosseum of Mortals. Taking Jake by surprise and landing a single fatal hit was far more difficult than perhaps anyone else in the entire arena. In fact, this led to arguably an even bigger advantage than anything else: consistency.

Anyway, even if the dwarf was salty about losing, and Jake had beaten him before he could really show off his skills, the rewards were very much still there as Jake stepped into the rank of Master Gladiator.

Congratulations! You have reached the Master Gladiator rank, proving yourself as a pinnacle Gladiator in 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 Master Gladiator, you are still limited to one fight a week against another Master Gladiator.

All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.

In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Master 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 Master Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.

The difficulty of all Show Match options has been increased.

For reaching the Master Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 10000 Colosseum Points.

For defeating the Earthborn Faithful, you are rewarded an extra 25000 Colosseum Points.

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

Seeing he had been rewarded a total of 35000 Colosseum Points for just this one promotion match felt oddly cathartic to Jake. That was the number of points he had spent on all the equipment that had allowed him to breeze through the Veteran Gladiator rank, all earned in one day. Alright, it was the accumulation of ten or so weeks, but the point still stands.

Looking at his updated status, this accumulation did account for nearly half of his total points earned during the Veteran Gladiator rank.

Current objective: Be promoted from Master Gladiator to Warlord.

Current rank: Master Gladiator (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 73910

Lives remaining: 10

In the Veteran Gladiator rank, every Show Match had rewarded 600 Colosseum Points, while every Veteran Gladiator match had given 500 each. This was a doubling of all points gained, which did make Jake wonder if that was how the next few ranks would be... but then again, after a single more rank-up, he would no longer be a Gladiator.

Instead, the next rank was called Warlord. Jake had heard mentions of the rank before but hadn't known it was the one after Master Gladiator, and based on all he had heard, every single Warlord was a

real monster. Then again, Jake remembered Polly also talking about every Gladiator being a real monster, so he wasn't sure how accurate that assessment was. The only monsters he had seen in the arena so far were the anomalies for his promotion matches.

Jake did hope that the Master Gladiator matches would begin to offer truly difficult challenges, but alas, that did not turn out to be the case. The very next day, Jake had his first Master Gladiator fight against a hobgoblin rogue who also used some weird poison magic. Aside from the odd feeling of no longer being effectively immune to all poison and having to dodge it, there really wasn't anything exciting to the fight.

He just hoped that the healers or potions could help reattach limbs as he did have to cut off the hobgoblin's right arm, but in his defense, he had done so reactionarily.

Seeing as things were not getting harder, Jake returned to his usual schedule of practicing archery and working on some basic magic practice. Part of this magic practice was related to a plan he had for his katars, but it wasn't as easy as he had hoped.

When it came to his point progress, Show Matches once more doubled in Colosseum Point value – 1200 each - with the first Master Gladiator Match rewarding 1000 points, so another doubling there. But this turned out to only be the case for his very first one.

A week later, when he did this second Master Gladiator fight, Jake got 1100 points for the win. Show Matches stayed the same, though. They continued to improve with 100 more for every win, meaning when he won his fifth Master Gladiator fight, he got 1500 points. The next day when he went to sign up for a Show Match, he also noticed how the hardest difficulty fights now rewarded 1800 points, up another 600. So, the points no longer just doubled but increased even more than that.

The more time passed, the more Jake also considered buying a proper bow, but he restrained himself. At this point, not showing off his archery wasn't just him wanting to play around with his melee weapons but a strategic decision.

Jake had worked a lot on his archery, and he would dare say he had gotten quite a lot better at it. However, even if that was the case, it was unquestionable that the very first fight he used a bow would be the most impactful one. No one knew Jake could use a bow, not truly. Sure, they could probably figure out he had a deal with the Quartermaster for a steady supply of bows and arrows to his practice room, but considering he hadn't ever used a bow and arrow in combat yet, they likely just assumed it was a hobby or something he was still working on becoming able to use.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't looking forward to the day when pulling out his archery seemed like a necessity.

As expected, Jake reached the peak of Master Gladiator without any major issues, even if he did definitely feel the fights getting harder. When it came to scouting out opponents, he had also improved his methodology. Rather than begin to gather information on every foe, Jake tried to have Polly or Owen locate his next opponent for him. While direct contact between yourself and your next opponent was frowned upon, and making threats straight-up against the rules, there was nothing that said one couldn't scope out each other from afar, something Jake himself had experienced many times.

That Jake had an utterly uncanny Bloodline-powered intuition toward how strong people were was totally irrelevant. In either case, this proved a great method to figure out if further information-gathering was even necessary. If Jake felt like his next opponent was too weak, he wouldn't bother, but if they felt strong enough to be a challenge, he would give Polly the go-ahead.

Not a single opponent in the Master Gladiator rank got that go-ahead. He got close a few times but ultimately didn't have the need.

Jake regretted not using this method before he met the Benevolent Monk... for if he did, Jake sure as hell would have gone out to buy some proper equipment and make proper preparations.

Either way. Having reached ten wins as a Master Gladiator, his promotion match was next, so Jake had naturally gone to the Battlemaster, who had a huge surprise announcement waiting for him.

"Look, I am not going to make any excuses here, but I think someone is out to get you with all these promotion matches. Three times in a row is definitely no coincidence, so maybe some of the higher-ups in charge of scheduling are actually out to get you... then again, they do also like exciting matches like this between two rising stars. Oh, yeah, you must wonder why I am rambling... we got another anomaly on our hands," the Battlemaster said.

Jake was shocked. Shocked, I tell you.

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 Emberlight Blademaster

Based on the following explanation from the Battlemaster, the Emberlight Blademaster was a spell blade of some sort. He used light and fire magic to enhance his swordsmanship and was incredibly skilled in both. He had both solid ranged attacks and was a beast in melee.

Jake naturally did some more research than what the Battlemaster told him and even went and checked out the elven swordsman In person. While he was indeed strong... well...

If the dwarf had a horrible match against Jake, this so-called Blademaster ended up having an even harder time.

Jake had spent more than thirty years with the Sword Saint while delving into Nevermore. Not only had Jake seen the old man fight a lot, but they also had their fair share of friendly spars when they both got bored during downtime.

And while this Emberlight Blademaster was impressive in his own right... he still fell a bit short compared to the Sword Saint. Jake didn't really enter this fight with any game plan but had just researched his opponent to know about any dangerous trump cards, but all in all, it ended up being a pretty straightforward fight that Jake won after landing dozens of blows over a five-minute period.

Sure, he did have to go and get his pants, gloves, and chestpiece replaced afterward, as all had taken irreparable damage from being burned by the searing Emberlight, but that's what insurance was for.

Based on Jake's estimations, the Benevolent Monk was still the strongest person Jake had met in the Colosseum so far, but his fight had been "easier" than any of the other two special promotion matches. The differences in power between the Emberlight and the dwarf hadn't been that big, though... which was why the points he got from the bonus objective surprised him.



Congratulations! You are no longer a mere Gladiator, but a true Warlord, proving yourself a true apex combatant in the Colosseum of Mortals. By now, you have truly caught the eye of some of the more powerful entities involved with the Colosseum of Mortals, with many waiting with anticipation to face you themselves. Be prepared, for it shall only get harder from here.

For reaching the Warlord rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 20000 Colosseum Points.

For defeating the Emberlight Blademaster, you are rewarded an extra 60000 Colosseum Points.

Jake mentally skimmed the message, cutting out the repeated message about the shop offering more stuff and more options for the Show Match and all that.

Looking at the achievements, the 60000 from beating the Emberlight Blademaster were definitely more than expected and a nice bonus to get alongside the promotion to Warlord. Things were really stacking up, and looking at his points gained...

Current objective: Be promoted from Warlord to Paragon.

Current rank: Warlord (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 252,210

Lives remaining: 10

While spending around 35000 Colosseum Points had been painful in the moment, he had definitely more than made up for it now. And as he progressed toward this Paragon rank, he hoped that now, finally, fights would get hard.

"Two more ranks to go, and the Colosseum of Mortals will have another champion," Minaga grinned as he watched Jake. "Him picking up some gear was really about time because, man, was it sad to see that Benevolent Monk smack him about."

"It would have been disgraceful if he had lost that early on, and it would have eliminated his chances for a true pinnacle performance indeed," the Wyrmgod concurred.

Vilastromoz just looked on, not commenting much. He did wonder how many images of gods the Wyrmgod had managed to gather, though. The Emberlight Blademaster was a god from the Altmar Empire that had reached godhood and was now a commander in their divine army, while that dwarf, the Earthborn Faithful, was part of a large pantheon primarily filled with elemental gods.

The Viper didn't like to just wonder by himself, and while it would be fun to wait and be surprised... he was ultimately too curious.

"So, pray tell, what other interesting opponents do you have lined up?"

"Quite a few, quite a few," the Wyrmgod smiled.

"Yep, definitely an impressive lineup this time around," Minaga nodded with excitement.

"Come on, give me a tease," the Viper smiled.

"Hm... fine. A small peek," the Wyrmgod said, amused as he waved his hand.

The Viper looked as projections of three figures appeared. His eyes opened wide for a second before he grinned.

Jake definitely had his work cut out for him if he wanted to beat those monsters... and Vilastromoz doubted he would want it any other way. Besides, what other chances could a mortal get to fight Primordial-level figures?

Also... I really didn't expect to see her image here...

Chapter 754: Nevermore: The End of Benevolence

Outside Nevermore, in the Order of the Malefic Viper, the old mansion that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper used to live in looked much the same as before he went to the World Wonder. Despite not really having permission, Meira and the others kept using the place for all of their meetups, and Meira lived there full-time. It was simply the best meeting spot, even if the majority of the library was locked off to them.

This wasn't because Meira didn't have her own place now... it was more that she only really ever felt at home within the mansion. Whatever bad memories she had from the place were long replaced with

good ones. Besides, she had taken care of parts of Jake's garden for so long and had several experiments ongoing there, so moving would really be a hassle.

Teacher also said it was fine to stay, and Meira saw no reason to question that.

By now, it had been a few months since she evolved to C-grade and threw off the last traces of her former identity as a slave. She still had some parts of her past that lingered, and it was about high time to address them. It was also just something she wanted to do... something she had looked forward to doing.

"I'm surprised you didn't wait for the Chosen of the Malefic One to return before doing it," Izil, whom Meira had invited over, said. "I'm sure he would have agreed to come along if you asked him."

"I know," Meira nodded. "But this is something I have to do myself, okay?"

"Are you sure it counts as yourself when you take me along?" her fellow elf teased.

"It's different, okay?" Meira said, a bit flustered. "Anyway, there is no need to bother him with something that trivial. Besides, it's about time I do it. I've delayed enough, and Teacher said that going would be good for my mental state. Records of who I am and where I come from are there, and... I want to go, okay? I want to do what I can."

"I understand, trust me. But, I have been wondering, how will we get there? It is quite a distance away based on what you told me, and there is no gateway leading anywhere close," Izil asked.

Meira just smiled. "Well... I am the Chosen of the Grand Elder now..."

It still felt weird to say, even after several months, but it would be silly not to take advantage of that fact at least once in a while, right?

The spear shot past his temple, Jake barely avoiding the hit by tilting his head to the side and twisting his body. He dove into close range of the spearman, but his opponent was ready and stepped down hard to release a shockwave of wind, spewing up sand while propelling himself backward, trying to land another stab during his retreat.

Jake deflected the spearhead and gave pursuit, closing in and trying to land a solid blow. The hobgoblin quickly reacted as a gust of wind pushed him backward even more as he raised his other hand and released a blast of condensed fire mana toward Jake.

With a swipe of his katar, Jake pushed away the fireball, stabbing forward into the chest of the spearman. The katar penetrated slightly before Jake was forced to retreat away from a swiping spearhead, aiming to separate his head from his body. Almost like an echo, a flaming wind followed the spear, making Jake block with a surprised look on his face.

Thinking he had an advantage, the hobgoblin attacked once more. Jake smiled, having predicted this, and acted surprised on purpose as he slightly side-stepped the spear, turning his side to the spearman. With his left hand, he grabbed the spear shaft after putting the katar away and, with the other, stabbed toward the hobgoblin.

With an even bigger smile than Jake, the spearman twisted the spear to spin the weapon around as a whirlwind appeared around it. He clearly intended to either make Jake let go or break his wrists, either

case resulting in him being in a prime position to attack. Neither of those things happened. The hobgoblin's smile quickly faded as the spear didn't move an inch, Jake having it in a vice-grip.

Stable arcane energy swirled around his gloves as he had infused them with it to trigger the enchantment, effectively freezing his own hand. He was fully aware that the gloves wouldn't survive the ordeal, but hey, insurance was still a thing.

With wide eyes, the hobgoblin barely had time to let go of the spear and jump back to avoid Jake's attack, but with him disarmed, he knew the fight was over. Considering his body already had plenty of wounds covering it from all of Jake's prior attacks, he seemed to know the gig was up.

"I surrender," the hobgoblin said with a sigh as he held up both his hands.

Jake smiled and let the mana fade from his left glove as it disintegrated from the far too potent arcane energy before he tossed the spear back to his opponent. "Good fight."

"Yeah... not like I managed to land a single hit, though," the poor guy said in a defeated tone. "Anyway, thanks for a good one. Good luck going further."

"Thanks, and you too," Jake thanked him as both of them exited the arena to the usual commentary from the announcer. Despite wishing him luck, Jake wasn't so confident in the guy going much further. The competition was tough.

When he had been promoted to Warlord, Jake had hoped for the fights to get harder but had expected disappointment. It turned out his opponents were all actually pretty damn good. He didn't find himself fearing for his life, and his consistent performance meant he walked out of all fights where his opponent

couldn't make some large-scale attack he chose to tank unscathed. There were even a few times, including versus this spearman, where he used his Fear Gaze defensively to avoid taking a nasty wound during an exchange. If possible, Jake wanted to avoid major injuries, as that would mean he potentially couldn't fight the next day, and he had a streak to keep going.

However, even if he didn't take any major injuries, it didn't mean it was all easy. The hobgoblin was a great example of someone who was just strong. He had good stats, could do a lot of different things, and was incredibly skilled with magic, but especially with that spear of his. To call him a spear master would definitely be no understatement.

It was something Jake hadn't thought much of before, but the fight with the Emberlight Blademaster illuminated how important experience fighting against certain weapons was. Even if C-grades were far faster, more skilled, and had more tools, the basics were still the same, and all of these fights allowed Jake to get a good basis for fighting against a wide variety of opponents and skill sets.

In other words, it was a fantastic sparring ground. One that allowed every person who progressed through the Challenge Dungeon to build up a wealth of experience in a relatively safe environment. An environment where geniuses had been gathered from all over the multiverse to fight you, something that couldn't be found anywhere else.

Even the Show Matches were teaching him a lot. They had definitely also gotten harder by now, but Jake still found them a lot easier than the matches against other combatants. First of all, because he could kill whatever he fought without thinking twice, and second of all, because Jake was uniquely talented at fighting against multiple opponents. Also, while he had a lot to learn when it came to fighting humanoids with different weapons, that was definitely not the case with beasts or monsters.

To conclude, the Colosseum of Mortals had finally become truly fun. While Jake – as weird as he was – liked practicing day in and day out, having a single fight every day to look forward to was nice. He was also only a single week away from having his promotion match to Paragon, so that was something to look forward to.

He also began to do one other thing to practice, something Jake had never really done before:

Spectating.

Seeing two combatants of high skill was definitely a teaching experience, and he surprisingly learned a lot just from being an observer, once more proving that Perception was truly the best stat, even outside of combat. The reason he hadn't really gone and seen many matches before, only sometimes checking out Owen's fights, was due to a rule of the Colosseum that said one was not allowed to watch matches above their own rank... a rule that made absolutely no sense if this was a real place, but as a Challenge Dungeon in Nevermore, Jake could see why it was there.

Allowing everyone to watch people like the opponents Jake faced in the promotion matches would be too big of a reward for doing nothing, not to talk about the monsters Jake didn't doubt were in the Champion rank. If one could just spectate anyone, Jake could see many people enter the Challenge Dungeon just to spend a few years watching pinnacle individuals fight each other rather than fight themselves, completely eliminating the entire challenge part of the Challenge Dungeon.

In some ways, one could even view this ability to spectate higher-level matches as a reward, and upon reaching Warlord rank, Jake found it worth it to watch at least a few fights here and there. It also counted as research if he watched opponents he would potentially face in the future.

Ah, but there was one way for lower-ranked people to see higher-ranked fights. With the invitation of another combatant, they were allowed to view it. Jake suspected this was not something that would really ever happen to someone actually doing the Challenge Dungeon. If it did happen, it would be the reward for some side objective. No, instead, it was probably there to allow the challenger to invite whatever mates they made during the dungeon to go watch stuff together. Or maybe Jake only thought that because it was exactly what he used it for.



That day, Jake, Owen, and Polly decided to attend the match of two other combatants Jake had faced before, namely the Earthborn Faithful and the Benevolent Monk. Both of them were also Warlords at his point and were definitely top contenders to get promoted to Paragon. Maybe even have a shot at the Champion rank.

It was rare that such powerful people would meet like this, but it wasn't unheard of, and when Jake heard it was taking place, he definitely wanted to go watch. Based on the Battlemaster, there were some people in charge of scheduling that tended to avoid putting peak fighters against each other before the truly high ranks... and it seemed like Warlord qualified as a truly high rank, seeing as they had matched up the two of them.

In either case, it looked like the organizers thought the two were roughly equal and wanted to set up an exciting match. While it was true the two of them were roughly equal when it came to gathering wins, Jake knew they weren't truly equals, and for one crucial reason.

After the announcer had introduced both fighters, the Benevolent Monk once more walked into the arena and bowed toward the dwarf. "Greetings, he who serves and is served by the earth. May I propose a friendly competition to-"

"Fuck off!" the dwarf yelled loudly. "I ain't doin' ya stupid bloody competition, ya freak. Face me properly... or imma bury you here."

The dwarf erupted with energy as the sand all around him rose and began to form rocky pillars. Across from him, the monk stood silently before sighing. "Very well. I thank you for this coming match... and I shall respect your decision and return you to the earth once more."

Jake came to learn after the fight that no one had ever rejected this proposition from the Benevolent Monk outside of the first few matches. His act of benevolence was to offer the possibility for a spar and not a true fight. However, should one reject this benevolence, the match would turn from a spar into a true battle... and when fighting for real, there was no room for mercy or benevolence, but what Jake could only describe as pure, unabashed violence.

Everyone there had likely expected the fight to be roughly equal, and while it did look that way in the first thirty seconds, things quickly changed. The defenses of the dwarf crumbled, and even as he pulled out more and more attacks and spells, nothing seemed to work as the monk proved himself far more deadly than Jake had seen him be during their fight.

Every move was one that aimed to kill, and he gladly took minor injuries himself to land blows on his opponent. Moreover, his body was clearly far more durable than it had any right to be, and after a while, Jake spotted a potential reason. While it was hard to see, even when Jake had fought him, odd energy patterns covered his body from head to toe. Like an invisible tattoo, Jake theorized these tattoo-like patterns perhaps functioned as replacements for equipment, as he did know that was possible, albeit extremely rare.

As more time passed, the fight became more and more one-sided, and while the monk was covered in wounds, big and small, he never lost momentum. By now, the dwarf was also clearly unable to escape through the sand anymore.

That was when Jake learned something more. Something quite frankly terrifying as fuck. At the end of the battle between the two anomalies, the monk moved in for a finishing strike as he peeled away the final line of defense of the dwarf, which was when Jake realized. That hit Jake had been struck with when he "won" the fight against the monk – the one that had left him feeling half-dead for several days - was not some ultimate attack... it was the first strike in the series of a combo attack.

The first punch broke the stone armor and several ribs of the dwarf. The second ruptured his heart, the third destroyed his brain, the fourth burned away all remaining vestiges of his soul, and the fifth obliterated what was left of the body.

An eerie stillness overtook the arena as the monk stood with an outstretched fist covered in blood, droplets slowly dripping from his red fist.

"May you continue to serve the earth, even in death," the monk said in his usual respectful tone as he bowed toward the huge fan-shaped blood splatter, which was all that remained of the Earthborn Faithful.

That day, it became clear as day... should you reject the benevolence of the Benevolent Monk, there would be no mercy, only death.

"Dude, I'm so glad you didn't fight that monk for real," Owen muttered as they watched the monk slowly walk out of the arena, leaving drops of blood in his wake, both from his own wounds and his fists.

"Yeah," Jake nodded in agreement. "The rematch will be quite exciting, though from the looks of it, only one of us will be walking out alive."

This wasn't just Jake wanting a fight to the death. He felt the pure killing intent and bloodlust from that so-called Benevolent Monk, and he knew that should he want a serious rematch with the monk, there really was only one way it could go. If the monk wanted a life-and-death battle, Jake wasn't going to reject it.

"It... it isn't sure you'll meet him again, right?" Polly asked, worried. "You already met and beat him once, and repeat matchups are incredibly rare."

Jake just smiled at her. There was no fucking way there wouldn't be a repeat matchup.

He just hadn't expected it would be so soon.

#### Chapter 755: Nevermore: Paragon Preparations

Jake had expected his rematch with the Benevolent Monk to be during a promotion match or at least another highlighted event, but that didn't turn out to be the case. After watching the very-much-not Benevolent Monk fight, Jake did his last match as a Warlord before his promotion the week after, and when he signed up for the promotion match, he was naturally once more met with another anomaly... just not the one he had expected.

"Look, by now, we both know this is all a setup, alright? But hey, you can't expect any easy fights anymore, being a Warlord possibly about to be a Paragon, so I guess it shouldn't come as that big of a surprise. Either way, next up is another person who has yet to lose a single match and is considered quite the monster by pretty much all opponents that have faced her so far," the Battlemaster said. Jake was honestly surprised when he heard the Battlemaster say "her" as he had totally expected to meet the Benevolent Monk... but then again, could he even meet him with how ranks and such worked?

Either way, it didn't matter. Jake was still confident they would meet sooner or later.

"So, any information on this mystery opponent?" Jake asked.

"Yeah... she may be the toughest fighter you have faced yet. You need to understand not a single opponent has even managed to land a single scratch on her clothes so far," he said, shaking his head.

Jake found his interest peaked. "Sounds strong. Do you have any tips or tricks? Maybe just some basic information on her?"

"I can't tell you much, but I can say she is one of the most feared types of mages in the world: an illusionist. The world itself is altered in her presence, and in her own promotion match to Paragon, she won within a minute by simply walking up to her opponent and cutting his throat... You may actually consider skipping this one," the Battlemaster said with some genuine concern. "But if you do plan on fighting, you better fucking plan for it properly, even if you only have a day."

"Sign me up for it," Jake just grinned. An illusionist, eh? Poor gal to meet someone like Jake.

"Are you sure? She is also known to be very ruthless and kills most of her opponents," the Battlemaster asked clarifyingly.

"I'm sure," Jake smiled.

"Alright then."

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 Living Nightmare

The Living Nightmare, huh? Sounded scary, but Jake didn't feel the slightest sense of fear.

Due to his Bloodline, Jake had automatically not taken her seriously. Over the last thirty years, Jake had encountered many who used illusion magic, not to talk about those he faced before Nevermore. Due to how Bloodlines worked, Jake's Sphere of Perception entirely ignored all illusions, and his own intuition filtered out all the false information automatically, making Jake arguably the biggest counter to illusion magic in the entire multiverse.

He still went and checked her out, with Polly also gathering some sparse information. Apparently, she was some odd fairy-like humanoid Jake didn't remember ever encountering before, and he was honestly surprised that if creatures like them existed, they were born in F-grade.

[Fae]

What Jake did learn was that fae or fairies, or whatever one wanted to call them, were very magically inclined creatures with downright horrible physical stats by default. Based on what Polly said, they also varied widely in size and appearance, with some the size of a finger and others several meters tall.

It was a weird race, that one. The one Jake was fighting was at least human-sized. If not, the battle would have been incredibly awkward. Oh, and as Jake also saw she had small transparent wings, he also made sure to check if she could fly. She couldn't, so that was good to know.

The match itself turned out to be... kind of interesting? The fae was about one and a half meters tall and wore a robe covering nearly her entire body, with the only thing he could see being two eyes without any pupils. As he stood behind the bars of the arena and made eye contact with her, he felt the mental magic already at work as some odd instinctual fear began to well up in his chest.

Yep, she was definitely priming him for what was about to come.

When the bars lowered, and the battle began, Jake instantly noticed all that was wrong. The entire arena was darker than before, and it almost looked like the sand was moving on its own. The fae also slowly walked out of her entrance area to the arena, stopping after only a few steps.

Jake looked at her, still maintaining eye contact. The entire arena around him had dimmed in color as if someone had turned down the contrast, and out of the corner of his eye, he felt like he constantly saw movement in the shadows. The pillars spread throughout the arena had also all turned red, with lines of blood running down their stone.

"You battle me in my world... do you truly think you can be victorious?" the voice of the fae echoed, seemingly from all directions.

Still looking at her, Jake shrugged. "We will have to find out now, won't we? I am pretty confident I can handle your magic."

"It's almost cute how you put on a brave face. Do you think you are safe just because you keep your eyes on me? That the darkness cannot claim you? That the nightmare isn't omnipresent, ready to devour you whole at any moment?"

"I'll take my chances with the darkness; I get the feeling you are the real threat here," Jake smiled.

"Believe what you may... but if I am the true threat, should you not aim to strike me down? Or are you satisfied, standing there, quivering in fear?" she continued, flashing a sinister grin.

"I guess I shou-"

Without any warning, Jake tilted his head to the side and swung his right hand upward as he felt it meet resistance. The image all around him faded as the figure of the fae at the other end of the arena dispersed, revealing her true form, now impaled with a katar through her heart. A dagger fell to the ground, a small cut appearing on Jake's neck that would have been fatal if he hadn't moved his head away.

"How... your eyes never... moved..."

"I told you I was confident in handling your magic," Jake said as he pulled out his katar.

The fae stumbled back before falling onto her back, breathing her last breath.



It was her own damn fault that she died. If she hadn't gone for a killing blow on Jake, he would have been nice and only kicked her in the head. But if she wanted to kill him, she should have expected to be killed in return.

Jake also just didn't like that she killed everyone even when she didn't have to.

After walking out of the arena and back to the Battlemaster to report, Jake read through his new system message.

Congratulations! You are now a Paragon of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing so close to the apex you can almost feel it. Only ten more victories remain before you claim the title of Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, an honor few have experienced.

As a Paragon, you are still limited to one fight every week against other Paragons.

All crafters will sell you the best equipment the Colosseum of Mortals has on offer.

Show Match reward options have been maxed out. You are now limited to one Show Match for every win as a Paragon.

For reaching the Paragon rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 50,000 Colosseum Points.

For defeating the Living Nightmare, you are rewarded an extra 150,000 Colosseum Points.

Go forth and claim your rightful title as Champion.

A lot had changed. Annoyingly so. Fewer Show Matches sucked, but at least he was getting close to reaching the Champion rank. As for the points... getting 150,000 for a single stab with a katar felt like overkill, but then again, her illusions had been damn strong. Jake's senses were totally thrown for a loop, and without his sphere, he could have seen himself in real trouble.

Either way, another rank passed, another influx of Colosseum Points.

Current objective: Be promoted from Paragon to Champion.

Current rank: Paragon (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 710,210

Lives remaining: 10

In Warlord rank, it had worked much like in the Master Gladiator rank when it came to points increasing over time. The first win had given 4200, the next 4400, with the final one giving 6000. The same was

true for Show Matches, where the first four weeks of matches had given 3000, and after he got five wins as a Warlord, it jumped to 4500. The difficulty had naturally also jumped, but far from to a level where Jake couldn't handle it.

Jake, seeing no reason to delay and fail to keep his streak going, naturally asked the Battlemaster about scheduling his first Paragon fight, and...

"Remember that Benevolent Monk guy?" the Battlemaster asked.

"Sure do," Jake nodded as he tried to hide a smile. Here we go.

"Well, I don't know if this is good or bad news for you, but your first match as a Paragon will be his promotion match. I will admit I found it a bit odd that they chose to make his promotion match against the only person he has ever lost to in the Colosseum, but after looking into it, I found the reason... this match will have a referee," the Battlemaster sighed.

"And what exactly does that mean?" Jake questioned.

"That the usual rules are out the window."

"Explain," Jake frowned.

“Being demanding now suddenly, huh? Anyway, it means that the referee will decide the rules, which means that should the monk try to make any house rules again, they will be denied. Additionally, the referee will be the one to decide the means of victory, and chances are they will make it a fight either to the death or until one party is unable to fight anymore. Based on what I heard, people loved the fight versus the dwarf and want a repeat of something like that,” the Battlemaster said with a sigh.

Jake frowned even more. He didn’t like the feeling of being forced by the Colosseum into a death match like this, but he also knew that was likely what their fight would have turned into anyway.

“So, is the match tomorrow?” Jake asked.

“No, no, it will not be,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “It will be in a week. The organizers were fine with having it the next day in prior ranks to ride some of the hype from you just winning ten fights. That isn’t the case for Paragons anymore. Paragons are all rare and powerful and bring in a huge crowd no matter what, as everyone is excited to see who may become the next Champion. Ah, and it’s the same for those Show Matches. Can’t do one before after your first victory in the arena either, so for the next seven days, you are free to do whatever you want. I would recommend that you spend that time preparing for your fight to not end up like that dwarf.”

One would think that Jake got disappointed or annoyed at being told he couldn’t fight right away... but it was actually the opposite. Jake welcomed this downtime, especially knowing who he would fight.

There were indeed preparations to be made, and seeing as he had unlocked buying the best items the Colosseum had to offer, it was time to finally get a bow in case it was needed during the fight. Buying one would tip off the Benevolent Monk and any upcoming opponents, but he believed it wasn’t worth the risk to enter the arena against the monk without a good bow available. While he did have ten lives remaining, wasting one on gambling on not needing a bow seemed stupid.

Heading to the shopping district right away and checking out what was on offer, Jake saw that after reaching Paragon rank, he could even buy legendary items. The problem with those was the price. Every single weapon cost between 100,000 and more than 700,000 Colosseum Points, with the shop only showing items within Jake's budget, meaning there were probably items available that were even more expensive.

While the refund policy was an option to get half back, Jake still ended up settling on an ancient rarity bow that he believed would suit his needs.

[Immutable Hunter's Bow (Ancient)] – The best bow does not need to be complicated, but one made with the basics refined to perfection. This bow is made of a type of wood often compared to metal, making it effectively indestructible and with incredible mana conductivity. Each end of the bow is sharpened and allows the bow to be used as a melee weapon in an emergency. Enchantments: Insured.

Requirements: Soulbound. Warlord Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 26,000 Colosseum Points.

Jake had purposefully gone for a weapon he believed would be able to handle his destructive arcane energies. While Jake didn't have the Arcane Powershot skill, the dozens of broken bow fragments in his practice room were a good indication he could still use something incredibly similar.

This bow should be able to handle that. It was one that threw away all other enchantments just for increased durability, after all.

Having the ability to hit people with the bow was also a fun little option. Blocking with it, too. Jake did a few stress tests when he received the bow, and the durability truly did live up to the name. He seriously doubted any level 0 could break it.

Jake also already had a plan when it came to the arrows he would use.

The Earthborn Faithful had used a special technique to effectively infuse magic spells into gemstones that he could activate during combat for far faster casting speed and less mana expenditure. Seeing this had given Jake an idea, and after confirming with Owen, Jake got to work.

As for what he confirmed?

That one was allowed to bring their own weapons into the arena as long as they were self-made. This honestly didn't affect a lot of people and was incredibly rare, but in retrospect, Jake had already seen it a few times. Jake seriously doubted some Quartermaster or blacksmith had given those weird hidden magical tattoos to the Benevolent Monk as an example.

What Jake wanted to do was a bit different, though. He wasn't planning on crafting any weapons to use but instead to go a far simpler route: conjuration. When Jake had asked Owen and Polly if one was allowed to bring their own conjured items into the arena, both of them had looked at him as if he was an idiot. It was common knowledge that summoning anything drained energy as upkeep, so even if one did conjure weapons, it was usually done right before the fight started... but Jake was different.

He would make his own arrows. Doing this, he would even save points by not having to buy a quiver. The basic one the Quartermaster had given him the very first day he joined the Colosseum of Mortals was more than enough.

Due to the nature of Jake's arcane affinity, if he made an arrow with purely stable arcane mana, it wouldn't begin to dissipate at all by itself within any short period of time. To test, he had even made an arrow and left it sitting out for over a month before it slowly began to crack and break, simply due to the environmental mana slowly wearing it down.

So, for arrows, Jake would conjure them himself. He also prepared two other surprises, as he did have two more slots in his Ring of Deft Hands aside from his katars and bow. Because, yes, he could even store his stable arcane constructs within, the system recognized them as physical objects and not just normal conjured items that usually dissipated if deposited in a spatial ring. This was, for example, why the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter couldn't be stored in his usual spatial necklace... though now he was interested to see if he could store the Protean Arrow. Probably not, and it didn't really matter due to his quiver, but he still wanted to test it once outside.

But making his arrows was not the only thing Jake had worked on when it came to utilizing his arcane mana. No, he had a project he had been working on even before he began to conjure arrows.

Because while Jake had lost all his skills, that didn't mean he couldn't replicate at least some of them. And there was one thing he had wanted to do for a long time that he was now finally confident in succeeding in:

Transmutation.

That's right, it was time to turn his katars far deadlier... and save tens of thousands of Colosseum Points by not having to buy replacements.

Chapter 756: Nevermore: Benevolent Monk Rematch

Transmutation for Jake had always been a bit out of the ordinary compared to other alchemists, especially after he began to play around with all that Origin stuff. But one had to remember that the precursor to all that was Jake experimenting with combining transmutation and his arcane affinity.

There had been a lot of trial and error on his transmutation journey as a level 0, and throughout it all, he had leaned on the experience he had from Touch of the Malefic Viper. A skill he also did a lot of personal practice with, and it had to be remembered that when he first began practicing using it for transmutation, he had instantly jumped to using his arcane affinity, which to Jake meant that his arcane affinity was very suited for transmutation... or maybe it was just very suited for Jake to infuse into everything he used.

That was exactly what Jake was trying to do... though it did turn out to be quite a bit harder without the Malefic Viper Legacy skill. However, that didn't mean Jake wasn't confident. As mentioned before, Jake's control of arcane energy was monstrous for a G or F-grade, and the items he wanted to transmute were ultimately only level 0 equipment, so the energy he needed to transmute lacked in both quantity and quality.

However, he quickly hit a bit of a snag.

Jake had, at first, experimented with the free items the Quartermaster handed out, but they turned out to simply be too weak to handle the influx of arcane energy without crumbling to dust. That had been quite an annoyance, as Jake really didn't wanna spend points on weapons that he knew he had a high chance of breaking... but then Jake got an idea he really should have gotten a lot earlier.

See, Jake found a bit of an, let's just say, error in the way the Colosseum of Mortals operated. The rules dictated that any insured items could be replaced if they broke, but nothing said it had to break in combat, right? So what if Jake experimented with his epic rarity katars, and if he felt like he would fail, he totally accidentally went ham with infusing destructive arcane energy, breaking his weapon.



He had to admit he had been a bit apprehensive the first time. Not just because he was essentially committing insurance fraud but because he feared that the system had accounted for someone trying this and would refuse to give him replacements. That turned out to be an unfounded fear, and when he presented the cracked katar to the Quartermaster, the man had just shrugged and handed him a new one.

To make a long story short, that's how Jake broke around a hundred and twenty epic rarity katars over the course of a few weeks, with more than fifty of those being in the week leading up to the fight against the Benevolent Monk as Jake refocused his efforts. He was confident in succeeding, and only two days before his fight against the monk, he was successful. The same day, he upgraded the second katar using the exact same method as the first, giving him two identical weapons.

[Arcane Aersteel Katar (Ancient)] – This katar is made of a metal called Aersteel, making it incredibly light yet equally durable. The design of the weapon is simple and, due to the material used, has exemplary mana conductivity. This conductivity is increased further if one channels arcane mana through it. All of the air affinity energy within has been consumed and replaced by powerful arcane energies, making it lose many of the usual properties of Aersteel in exchange for increased durability and empowering all arcane mana being channeled through it. Enchantments: Arcane Empowered.

Requirements: Soulbound.

His transmutation had led to quite a few changes. First of all, there was, of course, the rarity upgrade, though that far from fully encapsulated how meaningful this upgrade was. Equally as big was how much better the items suited Jake now. The Aersteel properties that led to the katar being lighter had remained, but the mana that helped things like air resistance was gone. What he got instead was a far more durable and sharper weapon.

It was a little sad to see the insurance was gone, even if he felt pretty certain breaking the new katars was borderline impossible. No, the problem was that he doubted he could get a refund now. Alas, sometimes sacrifices had to be made. The Requirements had changed, too, no longer requiring any

specific rank, even if they were still Soulbound. It could be said that many of the unique aspects of the Colosseum had been stripped away for a weapon that was now truly his.

Jake also naturally tested his Improved weapons and found the result more than satisfying. The quality of the energy Jake had infused into them had transformed the epic rarity katars into peak-quality ancient weapons, with the mana conductivity for his arcane mana, not just flowing through the weapons freely but even getting empowered.

Before, something like extending the katar with an arcane edge was costly and difficult, but now it would be incredibly easy. With how much the katars suited him, Jake doubted even legendary katars would necessarily be better. While he considered buying ancient rarity weapons to try and transmute, based on brief experiments with his bow, Jake doubted he could pull it off within any reasonable timeframe. At least not without sacrificing all of the other things he wanted to practice, and even then, it was doubtful it would take less than half a year.

Besides upgraded katars, Jake prepared two more things to put in his Ring of Deft Hands. Both took some time to get just right, but when done, Jake was more than satisfied and could only grin when he imagined the monk's reaction upon seeing them.

Overall, Jake's preparations for the fight were extensive, and he even had Polly look into all she could find regarding the monk, though it quickly became obvious Jake already knew more than the information packages provided due to their prior encounter.

He also couldn't help but consider what would happen when he was done in the Colosseum and returned to his C-grade form, as he had no doubt made many improvements that would matter even if he was 250 levels higher. But all things in good time. For now, all that mattered was defeating the Benevolent Monk.

“So, I assume you already know by now what you are in for. The monk is a damn monster, and with the referee there, I doubt the fight will end without any bloodshed, so be prepared for a real battle. It may even be one of life and death, and if that’s the case, not being the dead one tends to be the best option from my experience,” the Battlemaster said as Jake came and waited close to the gate to begin his fight. “Are you confident?”

Jake smiled. “As confident as can be.”

The Battlemaster nodded. “Good enough. Go get him then, and don’t get killed, yeah? I placed a bet on you winning, and I am a sore loser.”

Shaking his head, Jake headed toward the arena that was now about to open up. He felt a mix of excitement and trepidation as he walked up the steps to the incoming battlefield and heard the echoing voice of the announcer in the distance.

“Countless wins, but only one loss. Today, the Benevolent Monk is not just here to fight another day but to reclaim his honor and his perfect winning streak. To make things even. But to do that, he will have to beat the only opponent who has ever defeated him: Doomfoot! Or at least that is the name I am certain the Benevolent Monk remembers him by...”

Jake listened but didn’t pay much attention. Instead, he focused on the monk at the other end of the arena, and even through the bars, he noticed something. New tattoos, far more visible than the normal ones, had appeared on his wrists and forearms.

He’s made preparations too, Jake smiled to himself. It was gonna be a good fight.

“But! Before we get the action started, we have a bit of a special announcement. This match will be overseen by a referee! We have already seen these two fight once before, so let’s mix things up!”

As the announcer said this, a side door in the wall of the arena opened up, and a man wearing a suit walked out.

Jake was ninety-nine percent sure that door hadn’t been in any of the other arenas.

This referee walked to the middle of the arena as he first looked at Jake and then the Benevolent Monk.

“Due to complaints after prior matches involving the Benevolent Monk, I shall be overseeing today’s promotion match. In this match, the winner will be decided when either party becomes unable to continue fighting, dies, or I stop the match and declare a victor. There will be no surrender but a true battle to the end. I will give both of you a choice now, though... do either of you wish to surrender before we begin? This will naturally result in a default win for the other party,” the referee asked.

Jake heard murmur all around from the stands, and in his sphere, he even saw Polly and Owen look nervous. Nevertheless, he didn’t say anything, as the monk also simply stayed silent.

“Very well. In that case...” the referee began, the announcer finishing for him:

“Lower the gates!”

With impressive speed, the referee ran back from the middle of the arena as both of the gates began lowering at once.

The idea of bringing his bow out from the get-go did appear, but Jake decided not to as he walked forward toward the Benevolent Monk. His opponent did the same as they met toward the middle of the arena.

"Here we stand again," the bald man said with a smile as he bowed when he got around ten meters from Jake.

"Indeed we do," Jake said as he also bowed slightly. "Though this match won't be a friendly competition."

"Alas, it shall not be a spar of learning but a true fight that will only result in a valuable experience for one of us," the monk said, standing up straight as he smiled radiantly. "So let us fight to our heart's content. Let us determine whose Path shall remain and who shall embrace samsara. There shall be no grudges, no animosity... just two souls trying to prove themselves."

With those words, all air of benevolence disappeared as the monk took a stance. The runes on his arms lit up as Jake saw what appeared to be ethereal bracers covering both his forearms.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment before launching forward toward the monk. In prior fights, he had tried to focus primarily on countering, but in this one, he planned to go on the offensive from the get-go to try and get some momentum.

Katar met forearm as the arcane-empowered weapon failed to cut the spirit-like bracers. The monk countered, but Jake wasn't a slouch either. Dozens of blows were exchanged within a few seconds before a palm and katar smashed into each other, sending both sliding back, only stopped by the sand after a few meters.

A slight smile marred Jake's lips as a trail of blood trickled down the monk's palm. He was strong... but he couldn't fully block Jake's weapons.

He seemed to realize this, too, as he went on the offensive. Jake was ready and engaged the monk as their duel continued. The monk's attacks were downright savage, every one of them aiming for vital spots, but even so, one party had a clear advantage.

Jake messing up meant his already powerful soul took a small blow, losing him a few health points. Meanwhile, the monk slowly began to accumulate wounds all over his arms and upper body. Every single blow also left a tinge of destructive arcane mana, almost making it look like Jake's attacks left electric burns.

It wasn't an equal exchange of blows, either, as Jake landed far more minor attacks compared to his opponent. He and the Benevolent Monk had fought once before... but the version of Jake back then didn't have his equipment. He didn't have katars that switched up how he fought, and his stats were also lower as he hadn't used proper gear. In addition, every single blow that meant to pierce his soul also had to go through a bit of armor first, lessening the impact slightly. It wasn't by a lot, but it definitely played a part.

This ultimately resulted in Jake having a far better feeling for the Benevolent Monk and his fighting style than the monk did for his, giving Jake the initial advantage. After a few minutes, the monk did improve and make the exchanges more equal, but he had already paid the price.

The two of them utilized much of the arena as they switched between retreating and advancing, trying to get the better position or cornering their opponent. Jake once more had the advantage here. While the monk seemed to be able to sense Jake in an uncanny way – probably some kind of soul-sensing – that wasn't the case for random pillars placed around the arena.

Not that Jake was entirely untroubled, either. The monk had several things he never had to show before, giving Jake quite a few injuries. Outwardly, it didn't show much, but inside his body, his organs were suffering.

During all this, the referee simply stood back, observing silently. He never showed the slightest inclination to end the fight, even as both of their wounds worsened. Not that this was bad for Jake, because the more time passed, the bigger his advantage would become.

If nothing changed, the monk would run out of energy or simply fall due to blood loss, especially after he tried a risky exchange where he ended up with a shallow stab in the stomach. The Benevolent Monk had tried to use that insane combo he had killed the Earthborn Faithful with and won their first fight, but Jake had been quick and done the only logical thing:

Minimized the damage.

Jake had blocked it as best as he could while also countering as the monk had been left open, allowing Jake to land his stab, truly putting the monk on a timer. In return, Jake did get a nasty palm to the chest that broke a few ribs, but before the monk could combo, he had managed to get some distance.

Jake was happy he had survived the devastating attack that had left him half-dead the last time he took it, but he knew the monk had to at least have one more trump card as he felt some build-up within the monk. Something he had also felt during their first fight. It almost reminded him of Hunting Momentum... and Jake would be ready.

As their fight passed the twenty-minute mark, the sand had been covered in blood all around them. Jake breathed heavily as the monk also looked nearly wholly spent. The spirit-like bracers were pretty much entirely destroyed by now, while Jake's katars didn't have a single mark on them besides blood. The same couldn't be said for the rest of his equipment. Definitely had to file an insurance claim on all of it.

Both fighters looked at each other after another bloody exchange. Jake smirked as the monk also smiled despite his bloody body.

At once, they charged against each other as the monk released the attack he had been building up to all this time. Both went for an attack at the same time as a spiritual projection of the monk superimposed on his own body, words echoing out despite the Benevolent Monk's mouth not moving.

"Soul-Reversing Fist!"

Energy stored in the monk's soul was unleashed at once as he punched toward Jake's chest. It was a strike that seemed based on all the damage Jake had done to the monk during their fight, and it would no doubt prove lethal if it landed. Jake reacted as he used Fear Gaze and raised his left hand to block as he punched with his right, willing to trade blows in a mirror of what had happened in their first duel.

But with a far different result.

Jake's katar penetrated into the shoulder of the Benevolent Monk as the monk's blow also landed. Jake twisted his wrist to turn the katar as an explosion of arcane energy sent an arm flying into the air at the very next moment. The monk stumbled back from the explosion with wide eyes when he realized... his attack had done nothing.



His eyes lowered and saw the two plate-sized aegis' of stable arcane energy summoned into Jake's left hand that had been pressed against his chest from the monk's punch. The monk smiled upon seeing a fist-sized cracked indent on the first of the plates. "I see... a fault in my Path..."

Soul attacks had one crucial weakness: they only worked on souls. It was pretty obvious just from the name, but compared to most other forms of attacks, those on the soul were especially primed to be countered by making them hit a target that wasn't a soul. Soul attacks still worked against many traditional means, such as armor, but proved incredibly weak against certain other methods.

Such as making the monk hit a two-layered shield of stable arcana mana instead of Jake's body, turning the blow absolutely harmless outside of cracking the aegis. The two layers had especially sealed the deal, as that meant even the semi-ranged wave of soul-destroying energy released had to try and pierce a second layer... something it had failed to do.

The Benevolent Monk had stumbled back several steps before stabilizing himself. He didn't even look at the arm now lying on the sand or seemed to care that he had lost an arm, nor the blood actively spewing out of the massive open wound. Perhaps because he knew the fight was over... that his Path was over.

He sighed with melancholy as he stared toward the sky for a few moments before he looked back down at Jake.

His... eyes changed, Jake thought as he frowned.

“Samsara awaits... I would say. Alas, such shall never be my fate,” the monk said in a different tone than he had ever used before. In fact, Jake wasn’t even certain he was talking to the same person. “I acknowledge your Path, even if you didn’t show me all you were capable of. However, even with what you have shown, you are more than capable, and your arcane affinity is certainly something to further nurture. I also see that you do not yet fully grasp the true concepts behind it, and while I doubt you will be able to see through its true nature any time soon, continue reflecting on it. Continue seeking answers. Also, do know that while my true self will never be aware of this encounter, that does not mean the true lord will not, for he sees your Path, and it is for he that I speak.”

Jake frowned. “Who are you?”

“I am Just an old monk asked to pass some sage advice, and I hope to truly meet you one day, Harbinger. So does the lord, who you will come to know, of that there is no doubt. But for now... farewell.”

With those words, his eyes turned blank as the monk’s soul ceased to exist.

“What happened there?” the Viper asked the Wyrmgod and Minaga. The screen had gone black the second the fight had ended, and the monk looked toward the sky, ready to surrender, only for it to turn back on again with the monk already lying dead on the sand.

“Yeah, that was weird... hey, partner, why did you cut off the feed like that? Did the monk have any cool last words?”

The Wyrmgod remained silent for several seconds before he muttered: “It wasn’t me...”

Chapter 757: Nevermore: Images

"When you say that you didn't cut the feed off... what exactly do you mean? Did the system interfere directly, or was it something else?" Vilastromoz asked. If it was the first, then he would have many more questions, but if it was the latter... well, he would still have a lot of questions.

"Certain... concessions had to be made in order to gather all the images I wanted. When the system assists in extracting an image and downgrading it to F-grade, the targeted entity will have the ability to interfere with the aim of vetting what the left image will be capable of," the Wyrmgod explained. "This was primarily made with the intent for the god to filter out certain hidden abilities they wished to keep hidden, but it has also been used to implement certain things that didn't necessarily need to be there. I have actively chosen not to attempt to moderate this, as I do not see any tangible downsides, and overall see the benefits outweighing the losses."

Vilastromoz frowned at the explanation. He had already been aware that these images weren't actually copies of people at F or G-grade. No, if that was the case, Jake would have been able to simply kill every single one easily. While someone like the Soulfist had been powerful in F-grade for sure, he simply didn't have the time to gain insights anywhere near the level of even a weak C-grade.

No, the images were instead created directly from living gods with the assistance of the system. The image would then be downgraded to have insights roughly to the level the gods had in early or mid-tier C-grade before making them level 0 - all done with direct assistance and management from the system to ensure balance.

For certain gods to not just accept having such an image made without any input was understandable. Vilastromoz would not have accepted to have an image made without controlling how it would turn out. However, as the Wyrmgod said, this method did make it possible for images to have things implemented by the gods who made them... or even someone close to these gods.

"So what you are saying is that the Daolord implemented something that would trigger an opportunity for him to deliver a personal message to a combatant winning the fight? Naturally, with this trigger also including a blackout for any observers, something that you agreed to?" Vilastromoz asked. "And I assume that means you know what was said?"

"A part of the agreement was that I would not be listening either, so no," the Wyrmgod shook his head.

"The Daofather is behind it, huh?" the Viper nodded. "Wonder what he is up to these days to want to deliver messages directly to random powerful Nevermore attendees. Is he desperate for new monks or something?"

Concluding that the Daofather was involved wasn't difficult. While every one of the Daolords was a respectable figure in their own right, for the Wyrmgod to agree to not even listen in on a conversation within his own dungeon wasn't something he would do for any of them. The Daofather was different.

Vilastromoz had to admit that out of every Primordial, the Daofather was the one he had the least interactions with throughout the eras. The Daofather wasn't a very active participant in the happenings of the multiverse, so it wasn't overly surprising, and the Viper barely heard anything about what he was doing. When it came to fights he joined, information was even more scarce.

In conclusion, he was an enigmatic figure that no one knew much about, not even his fellow Primordials. Vilastromoz had heard that he and Eversmile had interacted quite a bit throughout the eras, but that was about it. He tended to do his own things, and if the Dao Sect ever got involved, he would simply send one or more of the ten Daolords. Each of them was considered a pinnacle existence in their own right, and together, they could even stand up to Primordials. No need for him to ever get personally involved when that was the case.

"I believe there is a misunderstanding," the Wyrmgod corrected Vilas after a slight pause, making him frown.

"What did I get wrong?"

"The message was not left for random participants but for a select few only. Your Chosen among them. Also, while I cannot tell you what was said, I am sure you can simply ask your Chosen once he leaves Nevermore."

The Viper's frown deepened upon hearing these messages were targeted. What was the Daofather up to? It wasn't like this was a unique case, as he was used to the Dao Sect doing things he couldn't fully comprehend, but it was rare that it ever involved people like the Chosen of another Primordial.

Moreover, was this a good or a bad development for Jake? Was it even something meaningful he left behind... or was he just planting a seed?

Only time would tell.

Jake walked out of the arena after giving the corpse of the Benevolent Monk one final bow. The referee had promptly announced his win after the monk had died, the announcer and audience all going wild. He even saw Polly and Owen both look incredibly relieved through his sphere, with several more individuals in the arena standing also keeping a close eye on him. It was not the kind of looks that a bunch of casual viewers would have, but the kind of looks people studying a potential future opponent would.

I guess I am a person of interest by now, huh?

He did have nine more opponents to go before he would be able to do his promotion match and become a Champion, and based on the auras he felt, the matches should, at the very least, be entertaining.

Fully exiting the arena, Jake first went to the Battlemaster, who looked happy as a clam.

"You bloody won. Great, I was afraid I would lose my bet for a second there. Either way, good job, though it was sad to see such an interesting fighter fall in combat. He fought well and died an honorable death, which is the best most of us can hope for," the Battlemaster said with a sigh. "Now, want me to schedule your next Paragon match a week from now, or did you take too much of a beating?"

"In a week is fine," Jake answered. He wasn't in a great condition after the fight, and he definitely planned on buying one of those recovery potions to make sure he would be, but he had been in a far worse state after his last match with the monk.

"Alright. Also, do remember you are allowed one Show Match a week, too, the earliest of which can be done tomorrow if you so desire. It usually takes a bit of strategy to know when to have these Show Matches to make sure you are ready for your Paragon ones," the Battlemaster further explained. "And before you ask, there will be a break of a week between your tenth Paragon win and the Championship Match if you make it that far, so even if you wait a few days for the Show Match, you should be fine with getting in all your possible matches for optimal Colosseum Points gain. You seem to care a lot about those for some reason despite not really spending them."

"Well, that's good to know," Jake smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a potion and to go get my ruined equipment replaced."

"Can't help you with the equipment, but take this," the Battlemaster said as he tossed a potion to Jake. "On the house. You can view it as your spoils from my winning bet."

Jake kept smiling as he shook his head and proceeded to drink the potion and get done with all that had to be done. Owen and Polly joined him for his trip to the shops, both having plenty of free time from the looks of it. Owen was understandable as he had advanced to Gladiator just recently, and as he didn't do any show matches at all, he quite frankly didn't have a lot else going on. Polly was still not advancing through the ranks and seemed more interested in assisting Jake and Owen with their endeavors.

Especially after poor Owen had been forced to reveal his lightning magic in his promotion match before he reached Gladiator. While the guy had become pretty skilled with his spear, he was still only considered "okay" by Jake's standards. His base stats were pretty high, though, which was what had allowed Owen to even make it as far as he did without using his best weapon.

It was a bit sad for Jake to lose his perfect teasing method, but he did at least discover why Owen had been so intent on hiding his abilities. His lightning had an odd deep blue color that was apparently unique to a special school of lightning magic... that a Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals also used.

That's right, the big plot twist was that Owen was actually the son of a Champion. A huge twist that had left Jake incredibly surprised... but not by the fact he was a Champion, but the entire expression "a Champion."

Apparently, there were multiple who had managed to reach the Champion rank, though it was less than ten. So, Jake was ninety-nine percent sure the way to become Grand Champion was just to beat every other Champion.

Of course, he had to make it through Paragon rank before he could figure out who the rest of these Champions were and how strong they would be.

Before they parted that day and Jake went back to relax, Owen made a comment that made Jake reflect on his fight with the monk a bit more closely, especially regarding how the Colosseum operated in regards to it.

“It was a bit sad to see that monk who genuinely didn’t seem like he wanted to kill someone be forced into a life-and-death match like that. Even if he did seem fine with it.”

Jake already had conflicted feelings about the whole thing, but Owen’s comment only confirmed those feelings were well-founded. He didn’t like being forced to kill someone he had no animosity with, especially when it didn’t even give any experience points. At least when he hunted for levels, it was with a purpose and not just to kill someone. But with the monk, he had only killed him because the rules made it pretty damn clear it was either that or be killed.

However, he also had to consider that they both knew what they walked into. It was a duel between two willing opponents who were there just to fight one another. It had been a good fight that Jake didn’t regret having, and he respected the monk’s power despite the exploitable weaknesses in his Path. Weaknesses Jake didn’t doubt had been long fixed by the true monk.

Because, oh yeah, there was also the fact that the Benevolent Monk was just an image left behind by someone Jake assumed to be a divine being. It wasn’t like Jake had actually killed someone, and with that final message, it even seemed like the Benevolent Monk had wanted him to win. Or, at least, whatever had taken over toward the end had wanted Jake to win.

Jake also found it a little weird that no one seemed to comment on the monk seemingly being possessed and saying some cryptic shit before falling over with his soul extinguished. Then again, dungeon-fuckery was a truly powerful concept that he had learned not to question too much lest he wanted to go insane.

Anyway, when he got back to his little home, Jake lay on his bed as he checked his menus.



Current objective: Be promoted from Paragon to Champion.

Current rank: Paragon (1/10)

Colosseum Points: 709,210

Lives remaining: 10

When it came to points, every win in Paragon seemed to have taken quite a jump. His victory had earned him a total of 25,000 points, up from the 6,000 his final win as a Warlord had granted him. It was a good jump, but more than the jump for his gladiator matches, Jake wanted to see how much more the Show Matches now gave.

He was still 1,000 points short on points compared to when he got promoted due to buying his bow, which honestly did put into perspective just how many more points fights gave now than when he was in lower ranks. This single match had earned him more than all the ranks below Gladiator combined... the two months spent in the Gladiator rank itself included.

After reflecting on his point gains, cleaning himself up, and tending to his wounds, Jake rested for the rest of the day. The next day, he did some light practice, and on the third, he went back to the Colosseum fully recovered and ready for his Show Match.

Seeing as he was also limited to one a week of those, he definitely expected a spike in both rewards and difficulty. In all honesty, the Show Matches had all been far too easy thus far. Again, Jake was pretty damn good in fights against monsters or multiple opponents, so his standards were definitely above the regular fighter, but he still hoped for appropriately challenging fights. Maybe not Benevolent Monk-level fights, but at least ones that could get him excited.

So, with great hope, he opened the menu and saw the options available... and damn, did the rewards get a bump.

Show Match Opponents Available:

1. Minotaur Brutes (2x opponents) – 30,000 Colosseum Points

2. Luxwolf Pack (7x opponents) – 27,500 Colosseum Points

3. Dwarven Punisher – 25,000 Colosseum Points

4. Vicious Fire Salamander – 20,000 Colosseum Points

5. Scalekin Prisoners (3x) – 15,000 Colosseum Points

30,000 Colosseum Points for one win was definitely damn sweet. However, one had to remember that as he could now only do one Show Match a week rather than day, it would need to give at least six times

as much to average out to the same amount weekly. He had earned 4,500 per win before his promotion per match, so that was 27,000 weekly... meaning it was actually only a jump of 3,000 points every week.

At least the fights would get hard now, though, right?

An hour later – fifty minutes of which had been spent waiting for the fight to start – Jake stood in the arena with a slightly disappointed expression on his face and the head of a minotaur on the ground in front of him, its headless body lying not far away. Another minotaur could be found around fifteen meters away, filled with wounds from head to toe and a big hole where its heart had once been. As for Jake? Well, his armor had gotten ripped a bit here and there, but that was it.

So, yeah, it was pretty disappointing. The damn announcer didn't make things better either.

"Doomfoot! Katar King! The Purple Poker of Death! So many names, so many talents, all to describe one man: a true Paragon! Who knows, maybe even a coming Champion? I guess we will find out! Now go! Leave the arena and rest. You've earned it!"

He didn't need to be told that twice as Jake headed straight out and, after visiting the Battlemaster, went to his practice room... because, disappointingly so, he still had the resources to get in a good practice session.

Jake had grown stronger, and while he was still practicing and still had the trump card in his hidden archery, he had just about reached how strong he would get within the Challenge Dungeon. That meant he was only waiting to hit his limit and meet an opponent that was either truly equal or superior. The Benevolent Monk had been close, really close, but he had some too easily exploitable weaknesses.

Now the only question was... would Jake be forced to pull out his bow before or after he became the Champion? His reason for keeping it hidden was still partly so he could catch an opponent by surprise, but also for one more major reason:

He really wanted to avoid getting another stupid fucking nickname.

Chapter 758: Nevermore (Not Really): Willowood Clan

Pietra looked through the newly arrived shipment as she picked out the best silk from what was left. Most of it had already been taken by the other seamstresses, and Pietra felt lucky that at least some had been left behind she could work with.

If not, it would be hard to ever save up and buy their freedom, not to mention pay the monthly dues.

Putting all she could get in her spatial bag, she paid at the exit of the warehouse before heading home for the day. Renting a spatial bag had luckily gotten quite cheap recently as their clan had a lot fewer members than they used to.

On the way home, she couldn't help but peek at her neighbor's small residence. It looked worse by the day due to a lack of maintenance, but Pietra couldn't really say anything. They had lost the patriarch of their family and thus their position, despite him being the late son of an elder... alas, all that was from the days of old.

Getting home, Pietra smiled the moment she opened the door, fighting through any feelings of exhaustion.

"Mom!" her youngest yelled as she got up from her little bench and ran over.

“Hey honey,” Pietra said with a radiant smile, kneeling down and scooping up her daughter in a hug.

Holding her daughter tight, she looked out the small window showing the neighbor’s house, and inside, she saw a tall but very thin elf sitting in front of a small worktable with listless eyes. Pietra couldn’t help but sigh internally at the sight, holding her daughter even closer than before.

Deliah was truly an unfortunate soul. She had lost not only her husband but also her eldest daughter due to unfortunate timing when the Order of the Malefic had taken over. It had been a few years since it happened, and even if there had been some changes for their clan, it hadn’t really impacted the normal clan members much. It was more the higher-ups who had to deal with new rules.

Things were pretty bad initially. Right when the Order took over, they required the clan to send a certain number of E and D-grades to the Order every month and year, respectively. That had ended pretty fast, though, and since then, they had only been required to pay taxes.

Of course, if they didn’t pay the required taxes, the Order would make up for the difference by taking something else of equal value – more often than not, a few slaves. Which was honestly getting off pretty cheap, considering they were all slaves of the Order to begin with, though Pietra guessed they were considered some other kinds of slaves than those taken to the Order? The members of the clan didn’t have any contracts, after all.

That was why everyone had to contribute, and as a widow, Deliah had to contribute extra as her husband couldn’t. Her remaining children weren’t old enough to contribute much yet, and as she was responsible for them, she had to pay their share.

Honestly, it was a miracle she hadn't given up any of them yet by sending them to the Order. Pietra already had a hard enough time as a single mother paying for her one daughter and herself, and even if Deliah was a pretty talented jeweler who could use some of the many raw gemstones found in the mines, she had to be struggling to provide for four people alone.

"Mom?" her daughter interrupted her train of thought.

Pietra smiled and shook her head as she stood up and looked down at her daughter. "I was just thinking about adult stuff. Now, what do you want for dinner?"

Deliah coughed as she suppressed the pain. The kids were still in the small academy the clan had established, so she had to finish work before they came home. After a moment of hesitation, she reached into a drawer in her desk and pulled out a potion. It was her last one, but she was too low on resources to keep going.

She hadn't been able to fully regenerate her stamina and mana pool for several months by now, and it was starting to take a toll. The healer had said she was at risk of taking minor soul damage from overexertion, but she didn't really have a choice. Thus, she quickly drank the potion, ignoring the slightly rancid taste of a low-quality product. Low-quality but cheap product.

Her husband had been a pinnacle D-grade, which had given their family a respectable position in the social hierarchy, not to mention who her husband's father was. The fact that her father-in-law was an elder of the clan had helped to at least allow the kids into the academy to put some pressure off Deliah, and if all things went well, they all had a good chance of reaching D-grade. Assuming Deliah herself could continue to support them... something she would do everything in her power to do.

No matter how many years passed, she still couldn't forgive herself for what had happened to her eldest daughter. Her husband had been insistent on Meira being their way out of the clan and a way to a better life, and Deliah hadn't done enough to try and convince him otherwise or protect her daughter.

Despite her initial reluctance to go along with her husband, perhaps Deliah herself had begun to believe that marrying a young master from the Brimstone Conglomerate would have been a better fate than staying in the clan for the rest of her life. She would be a slave in both places, but at least she had a chance, however minor, for a bright future as the bride of an influential young man. Meira was smart and a talented healer, so as long as the young master had taken a liking to her, she could definitely have reached D-grade.

Now, none of that mattered. Deliah had agreed to let her husband take Meira to meet the young master, and the rest was history. The Brimstone Conglomerate had been destroyed, gods had fallen, and she had lost her eldest daughter and husband. What made it worse was that she could only blame herself, as blaming such massive factions with untold power like the Order was utterly meaningless.

So Deliah still hadn't forgiven herself yet for letting Meira leave that day. The night before Meira and her husband had gone to the branch of the Conglomerate, Meira had told her mother she wasn't sure she wanted to go and if she couldn't just stay home and work as a healer for the miners... and Deliah had been the one to convince her it was for the best to follow her father.

She had effectively sent her daughter to her death. Unknowingly, but that was still what she had done. At least if she had stayed back in the clan, she would still be alive. Especially now that the Order at least offered a way to earn true freedom through buying yourself a ticket to elsewhere...

That's why Deliah wouldn't give up on any of her children. She hadn't fought enough for Meira, and there was no way she going to let her little brother and two little sisters down in the same way. Who knows, maybe she could even get them off the Great Planet and take them somewhere safe one day.

So she worked. All she could hope for right now was that her body would hold up until the three of them could begin to provide for themselves, and the rest was simply hopeful thinking. But for her children, it was worth it to at least try.

Tanyl and Sakala were her two youngest. They were twins, a boy and a girl, both having just turned twenty this year and both in mid-tier E-grade. Elves having twins was incredibly rare, and while Deliah knew that it was considered relatively common among humans and even half-elves, it had come as a massive surprise to her and her husband. They had never planned on having more than three children but had ended up with four. Despite the struggles that had brought, Deliah had never once viewed the two of them as anything but blessings.

Kythela was their older sister. She was only four years older than her two siblings and was also in mid-tier E-grade. Meira had been quite a bit older than both the twins and her sister, and being more talented, she had been close to D-grade before she passed away. Deliah also knew that none of her kids were fully over losing their father and older sister, which was part of the reason why they worked so hard these days.

Hours passed, and Deliah finally managed to finish her work for the day. Her quota was high, but she could do it. Moreover, recently, she had even gained a few levels. She believed she had already exhausted all her potential, so that had been a welcome surprise and had helped her get her work done quicker and better. She was still only mid-tier D-grade, but that was already considered pretty good within the clan.

Looking at the sky outside, she still had a bit of time before the kids came home, so she went to take a quick nap. She would get a delivery again around nighttime and had more jewelry to complete while everyone else slept, so she had to try and restore her resources now to be able to do her job later.

She had barely managed to lie down and close her eyes when she heard a commotion at the door. With a brief glance out the window, she saw that around an hour had passed, but she still hurriedly got up right as the door opened.



"We're home!" Kythela yelled loud enough for even the neighbors to hear. It wasn't like their house was even big, having only three bedrooms total, so yelling was totally unnecessary.

Deliah didn't scold her, though, and quickly went to the door, where she saw her three kids walk in with an older man. He was tall and well-built, with bushy brows and a short beard, giving off a certain air of power. It was her father-in-law. Of course, more importantly than that, it was one of the elders of the clan and a C-grade at that.

"Greetings, elder," Deliah bowed as the man walked in with her kids.

"No need to be so formal, Deliah," the older man smiled.

She raised her head and saw her father-in-law look around the house while suppressing a sigh. Deliah did feel slightly embarrassed at the dilapidated state of her home, and she would have cleaned up if she knew they would have visitors. However, she also knew that the elder wasn't holding back a sigh of disappointment but that it was due to his powerlessness.

One would think that as an elder, he would have the power to change things or help, but in reality, it was an empty title that barely did anything. A single word from a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper would supersede anything he ever said or did, and the rules of the Order were very clear that each family had to contribute on their own, not even allowing him to pay their required taxes.

He still helped where he could, but it was incredibly limited.

Deliah invited them all inside and prepared to get something to drink when a shiver suddenly went down her spine. She froze mid-movement, her entire family doing the same. In fact, throughout the whole clan, they experienced this at once.

An aura had fallen over the clan.

“Get outside!” the elder yelled as Deliah did just that, ushering her kids out with her. Right outside, she saw her neighbor Petria also rush out, holding her daughter’s hand. In unison, they stared up and saw what looked like the arrival of the apocalypse.

The sky had split open as space shattered, the entire world shaking. It was a sight reminiscent of what the clan had also seen a few years ago, and they all knew what it meant... someone powerful was coming. Someone influential.

Out stepped several individuals, and before Deliah had any chance to do or say anything, her father-in-law had already shot into the air along with eight other figures from different places in the clan. It was the nine elders, their only C-grades. However, they had not flown up to fight.

Instead, they stopped in mid-air, not far from the hole in space, as a single figure walked out after several who looked like guards. From below, Deliah could not see who or what had appeared, but words seemed to be exchanged, and only a minute later, a clan-wide order was given.

Every single member of their clan had to gather... for there was about to be made an announcement regarding their future.

There was no questioning this order, no protests. All they could do was to comply. Over the next several minutes, the entire clan gathered in the large central square of the clan's main village. Women, children, men, young and old. Everyone was present as they stared at what happened in the sky above.

Out of the large crack of space had floated a large platform of gray stone with hundreds of people on it and what looked like a podium in the middle. Looking at the people there, Deliah recognized them. She had seen one before.

They were enforcers from the Order of the Malefic Viper. However, the last time she saw one, there had been only that one. But... here, there were hundreds. Every single one of them was a B-grade, capable of wiping out any of the small clans in this entire section of the Great Planet. What's more, there was the leader of this group. A dragonkin with black and dark green scales radiating power far beyond any of the others.

She had heard of these beings. It was a Malefic Dragonkin, a being closely connected and always blessed by the Malefic Viper himself. It was also this man who was the origin of the aura that had frozen the entire clan.

Why is someone like that here? Deliah asked herself as a shiver ran down her spine. Had they done something wrong... had some idiot provoked the Order of the Malefic somehow.

"Did... did your father-in-law tell you anything?" Pietra, who stood beside Deliah and her kids, asked in a worried tone.

"No... he didn't know or had even heard anything either," Deliah shook her head and answered in a low whisper while not taking her eyes off the platform above.

“Then what do you think is-“

“Shh!” a third person shushed them, Deliah agreeing that staying silent was probably best. To attract attention was not something anyone wanted, and while Deliah was curious, questioning out loud wouldn’t help anyone.

On the platform above, the dragonkin that seemed to be the leader stepped forward.

“Today, we are here to celebrate a joyous occasion. A change in your way of life. The sole disciple and Chosen of Grand Elder Duskleaf has laid claim to the Willowood Clan from this day onward,” the Malefic Dragonkin said in a voice that echoed so loud every person heard it.

Deliah was even more confused as she heard this. Why was some Chosen in this backwater mining clan, and why would they claim it? Was there something they didn’t know?

With a wave of his hand, the Malefic Dragonkin summoned a sea of gemstones that quickly gathered to form a rectangular gateway before stepping to the side.

Everyone kneeled as the gateway activated. Even the Malefic Dragonkin went down to one knee as they prepared to welcome someone clearly recognized as their superior. In unison, the entire crowd also kneeled, with some even kowtowing entirely. Deliah naturally did the same, keeping her stare firmly directed at the ground.

“All welcome, the honored Mistress Dawnleaf!”

A new aura appeared at that moment. One clearly amplified by the platform above.

“A high elf...” Pietra muttered beside her, feeling the sheer qualitative difference between a regular and a high elf.

However, Deliah hadn’t even noticed the high elf aspect. Instead, her head had whipped up due to the sheer familiarity of the presence of the person who had just stepped out of the gate.

She was a tall high elf, wearing a white dress with minimal jewelry. Deliah only really looked at the face of this elf, and despite the distance, she recognized her... even if a sliver of doubt still remained.

Chapter 759: Nevermore (Still Not Really): A Small Speech

Meira thought it was overdoing it... but Izil and Irin had both insisted this was necessary. Even Viridia had come by to insist that if Meira really wanted to break out of her shell and completely throw away all the burdens of who she had once been, she had to embrace her new identity fully. Teacher hadn’t seemed to care either way but had simply said:

“What you choose to do has nothing to do with me. You are now my Chosen, that is true, but I have no intent on limiting what you do, even if your actions are done through taking advantage of my position. If you feel that visiting or even taking charge of your old clan is what’s best, just go do that. No one will oppose you, and if they do, just tell me, alright? Can’t have any unnecessary conflicts delay you from fixing your personal issues and returning to doing alchemy. Ah, just don’t make any promises that I will do something or show up somewhere... because I won’t.”

While it didn’t sound like Teacher was overly supportive, Meira knew he cared. She even knew that should she ask him to come with her to visit her clan, he would. Not as himself but disguised as

someone else to not attract unneeded attention, but he would come. She wouldn't ask him, though. This was something she had to do without him... even if she did borrow his name and influence.

The problem was just that Meira had no idea how she would go about visiting. Should she disguise herself and go? No, that wouldn't work, as she wanted to actually help her family there, and her only way to do that was to leverage her position somehow. She had considered for a long time how to do that, as Irin had made a suggestion... why didn't she just take it over? Why didn't she just declare that the entire Willowood Clan now belonged to her? No one would oppose that. Who would want to argue with the Chosen of the Grand Elder over some random small elven mining clan that only had a few C-grades in it? It was the type of faction where even if some A-grade from the Order destroyed it on accident, he wouldn't even have to file any paperwork or be questioned for not reporting what had happened. In the grand scheme of things, the Willowood clan was that insignificant.

After some deliberation, Meira decided that was what she wanted to do. She would take over the clan and have that work as a shield of sorts. While no member of the Order would get in trouble for destroying a random C-grade clan, they would certainly want to avoid messing with somewhere of interest to the Chosen of the Grand Elder.

This was when the next problem arose. How exactly would Meira take it over? As in, what practical steps would she take? Well, luckily, she had people around her with ideas. People who knew far more than her and were more than willing to help. Some of them because they were her friends, but many because – as Izil put it – they wanted to earn her favor, as she had the ear of the Grand Elder. Some even wanted favor directly with Meira as they concluded she would become a far more influential figure in the future, even without relying on others.

It did still feel odd that people wanted her favor and not just the favor of others through her. But she wasn't going to say no to help when offered.

So, in the end, Meira had just listened to what the people around her recommended as they laid a plan to claim the Willowood Clan for herself.

During this, Viridia had sent someone to help her. It was an A-grade peak administrator who worked closely with the Hall Master, sent solely to plan Meira's trip to her old clan. It was her idea to get a newly evolved S-grade Malefic Dragonkin to come along to truly communicate the meaning of this visit, and it was her idea to make a spectacle of it all.

In her words, Meira needed an entrance worthy of the Grand Elder's Chosen. She couldn't just be teleported there with a few guards, or worse, with just some of her close personal friends. No, they needed to go all-out, especially considering this was her first public action as a Chosen. After all, she didn't have some grand reveal, so many would also view this as her first public appearance.

Meira even had to step in and reduce some of the spectacles... having a bunch of dragons circling the platform combined with an army of more than ten thousand to flank her just seemed like too much, and it was only through struggle she managed to get this army reduced to "just" a few hundred enforcers. It was a compromise of having more powerful but fewer people to still show roughly the same level of prestige.

When the time came for the actual ceremony, Meira simply walked out of the massive gate as she tried to remember all the tips she had been given. She tried to remember how Jake had acted during his own Chosen ceremony, and while this was far more private and not a grand announcement in front of the whole Order, she still didn't want to embarrass her Teacher.

Holding her head high and spreading her presence, she hoped it would work. Meira knew that her aura was far from Jake's, but based on the reactions of the crowd, it apparently still seemed intimidating. She knew a big reason for this was her Blessing getting mixed in there, but things were still better than she had expected. Oh, it definitely also helped she was a high elf now.

Glancing down toward the crowd, she tried to get a sense of how many people there were in her former clan. If she had to do a rough estimate, she would say it was about a million elves total, with nearly

every single one of them gathered below. It was a testament to just how big the mine was to keep them all employed... but she also remembered how her grandfather had talked about the clan once being tens of times larger.

However, more than counting her audience, she looked around for a few specific people. Meira had already made sure they were still around before coming, and after looking for a few seconds, still just standing there while radiating her presence, she saw them.

She saw her two sisters and one of her brothers – the youngest and one of the twins. She didn't see her four other half-brothers anywhere. They were brothers from her father's first and second wives, whom Meira had rarely interacted with, and she honestly didn't care much for them. They were all older than herself by quite a few years, and even before everything had happened, they were already very much living their own lives as miners and builders, a Path her youngest brother also wanted to follow.

The reason she spotted them was because a single elf in the entire crowd raised her head when Meira let loose her presence. It was a face she recognized, if barely. The elf's skin looked more sunken, and she looked exhausted, but there was no mistake... it was her mother.

Meira would be lying if she said she didn't still hold some resentment toward her parents. Her father had been controlling and never once cared about Meira's own opinions or thoughts in any matter, but just viewed her as a piece of property to use. Her mother had been complicit, and while she had tried to be caring and loving, she never did so at the expense of making her husband angry. Meira still remembered when she was a teenager, and her mother had tried to explain to her how important it was to never make her future husband dissatisfied, or she would risk losing his favor, and he would turn to his other wives or concubines. Back then, Meira hadn't questioned it at all, but now she realized it was some truly messed up logic.

However, even if she held resentment, she understood. In the same vein as how Meira had never questioned her mother's words before after meeting Jake, so had her mother never questioned it either. Perhaps even her father was also a victim of circumstances... but Meira didn't want to even think about that too much. He was dead, and Meira trying to make him out to just be a misunderstood man



who wanted the best for his family wouldn't help with anything besides possibly making her feel worse about his passing.

Looking at her three full siblings, she didn't feel any resentment at all. Instead, she had to hold back a small smile from seeing Tanyl and Sakala both looking nearly all grown up. They were still barely adults, being only twenty, and when she had left, they were still at an age where every year brought noticeable changes. Kythela also looked healthy and a bit older compared to a few years ago, but otherwise, she was mostly the same, not just in appearance but in level.

It truly put things into perspective. Meira's clan hadn't changed in the last few years, while Meira had become an entirely different person.

"Milady, perhaps an announcement from the Chosen would be appropriate," the S-grade Malefic Dragonkin spoke to her telepathically, throwing her out of her thoughts. Probably for the best, too, as her standing there just looking down at her family for a few dozen seconds definitely wasn't helping her look like some noble young mistress.

After quickly getting over the weirdness of having a powerful person talk to her so respectfully – something Meira was luckily getting more used to – she nodded and did just that. Meira did have a speech prepared, after all.

Stepping forward and tapping into the formation beneath her to amplify her voice, she spoke.

"Greetings, members of the Willowood Clan. Or should I say, we meet again, my former clan."

Her opening lines already had a visible effect on the crowd. Not of awe or surprise but sheer confusion. Like the fact she had once been a member of the clan wasn't even possible. Nevertheless, she continued.

"I am here today not only as the Chosen of the Grand Elder but as a former member of the Willowood clan. My name is Meira, a former healer in the miner's barracks. Perhaps some of you recognize me... and perhaps you don't. I myself only see a few familiar faces."

It was the truth. Meira saw a few family members, but that was it. Meira never had many friends or acquaintances. She had always been working and practicing the things her parents wanted, and when she wasn't doing that, she was helping take care of her siblings.

"You may question if I truly was connected to the clan, so let me tell you my story. My past is no secret. The day the Order of the Malefic Viper destroyed the Brimstone Conglomerate, I was captured by the Order and brought to their headquarters as a slave. After grueling training and being forced to evolve to a D-grade as a slave, I resigned myself to my fate. The day I was assigned as a slave to a new arrival from the newly initiated multiverse, I didn't question anything but only hoped to survive. Yet when I met my new master, willing to do anything to gain his favor, he rejected me at every turn. He did not want me as his slave... but he allowed me to stay. Not with the objective of serving him but to learn how to find my own Path. Decide my own Path. At first, I resisted, but then I saw hope. Hope toward a life where I could make my own choices and determine my own future. My master, the one who gave me that hope, was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

The decision to share so much personal information about her journey was not made without serious deliberations. Meira had talked for many days with not just Izil and Irin but even Reika and Bastilla. They knew most of her story already, and after checking in with the administrator sent by Viridia, they settled on going ahead with it. Meira had very much wanted to give this speech... because she felt like if someone had given it to her while growing up, it could have changed many things for her. Maybe that was just wishful thinking, but she wanted to believe that.

“I was lucky in so many ways. It was through his initial guidance and rejection I was forced to make decisions myself. Even then, I resisted until I was worn down and left with no choice but to choose what I wanted to do. The reason I am saying all this is not to brag or to prove how superior I am... but to tell you all that not even five years ago, I would have been one of you. I was given opportunities, and I grasped them. All the while, he supported me... until the day I was a slave no longer but a fully-fledged member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. I was made the disciple and Chosen of Grand Elder Duskleaf... my fate changed due to one lucky encounter that became an impetus for a new Path.”

A bit of muttering came from below, but Meira didn't shush them. All the enforcers had also been explicitly ordered to never make any aggressive actions unless it was to defend her or others from actual danger.

“One of the things my former master made clear from the beginning was that he didn't want any slaves. He would still accept people working for him, but never as slaves. That is one of the reasons he freed me... and today, I will do the same. For my entire life, the Willowood has been a clan that has lived in slavery in all but name. No contract may bind you, but your fates are not yours to control. Today, that changes. Call it my final gift to the Willowood tribe that put me into this world. You may not have my lucky encounter or my opportunities... but I can at least give you all a bit of hope for a better future.”

Silence followed as no one did or said anything. Meira looked over at the dragonkin and gave him a nod, the man smiling in return.

The Malefic Dragonkin once more stepped forth, his voice booming. “Details as to how these desired changes of Mistress Dawnleaf will be implemented shall follow in the coming days. Rejoice, for not only was her fate changed due to her fortunate encounter... but so has all of yours.”

The voice of the dragonkin faded as Meira hoped she had done well with her speech. She had stuck mostly to the script, so it would be okay. She also felt incredibly nervous about what was coming next. It was the thing she had both dreaded and looked forward to the most:

Her family reunion.

Duskleaf smiled as he watched Meira perform the speech she had spent so long preparing. She had done well, and even if she was clearly nervous, no one seemed to notice, and those who did wouldn't bring it up.

Truthfully, he did not have a smidgen of care for this small elven clan. They were one small clan of millions on the Great Planet alone, with truly nothing of interest about them... except for the fact that Meira had come from there. Which was enough to at least make Duskleaf a little interested. Not because he believed the place had something unique from it but because he believed understanding the environment she grew up in could help him understand her better. Natural affinities and such were partly environmentally based, after all.

He also thought that going to her old clan would be healthy for Meira. It would allow her to fully close a chapter of her life and potentially begin a new one. After she had begun all this planning to go visit, her alchemy had suffered as her mind was elsewhere, and it would be good for her to get everything out of her system.

Duskleaf did hope Meira would not feel too responsible for the clan. That could become a chain that weighed her down, after all. While she had promised she didn't want to actually rule the clan, there was always a chance, however slight. So many young geniuses had been lost to meaningless responsibilities or drowned in useless emotions toward families or clans that had ultimately only served as distractions on their true Path.

He did believe she could go far, if not all the way. Sure, before her latest evolution, her class and profession had been, to put it nicely, garbage. But by the time she reached just B-grade, none of that would really matter anymore. Much less in A-grade or beyond. No, the biggest threat to Meira was getting distracted and no longer feeling the rush of inner motivation she currently had.

Alas, only time would tell if reuniting with her family would become a burden that would drag her down and hurt her Path... or another source of motivation to keep her going. At this point, it could be either, and all Duskleaf could really do was guide her as best he could, whatever happened.

For now, he would just be happy for her and sincerely hoped that this reunion could bring her some genuine happiness. Because a happy alchemist was definitely better than a sad one.

Unless they worked with curses.

Well, that, or certain poisons.

Or some elixirs... and flasks... also rituals... formations too... and, well, a few more things here and there...

Anyway, in conclusion, Duskleaf just preferred that Meira would have a happy reunion.

Chapter 760: Nevermore (Partly Back): Looking Forward

The nine elders of the Willowood tribe. They used to look so scary to Meira... even her own grandfather always had a frightening aura about him. One of absolute power that commanded respect. They were all C-grades, and Meira remembered thinking their power and position were utterly unattainable for someone like her.

But now, sitting across a table from these nine, Meira felt no fear or apprehension. She no longer saw nine unapproachable existences. Instead, she saw nine aging men and women trying to suppress their fear of the A-grade administrator and S-grade dragonkin. This was mixed with a good deal of confusion

from the two standing behind Meira, who was the only one of them sitting at the table. Their meeting occurred inside the clan's "main house," where only the elders and high-ranking members usually were allowed.

One of the elders in the room looked more out of place than any other. Meira couldn't really blame him either. Just a few years ago, he had been someone Meira hadn't even dared look at for too long, someone her father whom she feared, feared himself. Her own grandfather.

In truth, Meira didn't really have any animosity toward the old man. She also wasn't sure how many emotions he ever held toward her either. He was over a millennium old, and her father had been one child of hundreds, with Meira herself just one grandchild of what had to be close to a thousand. Her father had been considered decently talented with a chance to reach C-grade, so her grandfather had put more attention on their family, but that didn't mean Meira had ever really talked with him.

The times he had been around hadn't been terrible, and he did seem to care in his own way. If that care came from him not wanting his direct relatives to be embarrassments or if he truly cared for them as people, Meira had no way of telling.

"Being back in the clan feels oddly nostalgic. I hadn't thought I would feel this way," Meira said, not really looking at anyone in particular. "How is everything around here these days?"

Now, Meira did have one genuine problem from here on out: she had run out of cue cards and plans. Sure, she had discussions with different people, but pre-planning conversations were difficult, so Meira could only do her best... and she wasn't sure if she hadn't already messed up from the beginning. In either case, she wanted to keep this short.

"There is truly nothing to complain about, honored Chosen, and the clan has only flourished after being allowed to serve the Order of the Malefic Viper," one of the other elders answered. The head elder and

one of the oldest members of the clan. She was a few thousand years old and had reached late-tier C-grade, also making her one of the strongest in the clan.

Meira could only sigh at the woman's answer. It truly felt weird being at the other end of the table, but if she had learned one thing from how Jake dealt with being a Chosen, it was to "cut through all the bullshit" and try to force an honest conversation that wasn't just a dance of platitudes with small hints of truth here and there.

"Head elder, I am not here to do an inspection or to scold anyone. I am here as a former member of the Willowood Clan to deliver a gift to the place that gave birth to me. So, please, do not obscure any truths or hide anything."

The head elder hesitated, and sensing that she still wouldn't get a proper answer, she turned to the one man in the room she hoped could give straight answers.

"Grandfather," she said, making the man look at her with surprised eyes. "How is the clan doing these days? And please be honest."

Be it through sheer confidence from having known her before she became Chosen or because the man summoned all the guts he had, her grandfather actually gave an answer, effectively overruling the head elder.

"Things have not changed much since the Order of the Malefic Viper took over. There have been some adaptations that had to be made, but it is very much the same for the average clan member. The only difference is that things have been better in the last year or so... was that due to you?" her grandfather asked.

Meira just nodded. "I couldn't do much at the time, but others around me did communicate to ones they knew to lay off the clan a bit."

"Thank you," her grandfather said as he bowed in his chair. "If I may... your father, is he-"

"Dead," Meira shook her head. A pang of sadness fell over the old man's face, but he quickly recovered.

"I see..." he just nodded. Being an old and experienced man, he seemed to understand that pressing the issue would be unwise. Instead, he talked about people Meira would perhaps care about.

"Your mother is... one of the people not doing so well. She has had to pick up many burdens after you two disappeared, and it hasn't been easy on her. I have done what I can for your siblings, but due to the rules of the Order-

He stopped abruptly as Meira threw an annoyed side-eye at the S-grade Malefic Dragonkin, making him back off his killing intent. Meira was beginning to understand Jake's complaints that people from the Order often overdid it.

"Please continue," she said, her grandfather's forehead now filled with sweat.

"The... the rules made things difficult for her, but your siblings are doing well... are... are you interested in seeing them?"



“That’s why I came here in person,” Meira smiled. “I won’t be involved in much that happens from here on out. At least not directly.”

Turning to the administrator standing behind her, she spoke: “Would you please take over dealing with the rest of these matters?”

“Certainly, Mistress Dawnleaf,” the administrator smiled as she projected an image into the air. “Now, please keep up, for chances are you nine will be responsible for facilitating much of this transition, so don’t hesitate to ask any questions.”

With that, she prepared to begin the presentation in front of the nine elders. The start was only delayed slightly by Meira getting up and leaving with the dragonkin, the elders all standing up and bowing as she walked out, even her grandfather.

Meira didn’t need to stay for what came next, as she was already roughly aware of the plans. As rare as an occasion like this was, where a member of some low-grade clan rose to a high position and wanted to incorporate their birthplace into the Order, it wasn’t unique. In fact, there were records of this happening thousands of times before... though it very, very rarely involved a Chosen or was this sudden and extreme.

This meant some existing procedures were in place for the Willowood Clan to officially join the Order of the Malefic Viper. That would hopefully make things go smoothly.

It would work the same as any other clan that had been incorporated into the Order of the Malefic Viper. It wasn’t like every single member of every vampire clan had joined the academy or anything like that, after all. It was far more similar to the citizenship of an empire, with every member of the

Willowood clan being granted their own identification tokens and an official status within the Order that gave them certain benefits, such as free travel and protection.

Teleportation gates would also be established in the clan, and a grand defensive formation would either be placed down or the area would be included in another nearby formation by expanding that one. The entire area was already covered by the defensive barrier put down by the Order in all areas they controlled, but that one was more for detection than actual defense and would only work against certain attacks, such as celestial objects falling or two S-grades deciding to have a fight in the airspace above the clan.

Meira would not do much more than make the clan official members. She, in truth, had no interest in ruling the clan. Perhaps she was a bit similar to Jake in that vein, but she didn't believe herself qualified in the slightest and would prefer to focus on alchemy and her own personal progress instead.

In her speech, she had called this a final gift to her clan, and Meira very much meant that. She was no longer a member of the Willowood Clan. That identity had been stripped of her when she first became a slave, and she had no intentions of regaining it. This entire visit was just a sentimental goodbye to a life that had once been. They would all get a chance now to claim a better life for themselves.

All of this naturally only concerned the clan as a whole... her immediate family was an entirely different matter.

Meira was currently headed to the home her mother and siblings currently lived in. She wasn't that surprised when she learned they had been forced to move to a worse area of the clan after her father's death, but when she saw the state of the house, she was still a bit taken aback. It was small and shabby, far worse than the place she had grown up in.

On the way, they didn't see many people as most had hurriedly gone back to their own homes, waiting to hear what would happen to the clan. Those who did still venture out didn't notice Meira due to her bodyguard, who easily hid them. She was grateful for the S-grade's conduct throughout this... he never really talked outside of reminding her of important things, and she didn't even ask for him to hide their presence nor to stay outside and out of sight when they reached the house to not scare those inside too badly.

Due to her interactions with Jake and Teacher, Meira could handle being in the presence of an S-grade without any issues, but her family would naturally not be the same.

Standing before the door to the house, Meira would have thought she would have been nervous... but she was oddly calm. Listening in, she heard the voices of several people inside.

"Are you sure that was Meira? I couldn't see all the way up there... and wasn't it a high elf?" she heard Kythela ask.

"It was," her mother, Deliah, said with certainty. "You also heard what she said. It must be her."

"Do you... Do you think we can meet her?" Tanyl asked nervously. "If it really is big sis..."

Meira, standing outside the door, failed to hold back a smile. Without much hesitation, she raised her hand and knocked on the door.

Everyone inside went silent, and after a moment, her mother went to the door and carefully opened it.

When she did, she froze when she saw Meira... but the twins didn't have the same apprehension.

"Sis!" "Meira!"

Without any second thoughts, they both ran over, but they did manage to get their bearings before they tried to pull her into a hug or anything.

"Hey, Mom," Meira said with a smile as she turned to the twins and Kythela. "How... how is everyone?"

Yeah... keeping up her façade as a figure of authority wasn't something she was that good at quite yet, especially not in circumstances like this.

"Meira..." her mom stammered as tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm... I'm sorry... I..."

Meira took her hand. "Let's talk about that stuff later, okay? Today is a good day... and we have plenty of time to get through everything, alright?"

Her mom held back tears as she nodded.

"It's really you," Kythela said, staring with eyes as big eyes. "But... how?"

“I did a whole speech up there about how,” Meira shook her head.

“You... you really went through a lot,” Kythela muttered. “Are you, you know, okay now?”

With a nod, Meira smiled. “Yeah.

After a few more assurances and questions, Meira finally went inside and sat down with everyone. They, of course, had more questions, and Meira happily answered while also asking many of her own. She learned how everyone was doing and what her siblings were studying at the academy. It was also only now she finally took proper notice of how haggard her mother really was.

As a healer, she had skills to see people’s conditions, and her mother was in the initial stages of soul exhaustion. It was a rare condition for anyone above D-grade to ever experience, as it came from, quite literally, exhausting yourself so much over a long period of time it led to potentially permanent soul damage. Usually, it was only seen during long wars where the battle never subsided, and soldiers had to keep fighting and never had any time to rest, so to see it in a jeweler...

It definitely made Meira feel less angry at her mom, seeing her willing to sacrifice so much for her siblings.

They kept talking for what felt like hours as perhaps the most pertinent question was finally asked:

“What will happen to us now? What do you want us to do?” Sakala asked.

“Yeah, what will happen?” Tanyl echoed his twin, a hint of excitement in his voice.

Meira just smiled and held their hands. “That’s the entire point of this. That’s not for me to decide. You can do anything you want; go wherever you want. I am not going to tell you what to do or what you can’t do. Those are your choices to make. All I will do is help you be able to choose your own future.”

That was the greatest gift Jake had given to Meira: freedom. And now that she was able to grant it, she wanted to give this freedom to her family, too.

If Jake was sincere, he had found the entire Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon a bit too easy overall. The entire structure of the Challenge Dungeon didn’t lend well to someone like him who wanted as many hard fights as possible, as it was more a long-term test of skill and ability to improve when circumstances changed.

Since he became severely limited in the number of fights he could do, Jake had leaned into this and begun to practice archery or basic magic daily. He had filled the downtime with something he found productive and had managed to get by the days like that.

However... the Paragon rank proved itself to be different. Jake could no longer enter every fight expecting his win to be a foregone conclusion. This wasn’t just because his opponents could now match him in power but due to how the Colosseum operated.

Jake’s opponents would study him. They would prepare counters to Jake’s usual weapons and practice strategies effective against him. If the fights were done blind, neither Jake nor his opponent knowing anything about each other, Jake would have felt confident in winning pretty much every fight easily. However, if he went in unprepared against a prepared foe, even if they were slightly less powerful than him, he would no longer feel as confident in his victory.

This forced Jake to properly prepare for every single opponent he met in the arena. He did still get some blind fights with the weekly Show Match, but for the Paragon fights, Jake had gone all-in with the studying.

He watched recordings of matches, went and saw live matches, and practiced to fight against every opponent specifically. When applicable, he also prepared unique pieces of equipment or summoned powerful, stable arcane mana constructs he believed would be beneficial.

In his second Paragon match, Jake met a human mage with a trident who did water magic. He primarily used his magic to make what were essentially water cutters while defending himself with large waves to push away anyone approaching him. Jake had watched his opponent's matches and began to notice certain attack patterns he could exploit, and while the water cutter was powerful, it hit a small area that Jake was confident blocking with his katars. Which is exactly what he did, resulting in a relatively quick victory. He still had to go replace his armor after, though.

The third match was against a scalekin archer – something he had been happy to see all the way at Paragon rank. Her primary fighting method relied on her ability to mentally control her arrows and her incredibly high speed due to her powerful wind magic that outmatched even Jake by a significant margin, allowing her to borderline fly around. Jake had been very tempted to pull out his bow for a proper archery duel but had resisted and instead went with another plan. Seeing as she primarily fought by moving about a lot, Jake had set up a trap throughout the long fight where he slowly wrapped incredibly thin stable arcane threads around two of the pillars throughout his chase and then goaded her into trying to dodge that way, resulting in her getting entangled and giving Jake his opening to finish the fight.

Many of the subsequent fights were very similar. Every fight, Jake went in with a strategy, and his own “simple” fighting style proved to be a big advantage here. As Jake primarily fought by countering what his foe did, he was harder to prepare against than most, meaning his preparations often proved more valuable than his opponent's. You could only study a guy who liked to charge straight at you and try to stab you with katars that much.

Not to say he walked away from these battles unscathed.

Ever since being promoted to Paragon, Jake constantly consumed those recovery potions to not fall behind. Despite winning his fights, he never walked out without severe injuries. At this point, doing so was simply an impossibility, as while he definitely out-counteracted pretty much every counter... he was still countered. There were still weaknesses they could find and exploit, and when they unleashed their trump cards, not taking at least a minor injury was unavoidable, even for Jake. Seeing this happen did make Jake happy as it helped him clean up flaws in his combat style and hammer out bad habits, though he could have gone without the stab wounds.

Even so, he went through the ranks without missing a single beat or getting behind schedule. Even in the ninth Paragon fight, where he ended up losing an arm, he managed to reattach it after using the recovery potion, bandages, and four days of rest, followed by a Show Match done mostly one-armed.

The tenth fight proved to be easier than the ninth, primarily because it was against a mage – the kind of fighter he tended to counter quite nicely.

With all ten fights down... only a promotion match remained. Once that was won, the announcer would have no choice but to add Champion before any stupid nickname he assigned to Jake, resulting in it definitely sounding more stupid than before.