

Hunter 761

Chapter 761: Nevermore: The Championship Match Begins

One opponent remained between Jake and the title of Champion, but as expected, it wouldn't be easy.

"Your final opponent before you become a Champion is definitely a gatekeeper," the Battlemaster said, looking Jake in the eye. "I can't tell you if she is the strongest opponent you will have faced in the Colosseum so far, but she is definitely the most consistently powerful one."

Jake was a bit confused by the phrasing, as the Battlemaster elaborated.

"Alright, alright. I can't give out information for free, but I will give you one massive warning: prepare a lot if you can. Because she will. If there are any weaknesses in your fighting style or any exploitable patterns, she will find them, and she will make use of them to put you on the back foot. Out of everyone you will ever meet here in the Colosseum, she is probably the one who is the best at analyzing and adapting to certain opponents, so expect to be countered, alright?"

As the man finished explaining, a window popped up in front of Jake. It was not a bonus objective this time, though, but just a message informing him this was the final fight before he would become the Champion.

A final battle stands between you and the Champion rank.

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.

This will be the final match to determine if you successfully ascend all the way through the ranks flawlessly.

Bonus Objective: Defeat the Valhalian Valkyrie

Ignoring all the changes in flavor text, this one communicated that all time restraints – outside of the regular one placed by Nevermore – would disappear if he won this match. There would be no “streak” to keep going.

Aside from that, he saw the name of his opponent... and it was one that took him aback. Valhalian Valkyrie. Actually, thinking back, this was probably the first time someone had a name that directly connected them to a major faction.

He wasn't sure what to make of that, and ultimately, it didn't really matter much as he knew what to do.

Jake followed the advice of the Battlemaster, and he started researching. He sent Polly to get whatever she could and even gave her permission to look into things that had a Colosseum Point cost associated with them. Meanwhile, Jake would focus on fight analysis, and luckily, she had a Show Match scheduled the next day.

Watching that show match had been... enlightening. Her name definitely fitted her. The Valhalian Valkyrie wore tight-fitting full-plate armor that looked relatively light yet also durable. Her entire body was covered, with even her face obscured by a helmet that left only a small slit.

She used a short spear for attack and not one, but several different shields throughout the Show Match. From the looks of it, she had a spatial storage of some kind to swap at least shields, so she always had one for every situation. Jake saw four different shields during the show match before she killed the last enemy.

When it came to her fighting style, it was... basic. It was so basic that Jake had a feeling she was aware he was watching the fight, something that was proven to be accurate when someone handed him a note after the fight, asking him if he enjoyed the show.

This made Jake question if he had even seen her use her real fighting style. It didn't help when Polly came back the same day and had widely conflicting reports on what kind of fighter she was. Some claimed she was a mage, some claimed a warrior who focused purely on speed, and there were even those who said she was actually a shapeshifter capable of changing her form and stats.

To summarize, lots of bullshit with no bearing had been spread, likely by the Valkyrie herself. This Jake did find genuinely odd... because Valhal was known as a faction that fought enemies head-on. It was not a faction that acted all shady and used strategies like this. Well... there was one person like that in Valhal, wasn't there? One person that Jake could see be the Promotion Match to become Champion, who was naturally also a god:

Gudrun, the de-facto leader and chief strategist of Valhal. She was the wife of Valdemar, and if the Primordial was the brawn, then she was definitely the brains of the operation.

Even if it wasn't her, it was at least someone related to her. Maybe someone who had studied under her. Either way, Jake decided to go into the fight with the expectation she was Gudrun, and his intuition made him think he was onto something. Again, it ultimately didn't matter who she was outside of Nevermore. In the Colosseum of mortals, she was just a very annoying opponent that he had to overcome one way or another.

Jake's final hope to get at least some information on who he assumed to be Gudrun was recordings of her prior fights... but he couldn't find any. Neither could Polly. It was entirely possible they were out there, but Jake would have to pay a ridiculous amount of Colosseum Points to get them, something he simply wasn't willing to do.

Now, he did question how realistic it was that no one had any recordings or even proper information to give out, considering the number of audience members for Paragon fights was well into the hundreds of thousands. Sure, even if they did not have the means to record the fight, it had to be possible to interview viewers and build a solid profile, but nope, it wasn't. So, yeah, there was definitely dungeon-fuckery going on telling him that he either had to pay way too many points to get information or fight her without being able to prepare that much.

So that is what he decided to do. He would enter the fight with very general preparations only. He would lean a bit on what he knew about Valhal and their general methods, most of that stemming from conversations with Carmen. It wasn't much, but it was honest work.

The thought of buying better equipment or getting a cloak or something also crossed his mind, but he decided against it after going shopping. He only really had the option of upgrading his armor or getting a helmet or cloak. There were some okay cloaks, but helmets were out of the question as they all at least partly obscured vision and made moving his head around harder. There was nothing like his usual mask, so that was a bit of a bummer.

A week was both a long and a short time – luckily helped by a fun and easy Show Match in the middle - and soon enough, the day of the Championship Match had arrived. Jake entered the battle with just his usual equipment, a few shields of stable arcane mana, and a quiver filled with stable arcane arrows on his back. Twenty-four of them, to be exact. He had wanted to store the quiver inside his storage ring, but alas, that was not an option because the quiver was not recognized. Well, okay, the quiver itself could be stored, but not all the arrows.

Walking up the steps to the arena, he knew he would be fighting an opponent who had prepared for everything Jake had shown so far... which was why the quiver was so important. Because that represented something he hadn't shown.

If it was dumb luck or genius foresight, no one could truly say – though Jake leaned more toward the latter – but it turned out to be a brilliant idea to keep his archery hidden for a moment just like this one. Seeing as he had walked around with a quiver since he entered the arena, perhaps probably-Gudrun did prepare some countermeasures for archery, but Jake seriously doubted she had prepared for what he had in store.

Everything was set for the fight... including the damn announcer.

“Today, we have gathered for a special occasion. A rare treat for us all! Many matches take place every day, nay, every single hour, but this one is unlike any other. For on this fateful day, we will have a new Champion of the Colosseum! “

Roars and cheers all around as Jake looked at the familiar figure he had seen in the Show Match stand across from him. Not just her Show Match but his own that she had naturally shown up for.

“Do these combatants even need any introduction!? One is a man of many talents, a master with both his katars and feet, who has proven himself an opponent none could stand up to so far, with a list of titles that nearly rivals his true power! The Purple Poker of Death, Doomfoot, Harbinger of Stabs... alas, we have decided to only call him one thing for today: Doombringer!”

Jake was about to curse internally at the stupid names as he heard the last one, and... well... it wasn't that bad? Doombringer was kind of okay, right? Yeah, it did have a certain ring to it. Definitely better than Doomfoot.

“But perhaps today, he will meet his match. Because if anyone can find his weakness and avoid their doom, it’s gonna be the Valhalian Valkyrie! Akin to the Doombringer, she has reached this stage undefeated, but unlike her opponents, she was in no rush. With steady steps, she won every match with a plan in mind, and today, she surely has entered with a strategy to bring doom upon the Doombringer!”

Not much information was given in the little speech about her, not that Jake had expected that. Everything was pretty much as expected, including the questionable announcer.

“Enough from me! Let the words lie and take up arms... and may the Championship Match begin! Lower the gates!”

Jake watches the gates slowly lowering, not in a hurry. His opponent was much the same as she patiently waited for the bars to be all the way down before she confidently walked forward. Jake saw she carried her short light spear as well as a shield, the same as during her Show Match. Her golden armor was the same, too, with her face nearly entirely covered.

The shield was circular in design and had a curve to it, making it purpose-built to deflect attacks. Especially those of the piercing kind.

“I gotta ask,” Jake said as they reached about the middle of the arena. “Would you happen to be called Gudrun?”

His words did seem to surprise her for a moment based on how she had a slight pause in her step. “Are you trying to come onto me, or are you simply dying to know the name of the one who will defeat you today?”

“Neither,” Jake answered unperturbed. “Just curious if my assumption is correct or not.”

“Will the answer hold any meaning?” she questioned. “Will you surrender if you know the truth?”

Jake shook his head at the dumb question.

“Then let us not concern ourselves with such silly things as names,” the woman who was totally Gudrun said as she lowered her stance. “And as it appears you will not make the first move, allow me the honors.”

With those words, she shot forward spear first. Her stab was clearly a probing one, and Jake easily dodged it and tried to move to her right side – the side without a shield. Jake’s move clearly didn’t surprise her, and she was already turning before Jake had fully dodged her stab, sweeping her spear toward his torso.

Using his one katar, he blocked the spear as he moved in with the other, but Gudrun – yes, he would mentally just refer to her as Gudrun from now on – was fast and jumped back before he had any chance to even get close enough.

Giving chase, Jake tried to close the distance as she kept backing off, making sure to never corner herself. To the average fighter, the fight just looked like Jake had the upper hand as he was always on the offensive, but in reality... nothing was really happening.

At least not on the surface. Progress was happening, quite literally, beneath the surface.

It had taken Jake a few moments to notice, but Gudrun was moving in a very exact pattern, and focusing on her boots, he felt the slight infusion of energy from her feet into the sand. When he noticed it, Jake began to try and counter by purposefully messing with her, but it didn't seem to have any particular effect. Even when he stomped down to send in a wave of destructive arcane energy, whatever Gudrun had infused was barely affected.

The reason was due to how deep down this odd energy submerged itself before settling on what he assumed to be the bottom of the arena. At least it looked like the bottom through his sphere.

Jake, knowing she was planning something, took advantage as best he could. While she was fast, Jake was still slightly faster. Her analysis of his fighting style was pretty damn spot-on, and between the spear and shield keeping him at bay, Jake had a hard time getting anything done.

But just because he had a hard time didn't make it impossible. Jake went in for an attack as usual, but the second she tried to stab him, he dismissed his katar and instead grasped hold of the spear as he infused his gloves with energy. This did not take her totally by surprise, and she was ready for Jake's other katar... but not a kick.

Jake spun his body and used her spear as leverage as he kicked her on the shoulder, his foot exploding with arcane energy and sending her staggering. Still holding onto her spear, Jake tried to yank it to get in another attack, but in a wise move, she let go of her weapon and jumped back.

Before he could even feel happy about disarming Gudrun, she snapped her finger. The spear Jake was still holding onto suddenly began glowing with runes as it exploded, releasing a jolt of golden lightning that slithered across his entire body, both inside and out. The explosion was over in an instant as metallic fragments fell to the ground while Jake clenched his fist, gritting his teeth.

She got me, Jake admitted mentally, as he, for the first time since the battle started, had stopped moving for more than a second. The lightning had done a number on him and temporarily stunned him just long enough for Gudrun to pull off whatever the hell she was preparing.

Jake sent a rush of destructive arcane energy through his own body to break the stun faster, but at that point, it was already too late.

Kneeling down, Gudrun slammed two summoned spears into the sand as she yelled loudly.

“Winds of the Ancestors.”

What happened next was something Jake had seen videos on the internet about but never thought he would experience in real life. From below the sand – deep below – a flow of wind appeared. The sand began bubbling all around him, and Jake felt himself get dragged down.

In an instant, Gudrun had turned nearly the entire arena into one big fluidized bed.

With a blast of destructive arcane mana, Jake got himself free as he launched himself toward Gudrun, who instantly switched her usual shield out for a large tower shield with an odd red gem in the center. Still mid-air, Jake blasted arcane mana ahead of him, not just to try and attack, but to stop his momentum... and just in time.

The entire shield exploded in golden light the very next second, launching Jake back all the way to the other of the arena, luckily unharmed.

Jake landed near his own entrance area, outside the range of the large formation Gudrun had placed down. Looking up, he saw Gudrun standing in the middle of the formation, smiling as a mound was slowly rising. Raising her arms, javelins with golden lightning surrounding them appeared embedded in the ground all around them as she reached out to grab one.

The fight had barely started, and Jake found himself standing before a small hill of fluidized sand with a Valkyrie ready to throw spears standing atop it, both of them fully aware of her advantage.

She had the high ground.

Chapter 762: Nevermore: Warrior of Valhal

Jake seriously questioned the validity of what Gudrun had just done. No, not how the magic worked or if the strategy was good, but how the hell she had even pulled it off. The massive sand mound she had summoned had to cost a shitload of mana, and what's more, the sand was still running down its sides like water, making it borderline impossible to climb. That had to have a constant mana upkeep, right?

Yet, upon scanning her, it looked like she had barely touched her own mana pool.

Looking at the mound through his sphere, he soon spotted how it worked. Within the sand were two spears she had stabbed into it, both pumping out mana and feeding the entire formation. Rather than supplying anything herself, she instead used them as catalysts and batteries.

That is when Jake came up with a theory...

The announcer said that Gudrun did not participate in these matches very often but had taken her time, yet he also knew that she did a Show Match every single week. This begged the question... what was she using all the Colosseum Points she earned for? Unlike Jake, these natives of the Challenge Dungeon only had one use for their points, and that was to buy equipment for their fights.

So what if Gudrun saved up for long periods in preparation for these fights and bought an arsenal of weapons and tools to win? Ones prepared explicitly for every opponent she met in the Paragon rank? If that was the case, Jake could see how she had managed to pull it off. The magical items one could buy did hold much inherent mana, and if she had a way to tap into that... yeah, that would explain a lot. The fact she had just exploded her shield and even that spear he had grabbed, along with all the javelins now at her feet, supported this theory.

To summarize, Gudrun was a fucking pay-to-win character. She was the type to just spend exorbitant amounts of Colosseum Points on every fight to make sure she would come out victorious.

Returning his attention to the fight, Jake didn't make any immediate moves. Looking at the flowing mound, he was pretty damn sure he had no way to ever climb that. Due to the sand constantly being replaced, stabilizing it using his arcane mana to climb up was out of the question, and while he could try to use one of the pillars to jump, that would put him in quite a perilous situation while in mid-air. Also, if he didn't hit the mound, he would be fucked.

He also had to consider that Gudrun likely had countermeasures prepared for every obvious solution he could think of on the fly. For now, she did seem happy with not making any moves as she just stood there with a javelin in hand, staring down at Jake. She probably knew that he would dodge anything she could throw at him... at least for now.

Because time was on her side.

The formation was subtly expanding below the sand, growing a few centimeters every second. Within two minutes, the entire arena would be one big fluidized bed, with the only safe spot on top of the mound. He did consider if just waiting out the formation to run out of power was an option, but by the time those two spears were out of mana, the entire arena would already have been fully covered for several minutes.

As Jake was acknowledging her strategy, Gudrun finally made a move to attack. Probably to distract him from trying to think up any countermeasures of his own, but also because her energy infusion into all the javelins was complete. Throwing one of her weapons, Jake jumped out of the way pretty easily as the javelin embedded itself in the ground before exploding with golden light, sending out more of her golden lightning and leaving an area of weird, electrified sand.

She is shrinking my area of movement even further.

It wasn't even close to hitting him, but it still kept him on his toes as she threw another, clearly to just buy time for the arena to shrink further as more areas of golden lightning appeared around him. Jake kept dodging a bit longer before he made a big leap to get some distance.

I guess it's about time, Jake thought. In all honesty... he had hoped not to have to do this before becoming the Champion, but alas, Gudrun had indeed near-flawlessly countered Jake's usual fighting style.

Holding out his hand, a bow appeared. His action seemingly took Gudrun by surprise as she paused her attack and yelled down from her sand mound.

"I will admit, I thought for a good while that quiver was just for show. Turns out you do have a bow, huh?" Gudrun said, still full of confidence. "I would very much like to learn if you actually know how to use that thing."

Jake just smiled. She'd asked for it. "Alright then."

With one swift movement, he pulled out an arrow and nocked it.

Now... going back a bit, Jake had considered how to improve his archery for a good while. At first, he had just gone back to the basics. He had focused on every subtle movement that came with drawing the string, activating the right muscles, and naturally aiming. It was the foundation of all archery, after all, and someplace Jake was already pretty confident due to his pre-system experience with a bow.

Shooting a bow was simple on the surface but highly complex when you really dove into it. A slight misplacement of a finger or the most minor twist could make an arrow entirely miss, especially for someone like Jake, who didn't use a modern compound bow.

Draw strength was also not simply "pull as hard as you can and let go when you can't pull the string back any longer." Sure, that would allow you to shoot a pretty powerful arrow, but it was not even necessarily the most powerful arrow one could shoot and definitely not the most accurate. There was also the problem of consistency when shooting like that.

Arrows still had a drop-off while in flight, even if it was incredibly minor over short distances. Usually, it wasn't something Jake had to worry about; however, this concept was reintroduced with full force when one began to use curved arrows. Based on how much power one put in, the arrow would curve more or less than one desired, and hitting the same target consistently quickly got hard.

This is where Jake's unique talents came in. Perception was a stat that not only helped you understand your surroundings better but even your own body. And Jake had a lot of Perception.

Even with reduced stats, Jake could consistently hit the same exact spot dozens of times in a row, even when curving arrows. In other words, his accuracy was utterly ridiculous due to his high Perception and ability to manipulate his own body to a near-perfect level.

When it came to pure power, there also wasn't much Jake could really improve on. He improved some small subtleties here and there and just optimized the process, but it was nothing really groundbreaking. At least not when it came to the purely physical aspect of drawing the bow.

So... Jake began to focus on one thing, and one thing only:

Speed.

Overwhelming speed.

Every single time Jake drew the bow, arcane mana surged into its body and the string. The second he released, so did he activate this energy, and for the briefest moment, he turned the bow and string slightly more rigid than before, which resulted in him effectively increasing the bow's draw strength.

This did result in reduced accuracy... that instantly got nullified by the next aspect he had infused. Even before he entered the Challenge Dungeon, Jake had infused plenty of mana into every single arrow he released, but he had been slacking when it came to infusing his Willpower properly.

Whenever Jake released arcane bolts, he could control them all throughout their flight. This was mainly because they were so much slower than arrows, so one would think that Jake making the arrows fly even faster would make controlling arrows in flight even harder.

And it did.

Which was why Jake didn't try to control them mid-flight quite yet. Instead, he controlled their flight before he even released the arrow. Making curved arrows was already one aspect of doing this, but he wanted to introduce more nuance and make the flight path even more unpredictable.

Before his practice, he could not make an arrow take a sudden turn. It always had to have a semi-consistent curve to its flight, like if one threw a ball with a spin. Jake's new way would be more equivalent to throwing a ball with a spin that also had a small bomb with a timer attached to it that would go off at a certain time to affect the flight path further.

As a level 0 G-grade with shitty stats, all these improvements couldn't show their full power yet. Ultimately, the Challenge Dungeon was just a minor event, and all upgrades he aimed for were with his true level and future scaling in mind.

Not to say that Jake's level 0 archery was something Gudrun could easily handle.

Arcane energy surged through Jake's body and weapon as he loosed the first arrow. Gudrun, who had already taken out a shield looked smug... right up to the moment the arrow curved around her shield and hit her in the shoulder.

Taken aback, she responded quickly as she summoned a second shield, but before the second one had even fully appeared, a second arrow came from the other side, hitting her in her other shoulder. Each arrow had pierced through her golden armor and penetrated several centimeters into her flesh, making movement harder.

Not helped by Jake smirking as he sent a mental command.

Both arrows exploded while still embedded in her shoulders, sending blood and broken armor flying. Gudrun's shields momentarily faltered as an arrow struck her in the stomach, making her tumble back. She barely managed to get out of the way of the fourth arrow while the fifth hit her in her thigh.

One of the problems with her strategy was that the top of the mound didn't really have any space to dodge. Her own plan had turned on her in an instant, as Gudrun had made one major miscalculation... Jake was far superior in ranged combat compared to her.

Gudrun also clearly realized this as she rapidly retreated down the other side of the mound as the formation stopped working. In an instant, the sand turned from fluid to solid, allowing her to land safely as she retreated behind one of the pillars, with shields still held up despite her injuries.

Jake wanted to explode the two arrows he had embedded in Gudrun but found himself unable to. She had done something to block it, Jake reckoned, though he wasn't sure how she did it. It felt like he just couldn't "find" his own arrows somehow, despite clearly seeing them still sticking out of her through his sphere.

Several more arrows flew after Gudrun as she retreated, but she managed to block all of them except one that flew by and left a cut on her already exposed forearm. She got behind one of the pillars, and right as she breathed a sigh of relief, an arrow descended from right above her. Jake had aimed for her

skull, but in the final moment, she managed to tilt her head, making the arrow side by her helmet and pierce into her left collarbone.

The sheer impact of the arrow forced her down on her knees. The follow-up arrow she still managed to block, if barely. Jake had expected her to raise her shield in time, so he made it explode right in front of her, making the explosion hit her shield and knock her back into the pillar, worsening all her existing wounds.

No more arrows came immediately after that, and the reason for that was quite obvious... Jake only had five left. This was one of the clear downsides of his current level 0 stats.

Summoning new arrows also wasn't an option either. Jake had spent more than fifty mana on every single one of the arrows and had spent a few minutes on each. He had effectively created twenty-four small Protean Arrows made purely of stable arcane mana.

Jake put his bow away and charged forward. Gudrun, hiding behind a pillar, threw what looked like a golden ball over her shoulder toward him, and Jake instinctively looked at it, trying to find out what it was... right as it exploded in a flash of white light. Jake was instantly blinded and felt an odd sense of vertigo as his balance got all out of whack for a fraction of a second.

Immediately, Gudrun stepped out from behind the pillar and threw one of her remaining javelins. Jake, thinking quick, did not dodge but allowed himself to be struck in the shoulder as he reached for his eyes. Gudrun, seemingly not having realized the full extent of Jake's Perception skills and feeling empowered from seeing Jake failing to dodge her javelin, charged toward him with a newly summoned spear, aiming for his heart.

Her body was not in good shape, but she still pushed through, trying to take advantage of what may be her last opening. She believed Jake was blind and unable to dodge in time... so when he avoided her spear at the very last second and stabbed her in the chest with a katar, her eyes opened wide.

Jake held nothing back as the weapon exploded with arcane destruction, launching Gudrun across the arena, splurts of blood dripping in her wake.

Hitting the sand, Gudrun somehow managed to land on her feet, but she quickly fell to her knees as she gritted her teeth before spitting out a mouthful of blood and yelling.

“Ancestral Offering.”

Jake had been certain the fight was over after he landed that hit... but she had one more card up her sleeve. Golden light enveloped her entire body as her armor began to disintegrate. The spears still below the sand that had been used to power the formation also ran out of energy, and even all the javelins she didn't have time to throw before lost their golden luster.

When the golden energy faded, Gudrun was left in only linen clothes with nothing but a spear and shield remaining. Even the storage ring on her finger had reappeared, signaling it was no longer an item. Through sacrificing her equipment, she had managed to heal herself nearly fully.

Jake was still blinded and had only seen everything through his sphere. He was pretty sure his eyes would take at least a minute or two more to fully heal, and Gudrun clearly knew that as she charged and tried to take advantage.

But... it wasn't really an advantage. Not against Jake.

Gudrun was fast, but she was not the fastest. She was strong but not the strongest. Her magic was powerful, but not the most powerful. The only place where she was truly at the peak was her equipment and her ability to use this equipment. She was just considered okay in every other area, meaning as soon as Jake overcame her strategies... she had no way of winning.

Because Jake was faster, stronger, and had more powerful magic. Moreover, he was the pinnacle in the entire arena when it came to dodging attacks. Even if Gudrun had managed to get herself back in temporary fighting condition, she was in no position to win.

Even if Jake was also injured, he had the upper hand. Over the next minute, Jake slowly overpowered Gudrun in a melee brawl, and even if he did take a few more wounds himself, he gave out far more than he got.

When his eyesight returned, the final nail was in the coffin. With a Fear Gaze, he managed to land a nasty stab in her stomach that easily penetrated through her clothes, which barely offered any defenses.

Gudrun, stumbling back, fell to her knees. She tried to get up, but her knee buckled under her own weight, making her unable to stand. She looked up at him with resolute eyes as Jake had stopped, now certain the fight was over.

"Heh," she smiled with bloody teeth. "Good fight. Now finish it. I am a warrior of Valhal... so at least honor me with a warrior's death."

Gudrun said this while looking him straight in the eye. There were no more strategies or attempts of deceit. Despite how she thought, Jake firmly knew she wouldn't use the name of Valhal like that or the

sense of honor of another warrior. Because, in the end, she was indeed a warrior of Valhal... and from the beginning, he had known this fight would never end in her surrender.

Jake met her gaze and nodded, respecting her wishes. "Thanks for the fight."

Without any hesitation, he stabbed Gudrun in the heart, and with a smile still on her face, she fell forward onto the sand, ending the fight.

Chapter 763: Nevermore: Gauntlet of the Grand Champion

Jake walked with steady steps out of the large arena, which was quite frankly a mess by now. Gudrun's formation had screwed it up a lot, and Jake's subsequent barrage of exploding arcane arrows certainly hadn't helped. Javelins were also lying haphazardly everywhere, and he did not envy whatever clean-up crew was in charge of putting the arena back to how it was.

As he walked out, the announcer naturally also did his thing.

"We have a winner! No, not just a winner, but a new Champion! What are the true limits of the Doombringer? Despite all of the Valkyrie's preparations and plans, she could not have predicted the Doombringer would bring out a bow and wield it with such overwhelming power!"

Jake still found the commentary horrible, even after he at least wasn't called the Purple Doom Poker or whatever bloody name the announcer decided on.

When it came to Gudrun's body, two people from the Colosseum had already walked out to retrieve it. Jake had given her a final look before he walked down toward the small tunnel leading down to the training area once again. While Jake was not that damaged, he still wasn't in the greatest of shapes, and not just because of what Gudrun had done to him.

Jake was, for all intents and purposes, too powerful for his own body. The power of his arcane energies was more than he could handle, even if he controlled it as best he could. This was one of the downsides of training his archery with his C-grade body in mind. With Arcane Supremacy, he was confident in handling it when he infused his body with a rush of arcane energy with every shot, but without it, he would leave minor damage every time.

Didn't help that Gudrun had fried him with that weird golden lightning a few times, either. She had definitely been a worthy fight before one would get promoted to the "final" rank of the Colosseum. If one had any major flaws, it would be game over. Without having his archery, Jake would have likely lost, as he honestly still wasn't sure how he would have overcome that sand mound with only his katars.

Of course, he would only lose a life and could try the fight again, this time knowing what she had in mind. At least, he assumed that is how it worked. He didn't fully know, as he hadn't died yet, after all.

"Go rest, Champion Doombringer. Walk away today, a victor of the Arena of Mortals. A fighter who has reached the apex. Of course, should you return to climb the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion, we would all be more than pleased!"

And there it was.

Jake had kind of beaten the Colosseum of Mortals now, but there was still one final optional challenge to go. Opening the system message he had just gotten confirmed he had indeed completed it.

Congratulations! You are now a Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing with the other Champions as a titan at the apex.

The main objective of the Challenge Dungeon has now been completed. You are free to leave the Colosseum of Mortals for a final evaluation unless you want to attempt the bonus objective. Nevermore Attendee shall get a bonus for every unspent life remaining. This bonus will be forfeited should the Nevermore Attendee attempt the bonus objective.

So, are you truly satisfied to be one of eight Champions? Or do you wish to truly prove yourself the true apex of the Colosseum? To stand where barely anyone else has ever stood?

To become the Grand Champion.

As a Champion, you are allowed to challenge other Champions. Be warned that should you challenge any Champions, you are required to challenge all of them, and there can, at maximum, be one month between each challenge issued.

For becoming the Champion without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 500,000 Colosseum Points. Final rewards upon Challenge Dungeon completion have increased.

Bonus objective gained: Defeat the other Champions to become the Grand Champion.

Current rank: Champion (0/7)

Colosseum Points: 1,883,010

Lives remaining: 10

Reading the message, Jake could only nod. While he couldn't say everything was as expected, he wasn't entirely taken by surprise. There were a few things that sprung to mind, though. One was naturally his massive amount of Colosseum Points. Getting half a million points for becoming a Champion was already massive, but the points he had gotten during the Paragon rank were nothing to scoff at either.

The first victory had awarded him 15,000 points, the second 20,000, third 25,000, and so on and so forth, with the final one rewarding a whopping 60,000. The Show Matches had kept giving 30,000 for every victory throughout the Paragon rank, but this still meant Jake had gained 375,000 and 300,000 points, respectively, from these two.

When it came to spending points, he had used a bit over a thousand, pretty much all of it on those recovery potions.

The second thing with the system message that stood out was what was missing. First of all, there were no mentions of Show Matches anywhere, making him wonder if those were unavailable now, and secondly, there was nothing about only being able to challenge other Champions once a week, just that if he did decide to go for the Grand Champion rank, he had to challenge at least one every month.

Also, the bonus objective revealed to him there were seven other Champions besides himself. So, seven more fights to go...

Jake did wonder if there was more after Grand Champion or if the Challenge Dungeon would just end. Alas, he still had those seven to beat before he had a chance to find out, and as he was way too curious

about who exactly he would be fighting, he went straight to the Battlemaster, even if his body was hurting pretty badly.

Yeah, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion he would give it a shot. Sure, he would apparently lose some bonuses if he lost any lives, but Jake didn't really care much about that.

The Battlemaster was already waiting for Jake at his usual spot, standing with his arms crossed.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the newest Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals," the Battlemaster said with a genuine smile. "I will admit I was a little surprised when you pulled out that bow of yours. Gudrun sure was, too. Say, do you also know how to summon a horde of monsters, or maybe you can transform into some powerful beast? At this point, I pretty much expect you to have more hidden cards up your sleeve."

"No, but I can create a clone of myself made up entirely of energy from an ancient curse stolen from a forgotten land of vampires, the clone itself being based on a simulation of myself from a fake universe," Jake answered casually.

"Ah, yeah, I figured," the Battlemaster smiled, shaking his head. "Anyway, congratulations are in order. You've beaten the Colosseum of Mortals... unless you want to keep going?"

"Enlighten me what that would involve," Jake smiled in return. Usually, the guy had some information the system message didn't, so it was definitely worth asking.

"It's called the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion, and it's quite the ordeal to undertake... in fact, only a single person in this generation has completed it," the Battlemaster answered. "But don't think about

that too much quite yet. You don't even know who you'll have to fight yet if you do decide to attempt the Gauntlet!"

"Fair enough," Jake shrugged, now definitely sure there was at least one final boss of sorts if he became a Grand Champion. "So... who will I be fighting if I decide to go for it?"

"That one is easy to answer; it isn't like the Champions aren't famous, to begin with. It's honestly weird you don't already know," the Battlemaster said as he nevertheless produced a list of names.

Jake wanted to curse the man, as he fully agreed it was incredibly stupid that he somehow couldn't figure out who the Champions were. It was only due to pure dungeon-fuckery, and before getting promoted, he only knew of Owen's dad.

Taking the list of names from the Battlemaster, Jake quickly skimmed over the titles of the seven other Champions.

- Lightning Monarch

- Warmaster

- Phoenix Queen

- Lord of the Hunt

- Archmage

- Mistress of Shadows

- Necromancer

So, one by one, starting with the Lord of the Hunt, because who the hell was that asshole to take a title Jake actually liked? His initial assessment was that this was some kind of archer like him, but he would naturally do some research to figure out if that was the case. Anyway, moving on from this Lord of the Hunt, Jake actually started at the top.

Lightning Monarch was Owen's dad, Jake was pretty sure. A lightning swordsman.

Warmaster was probably some kind of warrior.

Phoenix Queen was interesting. Maybe a beastkin of some kind? It couldn't be a beast.

Archmage was truly a name full of mystery, and after much deliberation, Jake guessed it was a mage of some kind.

Mistress of Shadows was probably that Dark Elf Jake had seen a good while ago. He had faintly felt a familiar aura from her back then, but he would have to confirm if she was Umbra, as he suspected.

Necromancer was also a super boring name, but it did kind of excite him. He had never really fought a necromancer, had he? How would a level 0 necromancer even work? Could he summon weak-ass skeletons or something? Definitely something to check out.

After he had read the list, Jake decided to keep trying to get some more information out of the Battlemaster. "I see there is quite the mix of Champions... how come none of them have tried this Grand Champion Gauntlet?"

"Think about it for a second. All seven current Champions are incredibly powerful in their own right, but they are not equally powerful in every field. The Mistress of Shadows, as an example, is a rogue using shadow magic – hence the name – and against any of the mages, she will have a clear advantage. However, against any of the warriors or the hunter, she will find herself struggling. And before you ask, the reason the rogue doesn't just kill the mages and stop is that if one begins the challenge to become Grand Champion, they are required to challenge all of the other champions, with at most a month between each challenge," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake already knew the last part from the system message he had gotten earlier, but it explained well why someone like the Mistress of Shadows had just beaten the mages and then stopped. Well, if she had done that, then one of the others, likely a warrior, would have taken her down in turn, with a mage then killing the warrior. No, anyone who wanted to become Grand Champion had to be so overwhelmingly powerful that they were able to beat even people he or she was terrible against.

"To clarify, does that mean if I want to try this Gauntlet, I could technically challenge a Champion every single day and be done in a week?" Jake questioned further.

“Technically speaking, you could, but do note the wording. You can challenge another Champion at any time, but that does not mean they will fight immediately. Every time you issue a challenge, the other Champion is more or less forced to accept, but the fight just has to be scheduled within thirty days of the issue being challenged, the exact time at the sole discretion of the challenged party,” the Battlemaster continued explaining. “So, if all of the other Champions decide they want as much preparation time as possible, the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion can take up to seven months.”

“That... sucks,” Jake muttered.

“I doubt it would take that long. All the time before a fight is for the other Champions to prepare, and more often than not, they don’t make more preparations than are needed. Moreover, you can also use this time to prepare against them, so if they feel like the time serves you better than them, they may want to schedule the fight as soon as possible to catch you off guard,” the Battlemaster pointed out. “In your case specifically, as you have just become a Champion, they will likely accept the fight pretty fast to not give you much time to prepare either. However, should you wait too long to begin the Gauntlet for too long, they will likely want more time, as they assume you spent this waiting period preparing.”

“Are there any of the other Champions who are considering trying the Gauntlet?”

“Wouldn’t tell you even if I knew, but I can disclose that all of the current Champions have made plans to face each other. Not necessarily because they want to try and become a Grand Champion, but in case one of the others gives it a shot,” the man shook his head. “Anyway, what will it be? Based on how many questions you are asking, I get the feeling you are keen on attempting the Gauntlet?”

“Can’t say I ain’t,” Jake grinned.

"I kind of figured," the Battlemaster also smiled. "Do note that you can begin the Gauntlet at any time by challenging any of the other Champions, so if you want to make some preparations and go heal up, you have plenty of time to do that."

Jake nodded. "Yeah, I definitely need a good rest before I go fighting any Champions."

"Definitely recommended. Now, one final warning. Should you begin the Gauntlet, be aware that you only have one shot. Should you ever lose to any of the other Champions, you cannot retry after making more preparations, and you will lose your Champion rank for at least five years. After that, you can reattempt the Gauntlet, but the next lockout will be even longer."

"Can't say I am surprised that's a rule," Jake shrugged, assuming it didn't really impact him much due to his multiple lives. If he did lose, he doubted it would count as a loss in the storyline of the Colosseum. Well, alright, it could impact him if he tried to game the system. "I assume that rule is there, so you can't just surrender any time you think you will lose and then re-challenge again when you feel like you have properly prepared?"

"Something like that," the Battlemaster semi-confirmed. "Now, you don't look too good, so go rest up already and come back here once you are back in top form. Well, unless you really want to rush into a fight immediately. I am sure that should you challenge another Champion now, they would accept in a heartbeat and whoop your injured ass with ease."

"Or I could cause a massive upset," Jake grinned. "But, yeah, I should head off. Ah, but one last thing... can I still do Show Matches?"

"Nope," the Battlemaster shook his head. "And you won't earn any Colosseum Points from beating the other Champions either, but only get a reward once you either complete or give up on the Gauntlet. The more you beat, the more points you will get."

"I see, I see," Jake nodded. That was good to know. "Well then, I'll be off. So you in a few days once my insides don't hurt anymore."

"Fighting with hurting insides does tend to be ill-advised," the man said. "And, once again... congratulations, Champion."

Jake smiled as he walked away and back toward his house, where he had already pre-arranged to meet up with Owen and Polly. Now, he just had to actually make it back there... because the second he got close to the exit of the Colosseum, he saw the area swarmed with people, and from a distance, he heard the chants of the crowd... the horrific chants.

"Doomfoot! Doomfoot! Doomfoot!"

Perhaps the true challenge of the Colosseum was not the fighters along the way... but the psychological damage caused by the announcer and audience.

Just focus on the seven people who checked you out on your way out of the Colosseum, Jake...

By now, he truly regretted not just buying a damn cloak as he walked out of the only exit that wasn't a massive detour, bracing himself to face the crowd.

Chapter 764: Nevermore: Seven Champions & Side Quests

Jake spent far longer than he would have liked to get home. How in the hell did an entire crowd even manage to gather outside the arena in the relatively short time spent just talking to the Battlemaster?

He had no idea, but they somehow had. There were thousands upon thousands of spectators who wanted to see the new Champion and to celebrate him.

While he had wanted to avoid them entirely, Jake somehow ended up spending nearly an hour placating the crowd before using his injuries as an excuse to head back to the small townhouse. Speaking of the townhouse, Jake had been offered other accommodations from the time he hit Warlord, but he really didn't want to move around anymore. He only ever slept or sat in meditation within the townhouse anyway, so why would he need a fancier temporary home?

At least his fans were nice enough to not follow him home, and when he got there, he saw Polly and Owen both already inside, having even set up the table with some snacks.

Jake, already feeling a bit better just from his recovery potion doing work, headed inside and went to the small living room where the two of them were sitting patiently chatting among themselves. They quickly went silent when they heard Jake, and both greeted him the second he walked into the room.

"You made it all the way..." Owen said with a smile, but he clearly hid some apprehension.

"It's amazing!" Polly said, with a far more purely positive attitude. "I must say, I was fearful when I saw the Valkyrie summon that giant sand hill, something I honestly think was cheating as she clearly couldn't even fully control or supply the spell with enough mana by herself, but then you pulled out that bow of yours! Your archery training clearly paid off amazingly well."

"I don't think Jake just trained archery during the Colosseum," Owen added. "You were already an expert before you came here, right?"

While “expert” was a bit of a loaded word, Jake definitely was one by level 0 standards even before arriving at the Colosseum of Mortals. Probably mid-tier C-grade standards, too, but due to the high level of his melee skills, Jake hadn’t been super confident calling himself an expert archer before. Now, though? Now, he thought he had earned that title, even in the outside world.

“I was originally an archer, yes. In fact, my katars are usually my secondary weapon I switch to when using ranged attacks isn’t viable or optimal,” Jake responded truthfully. “And, not gonna lie, I was just waiting for someone to force me to pull out my bow. The Valhalian Valkyrie definitely warranted it.”

“I will admit, you never struck me as the highly strategic kind, but to keep your best weapon for so long was damn impressive,” Owen smiled, but that smile quickly faded. “I also get the feeling that you aren’t done with the Colosseum yet... are you?”

“What do you mean?” Polly asked, confused. “He is the Champion already! What more is there to do?”

“The Gauntlet of the Grand Champion,” Owen said in a serious tone. “A... difficult challenge, to say the least. One that very few have ever attempted, much less completed. Jake... by now, I guess you already figured out the Lightning Monarch is my father?”

Jake just nodded, reading the atmosphere enough to know that joking with Owen right now wouldn’t land well.

“Remember when I said my father used to teach me a bit? Yeah, that happened because he tried the Gauntlet and failed, making him go back to a quiet life for a few years before returning here. And he didn’t just leave because of the Colosseum rules, but to recover. He spent nearly a year recovering before he could fight again.”

Polly looked at Owen with sad eyes as she put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him. Owen looked at her with grateful eyes as he continued.

“And now he wants to try again. He is training to try again, but I fear things won’t end as well the second time around. I know I have no right to ask you this... but please don’t kill him if you fight him. Yet, at the same time, don’t let him off easy. Make him never return to the Colosseum again, but return home to my mother and siblings. Return to the damn home he has abandoned.”

Owen looked visibly angry as he said the last part. Jake finally began to get a proper understanding of Owen ... he was there to beat his father or at least somehow convince him to go home.

Jake’s pet theory was that Owen was meant to be some kind of rival to the regular Nevermore Attendees, while he served more as a guide and an introduction to different aspects of the Colosseum for those on the more powerful side while also creating a more personal connection to at least one of the Champions.

After being silent for a few moments, Jake nodded. “Alright, I will do my best, but no guarantees. As a Champion, he is no doubt powerful in his own right, and I can’t say for sure if I will have any leeway to hold back or even have a convincing enough victory.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Owen said with gratitude. “I will, of course, help you with any preparations. Back during his recovery, he taught me the same techniques and concepts. I know his strengths and his weaknesses.”

Jake hid a smile as he gave the young man a nod. He wasn’t going to reject intel on any of the Champions if it came to him.

The next to speak was Polly.

Polly didn't really fit into any solid mold when it came to determining her role within the Challenge Dungeon, though she had proven to be incredibly effective at gathering information despite not really having any rank to speak of. Somehow, she had a lot of contacts to pull on, and people were more than happy to discuss with her, even those at a higher rank. Of course, she still had her limits, and the information brokers still required payment before offering any help whatsoever, but Polly even got cheaper rates than Jake himself. So, even if she didn't fit any mold, she was definitely helpful.

Ah, but Jake did learn she had one more "function," so to say. One Jake probably should have seen coming, one that also helped explain why it was so easy for her to gather information.

"The Archmage... he never told me he was actually a Champion, but... that's my teacher..." Polly said with a mix of nervousness and anger. "I just learned it today... and I didn't know you wanted to do this Gauntlet thing, so I didn't want to share it needlessly to ruin the mood, but now..."

"You also want me to not kill him if we ever meet?" Jake asked though he felt a bit unsure about his question as Polly seemed to have an oddly angry look on her face.

Polly just sneered before gathering herself. "You got an actual chance to win, right?"

"Duh," Jake said, not really honoring the question with a proper answer.

"If you can, please kill that asshole," Polly said, spitting venom.

"Wait, what?" Jake asked, confused. Owen also looked taken back. "I thought you liked your master?"

"I tolerated him... I had to. I was his student, and he is the chief mage in the kingdom I come from. When I was fifteen, there was this big evaluation event put on by the mage's guild, and when I tested to have good affinities and talents for magic, the asshole practically kidnapped me. My parents protested but were told that should they cause issues, they would be arrested as traitors to the crown, with my new teacher also telling me that should I be a bad student, my parents would pay the price," Polly said, giving exposition about her backstory.

It was a bit on the cliché end, and Jake seriously questioned any recruitment tactic that required you to first piss off whoever you trained to shoot fireballs, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he just nodded.

"He does sound like a royal asshole, so should I get the chance, sure. I won't hold back."

"Thank you," Polly said, tears welling up in her eyes. Jake gave Owen a quick glance, the guy picking up on it as he took her hand. She grasped it, and the two of them sat there for a while as Jake looked at the cookie bowl on the table.

It would definitely be inappropriate to take one, right?

After a few minutes and Jake expertly sneaking a cookie, the two of them calmed down, and Polly also swore she would tell him everything she knew about the Archmage. She even offered to act as a double agent by going to the Archmage and giving bad information. Jake rejected that one, as that would just put her in needless danger. Even if he knew Owen and Polly were just natives in a Challenge Dungeon, he treated them as normal people.

Also, by now, he was kind of interested in whether the two of them would finally get together officially, considering they definitely had a thing for each other.

Anyway, from that day onward, the research into the seven Champions began. Polly naturally knew about the Archmage and Owen about the Lightning Monarch, but for the other five, he would have to gather intel from other sources. Well, as long as he confirmed that the Mistress of Shadows was indeed Umbra, it was limited how much Jake had to research on her, as he had a strong feeling no information he could get would be more useful than what he already knew.

When it came to the last four, Jake didn't really know. The Warmaster was potentially someone more from Valhal – maybe even Valdemar himself – with the Necromancer, Phoenix, and Lord of the Hunt entirely new characters.

It quickly turned out that, no, the Warmaster was not related to Valhal or any faction Jake knew of. In fact, there wasn't really much information on the guy at all. Apparently, he was a former general of some war and had been dubbed the Warmaster due to how dominating he was during that conflict. He was also a master of all weapons and a powerful warrior who didn't have any magic to speak of. There were no recordings of his fights or anything, and he hadn't fought in the arena for quite a few years but was considered semi-retired. Jake wasn't delusional to think that would make him weaker, though... in fact, it may just have made him stronger if this Warmaster was slowly training to attempt the Gauntlet.

Getting anything on the remaining three wasn't exactly easy either. All Jake could get was the most basic of things, such as information that the Lord of the Hunt was an archer who used nature magic, much akin to druids. While that was something, it wasn't overly helpful.

The Phoenix was indeed a beastkin woman who was probably related to phoenixes somehow. She used incredibly powerful fire magic and was a full-on mage based on all Jake could gather. Upon further research, Polly discovered that the Phoenix Queen also had some illusion magic, so that was good news for Jake.

Finally, there was the Necromancer, who did break expectations by a bit. Jake had assumed it to be another mage, but nope, it was more a warrior who just used death and poison magic. He wore heavy armor, always had his head covered, had very pale hands when he took off his gloves and apparently had a very cold handshake...

Yeah, he was definitely a Risen.

After a few days and some initial research, Jake was back in top form and went to the Battlemaster to issue his first challenge. Based on all he had gathered so far, he believed the two easiest opponents to be the Phoenix and the Dark Mistress. The Dark Mistress was indeed Umbra, or at least someone closely related to the Court of Shadows, and while he did not doubt she was incredibly powerful, Jake hard-countered assassins to a ridiculous degree.

When it came to the Phoenix, he believed she would be an easy opponent due to her being a mage and her illusion magic. Illusions did not work on Jake, and while fire magic was most certainly not something he wanted to play with, shooting arrows of stable arcane mana through the flames was something he was very confident in being able to do. His stable arcane energy was incredibly robust against magic, after all.

However, despite believing these two would be the easiest opponents, he decided to prioritize beating the Lightning Monarch and the Archmage. First of all, because he had more information on these two than any other opponent, and secondly, because Jake wanted to get the side quests of Polly and Owen done.

Ultimately, he wanted to beat all of them, so the order wasn't overly important. Considering that, he may as well start with the two he had a reason to fight rather than any of the others.

"Hello again," Jake said as he walked up to the Battlemaster, who looked like he had been expecting him.

"So, you've decided to commit and try to go the whole way?" the Battlemaster asked. "To attempt the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion?"

"Yes," Jake said with resolution.

"Remember, there is no taking it back. You either reach the top or fall from grace," the Battlemaster double-checked to ensure Jake was certain.

"I am fully aware, and I still wanna give the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion a go."

"Very well," the Battlemaster said with a huge grin. "Now, who would you like to challenge first?"

"The Lightning Monarch," Jake said.

"Oh? Interesting choice; I was sure you would have gone for one of the mages or maybe even the Lord of the Hunt to have some kind of archery competition," the Battlemaster said with some surprise.

"I have my reasons."

“Fair enough. I guess it is related to the Monarch’s son, right? That Owen kid? You don’t have to answer; it doesn’t really matter. Either way, I will issue the challenge and get back to you when I get an answer,” the Battlemaster said.

Jake was thankful the man didn’t probe more than he had to. Jake really didn’t want to spill the family drama of others for no good reason.

“Thanks for the help,” Jake nodded. “Say, how will you contact me when he answ-“

“Alright, I got an answer. The fight begins in five hours,” the Battlemaster interrupted him.

“What?” Jake blurted out.

“The fight. You know, the thing you just asked me for? The one with the Lightning Monarch? Yeah, it begins in five hours, so get yourself ready,” the Battlemaster said, shaking his head while grumbling something about Jake being weird.

“I thought you said you were going to check in with the Lightning Monarch or something to schedule the fight...” Jake muttered.

“That is what I just did,” the Battlemaster said, exasperated. “Are you sure you are in any condition to fight?”

“... you literally just stood there for five seconds...”

“You asked me to schedule the fight, didn’t you?” the Battlemaster said.

“Yes...”

“So I scheduled the fight,” the Battlemaster sighed. “Now go get your head straight before the fight begins. It would be sad to lose because you aren’t all there mentally.”

Jake wanted to say more but held himself back. He realized he had committed one of the cardinal sins of Challenge Dungeons:

Trying to understand dungeon-fuckery.

Chapter 765: Nevermore: The Gauntlet Begins

Vilastromoz had to admit that the Wyrmgod had managed to gather quite the respectable images to be used as Champions. To see Gudrun had already been surprising, as she wasn’t really known to be that huge of a fighter these days. Even before she became a god, she had been more of a shaman or leader than a Valkyrie that used a spear. Well, it was not like she could have been one, as Valkyrie wasn’t really a term before Gudrun, as she was the one who more or less created that Path.

Yet the seven Champions were even more noteworthy. Two of them were entirely system-created, and their images did not stem from “real” beings – those two naturally being the Lightning Monarch and Archmage. Truthfully, the Viper didn’t care for these two. The only slightly interesting thing about the

Lightning Monarch was that his arcane affinity had been taken by the system from a now-dead S-grade that failed to ascend to godhood.

But the other five were quite something.

As Jake had theorized, the dark elf was Umbra. However, based on the Viper's assessment, it was a significantly weakened Umbra in every single way, with many of the things that made her truly dangerous removed.

The Phoenix Queen was, interestingly enough, the daughter of the Phoenix that the United Tribes had sent to Jake's Chosen reveal party. In the outside world, she had managed to become a god a few eras ago and now worked alongside her mother.

Vilastromoz didn't have many comments on the Necromancer. He was a divine general from the Ghostlands and was an incredibly powerful necromancer when he was still a mortal.

That Lord of the Hunt was an archer god Vilastromoz had never interacted directly with. However, she appeared to hail from the Pantheon of Life, so it should be a fun fight.

Finally, there was the Wargod... who was definitely an interesting fellow to include in a Challenge Dungeon like this. Mainly because he – despite the name – was not truly a fighter in the outside world but a renowned blacksmith.

One thing had to be clarified, though. Even if these gods were not fighters or pinnacle beings in the outside world, it truly didn't matter. The Wyrmgod could have taken any random S-grade and created an

image from them, and chances are they would have been far, far beyond Champion material. If he chose to copy their S-grade conceptual understanding and technique level, that is.

However, all these images were made by copying the skill level that the image sources possessed in C-grade. In some ways, it was close to fighting the C-grade version of gods, but even then, there were big differences... because when in C-grade was the image copied from?

There was a vast difference between a level 200 and a level 349 in their technique and conceptual comprehension. For many of the earlier fights, it had been early C-grade images, while the further one got, the further in C-grade the images were also copied from, with many of the Champions copied from late-stage or even peak C-grades.

That is to say, Jake was not fighting a level 0 with the understanding of a level 250 like himself, but more often than not, a level 0 with the understanding of someone above level 300.

"So, what level is Umbra copied from?" the Viper asked.

"Roughly level 280," the Wyrmgod answered. "The Warmaster is level 349, with the others between level 300 and 340. I believe they will offer your Chosen quite the challenge, and I would be impressed if he manages to eke out victories against every opponent without losing any lives."

"At least there are no real penalties to losing lives anymore," Vilastoromoz shrugged.

"Yes, I believed it to be counterproductive to penalize those who attempt to beat the Champions further than the lost bonus from every remaining life. Should he beat two Champions, he will have made back

the potential loss,” the Wyrmgod explained. “There has to be balance, after all. And beating the Champions without losing lives is far from intended.”

“Hm, let’s say Jake wins... who is this mysterious Grand Champion you got hiding for the grand finale?” Vilastromoz asked with a smirk. “It has to be a big one when you have Umbra as just a Champion..”

“You will see if your Chosen manages to make it that far, but do be aware that should that happen, I believe that will be the end of his journey. Not a single person has defeated the Grand Champion yet, after all,” the Wyrmgod said with quite the confidence.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, you may have overdone it with that one... then again, it is meant to be the end of the Challenge Dungeon if you beat the final boss, so maybe it’s fine?” Minaga chimed in.

“Now you got me all curious...” Vilastromoz smirked even more, but he knew not to probe more than necessary. He had some personal theories about who the Wyrmgod could have gotten. Of course, there were also some notable people he knew it couldn’t be.

As a former Progenitor himself, many would potentially have expected to see Yip of Yore show up somewhere, but the Viper knew better. And it wasn’t because the Wyrmgod didn’t want an image of Yip, but Yip himself, who would have refused. In fact, he hadn’t really left anything of note with anyone else.

No, any Legacy he ever left behind was in meticulously designed Challenge Dungeons, and he would never risk giving anyone else the slightest level of freedom with an image of his. Due to his Path, he wanted, no, needed to be in full control of everything related to him, including his legacies and anything left behind associated with him.

For him to leave an image around would be the antithesis to his Path. Especially if it was an image that someone was meant to be able to beat in a fight. No, it definitely couldn't be him... but that didn't mean there weren't more complete monsters it could be.

"So, any bets on if Jake will beat all the Champions without losing any lives?" Minaga said with a cheerful grin.

"Rather than all the Champions, how about we make the bets one by one for every opponent? That way, we get seven times the bets," the Viper offered. "And I am willing to bet Jake will beat this Lightning Monarch on his first try."

"Are you telling me you don't think Jake will beat all the Champions without losing any lives?" Minaga teased.

The Viper just smiled. Looking at the lineup... he wasn't going to answer that one.

Four hours wasn't a long time, and Jake presumed the Lightning Monarch had chosen to accept the fight so fast to try and take Jake by surprise. In fact, it wouldn't shock Jake to find out that the shortest time there could be between an issued challenge and the actual fight was four hours.

This instant acceptance of the duel also indicated the Lightning Monarch had already researched Jake and believed that any additional research time would benefit Jake more than him. Of course... it was also entirely possible the guy was just so damn confident he didn't believe he needed any time to prepare, and based on what Owen said, that was actually a legitimate possibility.

According to Owen, his father had always insisted he had only lost the Gauntlet last time because he hadn't been careful enough during the fight and slipped up. He had simply refused to believe his opponent had been stronger than him.

Jake also learned that the primary reason for Owen's father's overwhelming confidence was his lightning magic. Owen described it as a "rare and unique affinity only passed down in their family," but Jake instantly recognized it as an arcane affinity. Based on conversations with Villy, he also knew that inheriting talent, even for things like arcane affinities, was totally a thing, so seeing Owen and his both be capable of displaying a so-called "unique" affinity wasn't surprising.

When it came to the affinity itself, Jake luckily had a wonderful test subject. Owen could summon the odd blue lightning, which allowed Jake to analyze it and figure out how it worked, and through his tests, he had discovered a few interesting peculiarities.

Lightning had the innate property of "burning" mana when it hit someone, but the blue lightning appeared to have almost the opposite effect. At least when Owen used it on himself... and this was where Jake found the biggest difference between normal lightning affinities and Owen's.

Owen's was more suited as a body-buff rather than an offensive weapon. He couldn't really shoot powerful lightning bolts, as the energy got a lot weaker while outside the body, while inside, it made Owen both faster and stronger while giving him significant resistance to any energies that invaded his body by burning it away.

Offensively, it did have some properties, but those really only ever showed when the lightning coated a weapon. That was why Owen was still so intent on using a spear and why his father used a sword.

In conclusion, it was a great affinity for spell blades. During Jake's preparations, he also studied whatever he could concerning the man's fighting style and whatnot, but there wasn't that much available outside of what Owen could teach him.

Could he have gotten more information by paying Colosseum Points? Potentially, however, Jake decided that he knew enough after seeing all Polly had gathered and being taught by Owen.

Back to just before the fight began, Jake was standing ready to enter the arena, with Owen beside him, looking visibly nervous. "You know... I didn't really think about how messed up this situation is... I am asking my friend to beat up my dad to make him go home and live on a farm..."

"If it helps anything, I've beaten people up for worse reasons," Jake shrugged. "Also, shouldn't he be rich if he is a Champion? Why live on a farm?"

"Well... okay, it isn't really a farm, more like an estate or compound placed outside of a large city... Owen said, scratching the back of his head. "Just... be careful, alright?"

"Don't worry; I already said I'll do all I can to not kill your old man," Jake tried to reassure him.

"I mean that you also need to be careful for your own sake. While I admit my father is delusional if he thinks he can become a Grand Champion, he is still incredibly powerful. His title of Champion is earned, and while you have promised to try and not kill him, he will not show the same mercy. It doesn't matter if he knows we are friends or not; he will do all he can to win," Owen said, his nervousness somehow getting even worse as he began to fidget.

"I already told you that should he be too strong, I won't show mercy either," Jake said, padding the guy on the back. "Alright, how about we make a bet... if I win and beat up your dad so he sees reason, you'll ask Polly to accompany you back home. Deal?"

"I... what does Polly have to do with anything?" Owen asked, visibly flustered.

"You know what? I'll take that as a yes," Jake grinned, having timed his tease perfectly with the gate opening up in front of him. "Now go find her on the stands, yeah? I got a Lightning Monarch to beat up."

Owen looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept silent as Jake walked off into the tunnel leading to the arena.

It did not take long before Jake heard the clamors of the crowd. Failing to resist, he sent out a Pulse of Perception and saw that the arena was somehow even more massive than any of the earlier ones. Not in size of the battle area itself, but the stands. There had to be more than half a million spectators at this point... with Jake still no closer to learning where the hell they all came from.

Ascending the stairs leading to the small entrance area of the arena, the battleground soon appeared before his eyes. A few seconds later, he saw his opponent at the other end of the arena, right as the announcer began to speak.

"To be a Champion is a privilege, an honor, and a promise. A promise to remain one of the strongest the Colosseum has ever seen, standing side-by-side with other titans. Yet some are not satisfied standing beside others... they seek to stand above them. To truly prove themselves the very best. We have one such individual here today. One man who refuses to not be at the apex, and despite having only become a Champion recently, he shows no intentions of stopping his ascension. It's the one, the only: Doombringer!"

Yep, Jake was definitely happy they called him Doombringer now. It was definitely better than any of the stupid prior names.

“However, barring his path on the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion is another man who has attempted this ascension once before. A man who failed, but not after leaving a mark by even daring to try. I am naturally speaking of the Lightning Monarch, a veteran of the Colosseum who has been a Champion for well over a decade! He is a true warrior who has proven himself again and again and, after a long absence, is back to do so once more. So let us ask: Will Doombringer succeed where the Lightning Monarch failed? Or will the Lightning Monarch teach him just how difficult his quest is? Let’s find out! Lower the gates!”

Jake had kind of expected this introduction message to be longer, but maybe it was intentional that the announcer didn’t mention a smidge of information about either of them? Nevertheless, it didn’t matter to Jake.

Looking across the arena, he finally saw his opponent properly. The Lightning Monarch’s entire body, save for his head, was covered in silver armor, and he wore a single sword in his hand. His face reminded Jake a bit of Owen, except for his sharper features, stubbled beard, and the several scars that covered it.

Focusing more on the sword, Jake felt quite the power from it, making him certain it was of a very high rarity... likely even legendary. The armor wasn’t anything to scoff at either. While he wasn’t a pay-to-win character like Gudrun, he definitely hadn’t cheaped out on his equipment.

He did look a bit intimidating, but Jake didn’t feel any fear. His aura was also respectable, and Jake knew this wouldn’t be a walk in the park, but he was walking into the arena a man with a plan.

His opponent quickly walked forward as he observed Jake closely. As was almost customary by now, they both stopped toward the center of the arena as the Lightning Monarch spoke. "I must applaud your bravery. To attempt the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion is a decision not made haphazardly and one I truly and deeply respect. Ah... and I also heard you have some kind of connection to my son? I hope you have been a good influence on him, but do not think I shall show the slightest restraint for his sake."

"I, too, have heard quite a lot about you," Jake said as he smiled, not even much in the mood for a long conversation. "Including that you are considering reattempting the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion despite nearly getting beaten to death the first time around."

"Alas, one failure shall not define me. I was not at my best that day, and I am even more powerful now... who knows, perhaps today shall even be my unofficial start to the Gauntlet by beating you?" the Lightning Monarch said with a small chuckle.

"Have you considered that you lost the first time around because you aren't cut out to be a Grand Champion?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Your feeble attempt at making me doubt myself is useless," the man waved him off. "Now come. Bring out your bow and show me what you got."

"No," Jake shook his head. "Prove that you are worth it for me to bring out my bow. Prove that you are worth spending these arrows I have painstakingly created. If you do that, maybe you'll have a shot at becoming a Grand Champion... but if not, maybe you should just go home and be a family man?"

With those words, Jake pulled out both katars and charged forward, preparing to do as Owen had asked. He would not just beat up his dad but truly hammer home the difference between someone with the make of a Grand Champion and someone without.

Chapter 766: Nevermore: Lightning Monarch

Jake was arrogant; no two ways about it. But his arrogance was also always backed with a certain level of well-earned confidence and a powerful intuition. He did not declare others weak or strong or claim himself superior based on pure narcissism, but his own reading on his opponent... and while the Lightning Monarch was powerful, Jake had full confidence in himself. Especially when he saw the man be momentarily surprised at Jake's charge... oh, and the fact that he had a damn good plan.

Nevertheless, his opponent reacted fast, proving he was no slouch.

A rush of blue lightning covered his body in an instant as his blade moved down to block in the blink of an eye. Sword and katar clashed as Jake was pushed back, a small stream of lightning running across his body from the impact. It was important to note here that it ran across his body and not into it.

Below his clothes, Jake had covered himself entirely in a stable layer of arcane energy made specifically to block out the lightning. He didn't need it to be incredibly durable, just resilient enough to handle the remnant lightning energy from when weapons clashed or whatever was left in the air after a swipe from the Lightning Monarch's sword.

Giving pursuit, the Lightning Monarch attacked relentlessly, forcing Jake to retreat repeatedly. The man's attacks were fast and deadly, and Jake could only defend himself as more than a dozen blows were exchanged.

After his combo, the lightning around the Monarch lessened visually, making Jake go on the offensive. The second he did, the lightning aura around the Lightning Monarch exploded once more, making Jake go back on the defensive instantly. A few dozen exchanges later, his opponent slowed down again, making Jake attack the very second he did, giving the Lightning Monarch no time to rest.

While the Lightning Monarch had entered the battle full of confidence, Jake had done the same because he was a man with a plan. His fighting method, where he retreated and attacked to keep the Lightning Monarch constantly engaged, was entirely intentional and his strategy from the very beginning.

When Owen had first explained how the lightning arcane affinity worked, Jake had quickly come to a realization. To make your arcane energy flow through your body in order to make yourself stronger, faster, and more durable while even coating your weapon in the energy...

Yeah, that was just a boosting skill, wasn't it?

Mind you, Jake did boost himself using arcane energy even as a level 0, but he was not constantly boosting. Instead, he used the energy in small bursts, such as in the middle of a kick or while stabbing forward with his katar. Could he technically keep the arcane energy constantly running through his body and use a skill similar to Arcane Awakening? Yes, but only for a very short period of time. A level 0 simply didn't have the resources to sustain a boosting skill for any reasonable amount of time.

At least not normally.

The arcane affinity of the Lightning Monarch was explicitly suited for this kind of boosting, making the boost far more efficient than using any regular affinities. He could effectively reuse the same lightning energy over and over again, resulting in potentially the only viable level 0 boosting skill out there.

However... it was still a boosting skill.

Jake had naturally been curious how the Lightning Monarch lost when he attempted to become Grand Champion the first time around. Especially how he lost in such a devastating fashion that he was left crippled for around a year.

It turns out that the fight he had lost was a prolonged one. He had been fighting and winning for many minutes until suddenly, he slowed down significantly and was hit hard. The Lightning Monarch had then tried to get up, boosting himself once more before ultimately losing.

So... yeah, he had been so damn injured because he had pushed his boosting skill further than he should have, and no matter how much he had improved, the Lightning Monarch still had this one crucial weakness:

Endurance. And not the stat.

So, Jake's strategy couldn't be more simple. He wanted to exhaust the Lightning Monarch, making him dance to Jake's tune from start to end without ever gaining any ground. Jake did learn that the Monarch had learned to turn his boosting skill on and off rapidly after his last attempt to become a Grand Champion to try and shore up this huge weakness and last longer in a fight.

That was why Jake had turned the fight into a push-and-pull, where Jake would be a hundred percent defensive whenever the Lightning Monarch attacked. The Lightning Monarch would naturally notice this and attempt to pace himself to not burn out too fast, which was when Jake went on the offensive, forcing the Lightning Monarch to push himself in order to keep up.

While the Lightning Monarch was undoubtedly powerful, that was only when he was boosting himself. His entire Path relied on the boosting skill, and when it was down, Jake had the advantage in speed, even if he still lost by a little in the power department.

Jake was sure the Lightning Monarch could win simply by overwhelming his opponents most of the time due to the sheer power of his boosting skill, but sadly for him, if there was anyone who was good at dragging out fights, it was Jake. As long as he stayed on the defensive, it was doubtful anyone could take him down, not unless they had some huge area of effect attack like Gudrun.

In conclusion... as long as Jake didn't fuck up, the winner of this fight was already a foregone conclusion. Of course, Jake wasn't just there to win but to crush his opponent's spirit.

"Are you frustrated?" Jake asked as he dodged several attacks by a hair's margin.

Looking at the man's face, he already knew the answer.

"You are as slippery as a rat!" the Lightning Monarch cursed as he made a wide swing, releasing a lot of lightning energy.

Jake had already stepped back to dodge and didn't even need to raise his katars to block.

"So you are losing to a rat?" Jake smiled as he attacked, not giving the man any chance to rest. "That's pretty embarrassing, isn't it?"

The Lightning Monarch was a bit too slow as Jake landed a low kick, making the man speed up more than usual as he tried to pull off one of his many combos. Jake barely moved his body as he swayed and weaved in between the hits before once more dodging the last strike by retreating.

“Fight me!” the Lightning Monarch hissed.

“I am waiting for you to fight me seriously first,” Jake smirked. “Or do you call that mindless flailing of your sword a fighting style? Do you truly think that is all it takes to be a Grand Champion? You may be fast, you may be strong... but you are still lacking.”

Avoiding another swing, Jake once more tried to counterattack but found himself pushed back immediately. The lighting around the Monarch intensified even more than before as he charged forward. Jake knew he was pushing himself, and without hesitation, he used Fear Gaze to make the man lose some of his momentum, giving Jake time to reach one of the pillars spread throughout the arena.

Jake began kiting around the pillar – a tried and tested arena strategy – making the Lightning Monarch never able to truly close in. Due to the sand making the man constantly run in circles, he never got a chance to build up speed, meaning Jake easily got away while throwing out the occasional taunt.

“YOU!” the Lightning Monarch roared as Jake’s danger sense reacted. Without any hesitation, he ducked as a wave of pure lightning energy swept over his head – having cut straight through the several meters-thick stone pillar.

Yeah, that was dumb, Jake thought. Was it impressive for a level 0 to cut through a damn stone pillar with a sword? Hell yeah, but it was also a massive waste of energy. Jake did not hesitate as he jumped up, avoided the falling pillar, and attacked the temporarily weakened Lightning Monarch, who was suffering from the backlash from unleashing an attack more powerful than his body could handle.

“Don’t you get it?” Jake said as he dodged the weak attempt from the man to defend himself easily before kicking the Monarch in the stomach, making him tumble back. “You’ve stagnated. Reached the end of your potential.”

“Your words...” the Lightning Monarch said as he stood back up again with a groan, “shall not shake my will.”

“I don’t need them to,” Jake shook his head. “Your willingness to acknowledge your own weakness is irrelevant to me... all it can do is extend your loss.”

The Lightning Monarch did not answer but attacked again, having partly recovered from that wide slash he made to cut through the pillar. He kept trying to lock down Jake and made many valiant attempts to somehow land a blow on Jake, but against his overpowered Bloodline, the man just didn’t stand a chance. It didn’t help that, honestly, he wasn’t even that skilled with his sword.

“How long have you been a Champion? Actually, don’t even answer that; the true answer will be far more embarrassing than what I guess in my head,” Jake said, teasing the man who was really running out of steam by now.

Nevertheless, he didn’t stop his barrage of attacks, even when his lightning began to visibly weaken. Jake saw the desperation in the Lightning Monarch’s eyes and knew it was about time to land the “killing blow.”

If not, the fight would turn into a duel to the death... because Jake got the vibes from the Lightning Monarch that he would rather burn himself to death with lightning energy than lose. Luckily, Jake did have one final strategy to use:

“Despite being a Champion for so long, your swordsmanship is still at such a low level... your own son is nearly better with a spear than you are, and he has only used it for a year,” Jake shook his head after

dodging another attack and landing a solid punch in the Lightning Monarch's stomach after dismissing his katars, sending him temporarily airborne, before landing on the sand with a thud.

Jake's words had been an insult... yet he saw a spark of something in the Monarch's eyes as he hurriedly began to stand.

"You should honestly be embarrassed at your progress... I had expected all the Champions to be truly powerful opponents, yet you, someone who has been a Champion for years, seems to barely have made any progress since you became one," Jake sighed. "And you are preparing to try the Gauntlet again? For how long will you prepare? Another few years? By that point, your son will have surpassed you and become a Champion himself."

For the first time, the Monarch didn't attack immediately after standing up, but instead, he looked at Jake directly. "Do you truly believe Owen can become a Champion?"

Jake, barely hiding his smile, shrugged. "Probably, though I will admit you at least have him beaten out when it comes to controlling your special lightning affinity. Then again, you only guided him in using it for what, three or four years?"

"It was... barely one year..." Owen's dad muttered.

"Only a year? Huh, guess we are both lucky you didn't teach him for longer, or he may have been the one standing here today, trying to do the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion," Jake said, trying to sound surprised yet casual as if Owen being able to do that was only natural.

By now, the fight was already over; at least, Jake hoped it was. While the man opposite Jake still stood tall, Jake saw the slight quivering in his legs. Unless he fully reactivated his boosting lightning, he wouldn't be able to move any faster than a slow stroll, and by the way his arms hung down his sides, the sword slightly slumping, Jake doubted he could even lift his weapon without boosting.

Something Jake really didn't want to happen, and not just because he was pretty damn sure that another boost would kill the Monarch, but because Jake knew it would also be a problem for him. If the Lightning Monarch decided to go for mutual destruction, it could get dangerous. Jake knew just how dangerous someone who was good at using a boosting skill and willing to die truly was, the Fallen King no doubt sharing this sentiment.

So, while not making it a fight to the death was a great outcome for Owen, it was also best for Jake, and he got the feeling this was the "best" way to win while even minimizing risk.

"You... are powerful," the Lightning Monarch said as he looked at Jake. "And you are telling me that my son is more talented than you? That with just a few years of training, he will become more powerful than you?"

... Okay, maybe Jake had overhyped poor Owen a bit too much, but at this point, there was no backing out as Jake once more shrugged. "I will say that I would rather fight you than Owen in a few years."

Hey, he wasn't even lying. Jake would indeed prefer to fight someone he didn't really know over his buddy of a year.

The Lightning Monarch looked up toward the stands, staring straight at Owen. Jake followed his gaze and saw Owen look confused. Nobody in the stands could hear what Jake and the Monarch were talking about, so what came next was definitely a surprise to many.

“Perhaps... perhaps it’s time to pass on the mantle,” the man muttered to Jake before he looked upward and yelled: “I surrender!”

Jake was hiding his grin while trying really hard to look surprised as the man yelled once more. “And with my loss today, so shall I retire from the Colosseum of Mortals, stepping down as Champion. But worry not, for my son shall pick up the title of Lightning Monarch, and within not that long, a new Monarch shall join the rank! Mark my words!”

Not bothering to hide his grin anymore, Jake threw the confused Owen a look and gave him a thumbs up. What? Owen had never told Jake how he had to convince his father to give up fighting, just to make him give up. Besides, what was a more classic dad move from an already neglectful absentee father than putting all your personal hopes and dreams in the hands of your kid, trying to make them achieve what you couldn’t?

From the beginning, Jake had doubted he could make the Lightning Monarch simply lose faith in himself and surrender. He was too damn stubborn and determined for something like that to ever work, so instead, Jake had aimed to redirect his attention.

In a slightly anti-climactic way, Jake’s first bout as a Champion had ended, and to the roars of the crowd, who seemed totally fine with this ending, Jake raised a single fist as he turned to leave.

Jake, walking out of the arena, did turn his head to see Owen giving him quite the glare, but Jake just smiled and waved as he shifted his attention to someone else in the stands. A man who stood on a small personal platform, overlooking the arena and focusing intently on Jake with some kind of magical orb in his hand.

Observing this man, Jake saw an old elf with a long, thin beard going all the way down to his stomach and old sunken features. He wore an extremely expensive-feeling robe, and leaning against the railing right beside him was a rather majestic staff. It wasn't difficult for Jake to ascertain who he was looking at through his sphere... because, damn, did he look like a classic old mage. Even if all the other details weren't a massive hint, the classic pointy hat gave him away.

It was naturally the Archmage, Jake's next planned opponent. And in that fight, there would be no need to hold back.

Chapter 767: Nevermore: Archmage

"You know, I am not even sure if I should be angry or happy with this outcome," Owen muttered while Jake scarfed down his lunch. "I know that I said I wanted you to convince my father to no longer attempt to become a Grand Champion... but did you really have to convince him to try and make me one?"

Jake finished chewing as he answered seriously. "In all honesty? Yes. You kind of said it yourself, but for the last many years, your dad had made his quest to become the Grand Champion his entire personality. To him, it was all that truly mattered, and me trying to convince him to be a good father and husband wasn't going to change his mind... unless those things are required to achieve his goal."

"If he is just faking being a non-shitty person to convince me to train and become the Grand Champion, what is that even worth? Also, how did you even know that would work? Even if I some-fucking-how manage to become the Grand Champion at some point in the future, how will that allow him to fulfill his goal?" Owen questioned.

"I have been thinking, and I asked myself... why did your father spend his time recovering training you, and teaching you how to use your family's affinity?" Polly chimed in. "Maybe it was because he wasn't sure if he would ever recover and wanted you to pick up where he left off even back then."

"I... am not sure that makes any of this better," Owen sighed.

"Think of it like this," Jake said, trying to be positive. "A dad who wants you to train to be the Grand Champion while faking being a good dad is better than a dead dad. Because at least the first option has the possibility to turn into something non-shitty, while the latter can never turn non-dead. Also, finally, is it really that bad to train to become the Grand Champion? Even if you fail, you will get a lot stronger in the process, and I have the feeling that as long as you get stronger than him, he will let off you."

"I guess you're right," Owen said, still sighing. "Now, how confident are you in facing this Archmage?"

Jake was happy with the change of subject as he considered the question for a while. "Well... hopefully it will be a good fight. I did catch a glimpse of him in the stands, and he did have a respectable aura, but I also know that he is supposedly a slippery bastard with lots of resources at his disposal, so I probably don't want it to be a drawn-out affair."

"Yeah..." Polly muttered. "He is really old and has a lot of artifacts he has created throughout the years, especially the many Sealing Orbs he carries around. They are super dangerous, so remember to watch out for those, alright?"

They had already had this conversation before, as Jake had learned plenty from Polly about her so-called Master. She knew far more than any information broker could relay, as she had been his assistant for a while, and even if he hadn't taught her much about combat, he had taught her plenty of general magic mumbo jumbo, and due to his innate need to brag, had gladly shown off a whole legion of valuable items he had either purchased or created himself.

Jake cared about what he had made himself, as those were what he could bring into the arena. The most dangerous items were the Sealing Orbs, which were small crystal balls where he had trapped intense mana within of a specific affinity. Then, through a bunch of rituals and more magic stuff, elementals would appear, already sealed within. These elementals could then be absorbed by the

Archmage, giving him a far greater affinity to a particular school of magic for a period of time while also burning their mana instead of his own... so yeah, that was his gimmick.

Only two days after Jake had beaten his first opponent as a Champion, he issued his second challenge to the Archmage. Jake had almost expected another instant duel to happen, but...

"You wanted a fast fight, right?" the Battlemaster asked.

"Yeah?" Jake asked with hope.

"Well, the Archmage doesn't. The match is scheduled to take place in twenty-nine days and twenty-two hours," the Battlemaster said with a deadpan expression.

"That fucking sucks," Jake grumbled. "Can I just change opponent or fight someone else in between?"

"Nope, the rules are rules," the Battlemaster shrugged. "And based on what I know about that old crook, he would have scheduled for the last minute no matter when you chose to issue the challenge, so you may as well have the waiting period now. Either way, you should go prepare, yeah?"

Jake just nodded. "Yeah, I guess I should."

So, Jake spent the next month training and making preparations for the Necromancer and Lord of the Hunt. Okay, he did also do a little bit to prepare for the Archmage, but honestly, he had already done all the preparations he needed. No, the only true preparation he did was to prepare a special little surprise.

Owen also stayed with Jake throughout this time, and what's more, he even had his father actively give advice. The man formerly known as the Lightning Monarch gladly shared all he could about other Champions he had either fought with or researched before. In the end, he ended up handing everything he had to Polly before he headed home to Owen's mother and siblings.

His father insisted Owen should stay with Jake, especially after Jake acted like he was helping Owen train.

Pretty quickly, an entire month passed, and Jake once more found himself entering the arena, this time to face off against the Archmage. This month was the longest period he had gone since arriving in the Challenge Dungeon without a fight, so he was feeling a bit jittery.

After a final "good luck" from Owen and a hopeful look from Polly, Jake walked into the tunnel leading to the arena.

The announcer once more introduced the two fighters in a very general fashion, once more not giving any real information about either of them. This pretty much confirmed to Jake that this lack of information-sharing was intentional and just not coincidental.

When the gates lowered, the two combatants once more walked toward the center of the arena, however, with more distance than he had with prior opponents. Both of them knew this would be a ranged fight, so there was no need to go in melee from the get-go. Jake also knew that his opponent preferred to have some time to wind up his magic, which Jake was a-okay with.

The first of them to speak ended up being the old Archmage.

"Ho ho ho, so you are the little human my dear Pollaystrasirial has been following around these days, huh?" the Archmage chuckled as he stroked his beard. "I do hope the little girl has learned enough from you to make it worth the punishment she is due once she returns for embarrassing me in the arena with her pathetic performance."

Jake didn't say anything as he pulled out his bow. The only thing he mentally noted was that he had totally forgotten Polly's full name.

"How uncivilized... would you not at least wish to utter some words before your potential demise?" the Archmage smiled, confident in himself.

"Surrender now, or you'll die," Jake simply said in a casual tone. "No second chances."

"Uncivilized was perhaps too flattering of a word; you are simply delusional and rude," the Archmage said, disappointed. "Too bad; I had hoped you would have been willing to accompany me back to my mage tower once I had beaten you so I could study your peculiar magic. Alas, it appears you wish to die too badly for that to happen in any reasonable fashion."

With those words, the Archmage took out his staff.

Immediately, Jake jumped back as he reached inside his Ring of Deft Hands. Within, it had four slots. Two were used by katars, one for when he needed to store the bow, but the final one was something special he had prepared just for the old Archmage.

Out came a giant arrow more than one and a half meters long with a complex design. Jake had spent three full days crafting it, and now was the time to show the Archmage just how stupid he had been to give Jake that long of a preparation period.

Nocking it, Jake's body exploded in arcane energy as he began to charge a skillless Arcane Powershot.

On the other side of the arena, the Archmage didn't sit still as he floated back and took out three orbs at once.

"Spirits of the North, Winds of the East, become one as a blizzard is born!" he yelled as he smashed two gems together.

Two powerful streams of energy were released and began merging as what looked like a small localized blizzard appeared around the Archmage, obscuring his form. This blizzard gathered itself quickly, clearly having some level of autonomous control. Even if it wasn't a fully born elemental, it was close, and Jake felt like he was facing two beings rather than one.

"Soil of the Deep, embrace my form and grant me strength!" the Archmage yelled before he crushed the other orb in his hand, as brown energy began to emanate from his body.

Right as the Archmage's preparations were complete, Jake made his move.

With a deep exhale and an explosion of arcane energy, he loosed the arrow. The icy winds were parted in an instant as the Archmage reacted by smashing his staff into the ground, making a wall of sand shoot up before instantly turning it solid.

The massive arrow flying straight for the wall exploded the very next moment, sending two dozen arrows flying around the stone barrier, attacking the Archmage from all sides like they were heat-seeking missiles. With a yell, the man erected a barrier all around himself as every single arrow hit at once, exploding upon impact.

A massive explosion, far beyond what any level 0 should be capable of causing, rocked the arena and sent sand flying everywhere. The icy wind elemental had completely scattered in an attempt to protect its master. And from the looks of it, it had succeeded. From the center of this explosion, a weak, haggard voice began to sound out.

"I sur--"

No more sound came out as an arrow hit him in the side of the throat, drowning the word. Through his sphere, Jake saw the mage feebly reach for it right as a second arrow flew in and struck him in the eye, penetrating into his skull and ending the fight for good.

The crowd and announcer were both silent as Jake put away his bow and fell onto his ass. Blood was dripping from his eyes and ears, and his right shoulder was nearly entirely blue, with several visible blood vessels ruptured within, giving birth to plenty of internal bleeding. Shooting those two follow-up arrows definitely hadn't helped.

As the dust cleared, the body of the Archmage was revealed. His lower body was covered in an earthy shell as he had tried to cover his entire body with stone. Sadly for him, his upper body did not have time to be affected, and whatever emergency barriers he had put up and the protection from his elemental had been far from enough, resulting in his entire body dripping with blood. Most of it was from wounds caused by all the explosions, but a good portion of the blood also came from the hole in his neck.

After a few more seconds of silence, the cheers began, along with the announcer excitedly declaring his victory. Jake just stayed sitting for a bit as he looked at the mage's body before sighing. "I did tell you to surrender when you had the chance."

Jake got up after a bit of struggle and walked out of the arena, once more raising a fist to the cheers of the crowd. They were eerily cheery despite the corpse with an arrow in his throat and eye lying there in the center of the arena, but by now, Jake was honestly used to it.

Right as he got outside of the tunnel leading into the arena, he went straight to the Battlemaster to report his win and get a pat on the back that hurt like hell. A few minutes later, Owen and Polly arrived to escort him back to his little townhouse so he could rest.

In this fight, Jake had once more gone in with a plan. Polly had repeatedly said how the Archmage was never in a rush when fighting but gladly took his time to use his spells to buff himself up. Jake had taken advantage of that by creating an attack far more powerful than any other he was capable of.

The quasi-Protean Arrow had been made up of a faint layer of arcane energy on the surface, with weak destructive energy right beneath. In this weak destructive energy, Jake had put twenty-four stable arrows that he had painstakingly created, and during the creation process, he tried to push in as much Willpower energy as he could to make sure they would curve upon exploding the weak destructive energy. Ultimately, he still had to control all the arrows when the big arrow exploded, hence the bleeding from nearly every orifice.

It had worked out as he wanted, and Jake was more excited than ever to get out of the Colosseum and upgrade some skills. He had gained a lot of inspiration, and he was more sure than ever that the true purpose of this entire Challenge Dungeon was to help people upgrade skills and train concepts... which often led to upgrading skills.

Walking back to his small townhouse, Jake checked his status.

Bonus objective gained: Defeat the other Champion to become the Grand Champion.

Current rank: Champion (2/7)

Colosseum Points: 1,882,910 (2,882,910).

Lives remaining: 10

Jake hadn't been entirely sure before, but now he was. Each win as a Champion rewarded 500,000 Colosseum Points... which made all the points he got in lower ranks feel so damn meaningless, especially considering how "easy" his first two Champions fights had been. As the Battlemaster had said, he didn't actually have these points yet, but would only get them after all the Champion fights were done, but at least it told him how many he would get.

He did know that the Lighting Monarch and Archmage were the easiest. Not just because he had seen and felt the auras of all the other Champions but because that just made sense from a design perspective. These two both had Challenge Dungeon natives related to them and storylines associated with them.

No, he was sure that the next five had to be the truly challenging ones. At least strong or not dumb enough to let Jake charge his quasi-Arcane Powershot together with his quasi-Protean Arrow, right? Not that he wasn't going to prepare some anyway.

Jake even went to the shops to see if he could buy a better spatial storage, but sadly found that none of the ones on offer would allow him to store his arcane constructs. At least not any of the non-legendary items, and Jake really didn't want to spend nearly a million Colosseum Points on a ring. Not before he lost a few of his ten lives, at least.

By now, he was beginning to wonder if he would even lose any lives at all during the Colosseum of Mortals...

Well, that was entirely dependent on his opponents, right? And if anyone could grant him death, it had to be the Necromancer who literally dealt with it.

Chapter 768: Nevermore: Necromancer

Polly cheerfully wanted to cook for their group that night to celebrate the death of her teacher. It was a bit odd to have her tell stories of how her teacher had taught her and how much he had sucked in between happy humming because he was now dead and buried.

Speaking of death, Jake issued his challenge to the Necromancer two days after he had beaten the Archmage... and once more was told the guy wanted an entire month of preparations... so yeah, another thirty days for Jake to prepare tools to increase his chances to win. Of course, he also needed to gather a lot more information on this guy compared to his two prior opponents, as he didn't have anyone related to him to spill the beans.

Even before the Archmage fight, he had already gathered a lot, and with another waiting period, there was no reason not to get more. Jake also began to feel like one of the reasons Show Matches weren't a thing in the Champion rank was to remove the potential plot hole of none of the Champions ever doing Show Matches. Sure, it would make sense if some of them weren't, but wouldn't someone like the Lightning Monarch have welcomed the training?

Anyway... the Necromancer was pretty much a warrior with some poison and death magic. There was also a bit of dark magic in there, but he usually won through prolonged battles where he wore down his opponent, and from Jake's research, he did admit the guy could be a problem.

He usually played defensive the entire time while creating a field of miasma all around him. This miasma would slowly spread and begin to inhabit the entire arena, putting anyone who fought him on a timer. Jake did question how the hell the guy had mana to pull off something like that, but he assumed it was just more equipment-powered bullshit.

So, the best strategy would be to take him down fast. That is where him pretty much just being a warrior became an issue. He wore heavy armor, wielded a warhammer, and had several spells to defend himself and buy time for the poison to spread. Shit, he even often won without having to spread his field of death just with his normal spells and a good smack with his hammer.

In preparation for this fight, Jake prepared another powerful quasi-Protean Arrow and worked on covering his body in a small layer of stable arcane energy to keep the miasma out. He also went to the shop to see if he could buy anything to help with breathing it in, but the best he could get there was a bandana or something to cover his mouth. Gas masks were sadly not on offer.

To counter it, Jake began working on a better method of eliminating this miasma before it had a chance to reach his lungs. Ultimately, he settled on just circulating destructive arcane energy through his body to try and eliminate the miasma, covered his mouth with some torn-off cloth, and hoped he could win before it got too bad. Jake was confident in his offensive prowess, after all.

Moreover, the Necromancer was many things, but fast was not one of them. Jake should have a good window where there was no miasma around him, and he could bombard his foe with arrows. Besides that, he spent the month working on more general stuff and even had a few spars with Owen, who was still quite a bit away from Champion material, but he was fine for a sparring partner.

Soon enough, another month had passed, and without further ado or delays, Jake found himself back in the small opening area of the arena, facing a tall man across from him.

"Welcome to yet another Champion's Match in the Colosseum of Mortals! Today, the Doombringer will attempt to continue his march on the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion and take home his third win! The Lightning Monarch and Archmage have already fallen to him... but will the Necromancer meet the same fate? Or shall he be the Deathbringer to the Doombringer? Well, I guess we should find out! Lower the gates!"

Jake watched the gates lower, but he didn't walk too much forward in order to still keep a good distance. He observed his opponent from afar, and he had to admit... the guy looked pretty damn strong.

His heavy armor was ivory white with black patterns all across it, with bone adornments here and there. On his head, he wore a helmet with antlers on it, both of which gave off eerie auras of death. The hammer he wielded was entirely black and had a long handle and a medium-sized head, where one side was blunt, and the other had a sharp pick. By the way he wielded it, Jake also didn't doubt the Risen before him was strong enough to swing that bastard around fast.

His opponent walked into the arena with heavy and steady steps, a slightly dark footprint left wherever he walked. Jake felt and studied his aura closely, and the conclusion was clear:

This man was the strongest being he had faced in the Colosseum yet. Jake was excited to face him as he stayed at a good distance, yet still walked a bit closer to meet his foe and have the customary first-meeting talk. The Necromancer was the first to speak as a deep voice, slightly distorted by his helmet, sounded out.

"I apologize for the wait before I could accept your challenge. I have been absent from the arena for too long, and I had to refamiliarize myself with the place before I felt ready to face you with the respect and honor any who dare attempt the Gauntlet deserves," the Necromancer said, his words having an odd sense of calmness to them. He sounded old. Like, really old.

"No worries," Jake answered. "I cannot criticize anyone for using their allotted preparation time when it is perfectly in line with the rules. Especially if you were not active in the arena."

"Your understanding is admirable," the old Necromancer nodded.

"I am curious about something, though. What is a Risen doing here? You are the only Risen I have seen in the entire Colosseum, even counting the audience," Jake asked. The Necromancer had not made any moves or begun to release his miasma yet, and Jake saw no reason not to try and probe out a bit of information. Who knows, maybe he would even say something useful?

"Oh?" the Risen said, surprise clear in his voice. "I had not expected someone to recognize my kind around here, much less when I keep myself covered. But if you are curious, then I did not end up here by choice. I was exploring an ancient ruin in my homeland, and in ways I do not recognize, I ended up in these lands. Alas, all I could do from there was make the best out of my situation, and as a Death Knight of my home, I welcomed the familiarity of the Colosseum. It is a glorious place, filled with battle and death."

A Death Knight, eh? Jake mentally noted. That was pretty much the only semi-actionable piece of information he gave out. The rest was just a throw-away explanation by a lazy writer to justify why a Risen was in the Colosseum as the only one.

Anyway... Death Knights were pretty much the paladins of the undead race, and Jake did know a bit about them. Ultimately, his biggest question after learning he was a Death Knight wasn't anything related to his abilities, though.

"If you are a Death Knight... why is your title in the Arena of Mortals Necromancer?" Jake asked very pointedly.

"That is... due to my own hubris. In the early parts of the Colosseum, I found this place far too easy, so I never bothered to battle myself but only raised weak bone constructs and unleashed basic magic to win my fights, and before I knew it, everyone called me the Necromancer. By the time I showed my true prowess, the name was already stuck in the consciousness of all," the Necromancer, who should really be called the Death Knight, answered.

Jake felt immense sympathy as he nodded in understanding. He knew the pain...

"Now, while exchanging words with you has been a delight, we are not here to speak, are we?" the Necromancer said after a few moments of silence, wanting to get the action started.

Jake nodded as he pulled out his bow. "True, true. Let's have a good one."

"May the best combatant win," the Necromancer said with a nod as his aura grew in power.

Without any hesitation, Jake made his move. He nocked an arrow and loosed it immediately as the Necromancer slowly began to leak out black smoke from between the seams in his armor. Jake had shot hit him in the chest before he had a chance to block, the arrow exploding on impact and making the Necromancer slide backward on the sand for over a meter.

Jake cursed internally as he saw it had only left a small mark and a few cracks in the metal. He had wanted to test the durability of the thing, and it exceeded his expectations. His only real choice was to hit the weak spots of the armor, such as the seams, or where the explosion would still do a lot of damage.

The problem was the Necromancer also knew he had to do that. Jake's second arrow was aimed at the Necromancer's head, but he was quick and blocked it with his hammer as he began running forward with heavy steps.

Outpacing him was easy, but the problem was that Jake couldn't just shoot arrows haphazardly. He had jam-packed his quiver, getting thirty-eight arrows in there, and while that seemed like a lot, Jake knew they could quickly vanish if he shot them without thinking.

With every footstep, the Necromancer left a trail of miasma in his wake, and it showed no signs of dissipating. In fact, it seemed to multiply by itself, infecting the very air itself. Jake, inspecting the armor of the Necromancer more closely, soon became certain it was the cause of this miasma. At least he used it as a catalyst to both power and release it.

Legendary... if not higher, Jake concluded. What's more, the small crack he had made in the armor with his first arrow had already been mended by the miasma. Seeing this, Jake slowly began to formulate a plan as the Necromancer attacked. His planned strategy was simple but incredibly effective.

Wielding his hammer with both hands, he smashed it into the ground, but Jake had already jumped away before a bone spike shot up from the ground where he had just been standing. Jake took the opportunity to counterattack as he shot an arrow aimed at the knee-joint of the armor.

It struck true and penetrated straight through. Jake purposefully did not detonate this one as, with an arrow in the knee, the Necromancer would not only have his dreams of being an adventurer squashed but have his movement speed slowed.

At least that was the plan, but the Necromancer stomped down, breaking the arrow, and kept walking like nothing had happened, leaving a fragment of stable arcane energy embedded within his flesh. Jake felt the energy of the Necromancer slowly attack it, but his arcane energy was not that easily gotten rid of, and he was in no rush to detonate it quite yet.

Having confirmed that his arrows could penetrate the armor in some places, Jake began to carefully attack as the miasma also continued to spread. He shot arrow after arrow, and while eight out of fifteen hits were blocked or missed, he soon had seven arrows sticking out of the shoulders, elbow, and knees of the Necromancer.

Jake had to admit that seeing the tall Risen continue to walk unbothered despite his injuries was very intimidating, but he also knew his attacks were working. The Necromancer's speed had gotten slower, and while the miasma seemed to be spreading even faster as the Risen got injured, Jake still had plenty of space to make use of as he purposefully sought out the areas where the miasma didn't have time to spread to yet.

With his opponent slowed down enough, Jake initiated the final part of his plan to take down the huge Risen. He began to shoot a barrage of arrows in rapid succession, all of them seemingly doing nothing as they exploded upon impact with the armor covering his opponent's chest, forcing the Necromancer backward a few steps with each impact. Even if this seemingly did nothing, as with the first arrow, all of

them left small cracks. Cracks that would take time to be repaired by the miasma... time Jake didn't plan on giving the Necromancer.

Releasing a final arrow toward the head of the Necromancer, he managed to make the man's head reel back as one of the horns was blown off. Seeing his chance, Jake unleashed his finishing attack.

Taking out a massive arrow from his ring, Jake quickly jumped back as far as he could without entering the miasma that now covered the entire perimeter of the arena. The second he landed, he rapidly began charging a quasi-Arcane Powershot. His opponent was clearly aware of this move, but right as he wanted to move away, Jake detonated the arrows stuck in his body. The ones embedded in his knees made the Necromancer groan and fall to his knees, giving Jake the time he needed to land the killing blow.

Jake's special arrow this time around was what Jake would call a bunker buster. He knew the Necromancer was tanky as hell, so he wanted an arrow that could penetrate a tank. Which is exactly what he made. The arrowhead was filled with destructive energy that exploded directionally forward, with a sharp bullet-like stable tip right behind it. Based on his tests, this arrow should more than do the job.

The Necromancer didn't even make any moves to defend as he saw Jake charge his shot. Clearly, he was aware he wouldn't be able to, so he counterattacked as he roared and dropped his hammer hard, sending a large bone spike flying toward Jake right before he shot the arrow.

Having the choice of either abandoning his attack or taking the bone spike, Jake chose the latter. As he released the arrow and used a quick Fear Gaze to make sure it would hit where he wanted it to, Jake swayed to the side at the very last moment, taking the bone spike to the shoulder. The impact lifted him off his feet and threw him backward as he spun in the air, yet despite the pain, his true focus was on the arrow he had just shot.

On the other end of Jake's arrow, the Necromancer did not fare well either. As expected, he was forced to take it head-on as the arrow smashed into his chest. Metal and bone were sent flying as the chest of the Necromancer exploded, and he was shot backward over a dozen meters before he impacted the wall of the arena, resulting in an explosion of arcane energy.

The entire wall also cracked, as the arrow had not only managed to pierce the armor but had gone all the way through to hit the wall behind the Necromancer, with the final explosion destroying almost every vital organ that even a Risen still relied on.

Jake, having been thrown into the midst of the miasma, coughed as he saw the defeated Necromancer through his sphere. He was embedded in the wall, with blood everywhere. He had been a good opponent, but Jake's offensive prowess was just too-

"Undying."

A ghostly voice echoed throughout the arena as an eerie presence descended upon it.

Jake could only stare as the Risen tore himself from the wall, and his feet landed on the sand once more. With steady steps, he began walking forward with a huge gaping hole in his chest, every single internal organ, including his heart and lungs, destroyed. At the same time, he felt the change in the Necromancer's presence... and it reminded him of a certain old swordsman when he went all-out.

As Jake was still trying to comprehend what the hell was happening, he coughed again. This time, blood came out as he felt his lungs burn from the miasma, but far worse than that was the bone spike in his shoulder. A hefty dose of toxins seeped from the bone even now, and even after Jake pulled it out and quickly got out of the miasma, the situation still wasn't looking good as his arcane energy was hard at work, trying to eliminate the toxins that had invaded his body.

Nevertheless, Jake still had his bow and a few arrows to fight with. Even if he ran out of arrows, he had his katars, and with the Necromancer already looking half-dead, he shouldn't last much longer despite the skill he had just used, right? Jake simply refused to surrender before the seemingly immortal monster walking with steady steps toward him.

Chapter 769: Nevermore: Undying

Everything had honestly worked out as Jake had planned. He had slowly weakened the Necromancer with several arrows and limited his mobility enough for him to confidently land a blow that, by all accounts, should have been lethal. There was nothing wrong with anything he had done... the problem was the opponent he had done it to.

From an outsider's perspective, the fight definitely looked over. Jake was poisoned and had a nasty hole in his shoulder, but was otherwise able to keep fighting, while the Necromancer had a hole that allowed Jake to look straight through his body and out the other side. Yet Jake was the one who found himself pressured as he bombarded the Necromancer with several more arrows, trying to somehow make his opponent fall over.

One of the arrows hit the open hole in the Necromancer and curved upwards as it penetrated his body and exploded. More blood and flesh were sent flying, but it didn't seem to affect the man much, and Jake soon noticed the main problem.

He apparently didn't need his flesh and muscles for shit. Every shred of power was embedded within his skeleton, and as long as that remained, he would be able to move around. These bones would naturally be far more difficult to break than flesh, and just a few arcane explosions would not get the job done.

What's more, the miasma was spreading far, far faster than before. Every drop of blood the Risen had spilled evaporated and turned into even more miasma, filling the arena way more quickly than Jake was comfortable with. He knew something had to change, so he tried all he could.

He isn't healing... so it should be possible to make him unable to continue fighting? Jake theorized.

The Necromancer's steps were still heavy and slow due to his heavily injured legs. However, Jake had an issue if he wanted to end the fight quick... he was down to five arrows. Moreover, with his shoulder badly injured and poison spreading out from it, Jake couldn't shoot powerful arrows anymore, and quasi-Powershots were not an option.

With his remaining arrows, Jake tried to make the Necromancer entirely incapacitated. His knees were already in horrible condition, and Jake wanted to at least take a leg off. If he did that, then he should be able to close in safely and somehow finish the Necromancer off with his katars.

Was it a good plan? No, but it was everything he could come up with immediately, and quite frankly, he didn't have the time to think up anything more elaborate as the miasma was growing in intensity and density. Despite how much he tried, he couldn't fully eliminate the toxins in his body either, as he was repeatedly forced to breathe in miasmic fumes.

Using his still far superior speed, Jake got around the Necromancer and, through much struggle, managed to land an arrow on the knee of the Risen. Sadly, his second shot was blocked by a hammer, and even when Jake tried to shoot from an awkward angle, the Necromancer also blocked the third.

With only two arrows remaining, Jake gave it his all. Despite his growing headache, he unleashed a Fear Gaze and, due to that, landed a second arrow in the same knee as the first. The Necromancer was brought to his knee, and right as he wanted to remove it, Jake landed the final one as he rapidly closed in.

Mentally, he commanded the arrows to explode. The resulting explosion heavily damaged the kneecap and left an opening for Jake. Using his bow, he swung it down with one of the sharp ends straight into the knee and, using it almost as a crowbar, tore the entire leg of the Necromancer off.

The strain snapped the sharp tip of the bow, but Jake didn't have time to even consider it as he had to dodge a swing from the hammer of the now one-legged Necromancer, who was mid-fall.

Jake stumbled back as he coughed up more blood, getting a bit of distance to try and stabilize himself. That is when he realized he had made another mistake.

His opponent pushed himself to stand using his hammer as an odd ethereal chain appeared in his other hand. His movements were oddly calm as he swung it down and wrapped it around the leg that Jake had just severed as he let go of the chain. Before Jake could even react, the falling chain moved by itself in mid-air and wrapped around the thigh of the Necromancer as it yanked the leg and reattached it.

Shifting his weight, the Risen stepped down on the leg that had been severed just moments before as he took a step forward. It was obvious that the leg was stiff as hell, and he seemed unable to bend the knee more than a few degrees... but he could still walk.

Fuck me, Jake cursed.

Out of arrows, Jake did the final thing he could. Running forward with all the strength he had, he had a katar in one hand and his bow in the other. Still being faster, he dodged the first hammer swing as he jammed the bow into the leg with chains keeping it in place. The bow penetrated through the already broken armor from Jake's relentless attacks and pinned the Necromancer to the ground for a second.

At the same time, a katar stabbed the Necromancer in the shoulder of the arm wielding the hammer. He penetrated through the seams and was bombarded with miasma from the wound as it spewed out as if he had punctured a gas canister.

Jake barely managed to avoid another hammer swing, but his footsteps were uneven due to the miasma as the Necromancer punched him hard in the chest. Groaning, Jake still refused to back down as he stabbed the Risen once more, and this time, he managed to avoid both follow-up attacks.

His objective to literally disarm the Necromancer was close as the Risen forced himself to fully stand once more after getting pinned. Jake cautiously waited for an opening as he dodged several hammer swings before he finally saw it. Using his katars, Jake redirected the hammer into the sand, and as it smashed into it, Jake used the momentum to slide one of his katars up the handle of the hammer. A trail of arcane energy was left behind as Jake swept his weapon upward, four fingers flying up with it. With a swift, arcane-empowered kick, Jake followed up and made the Necromancer stumble back, his hammer still embedded in the ground as his mostly fingerless right hand could no longer hold it.

Despite his minor victory in their exchange, Jake didn't feel even the slightest sense of relief. He was on a tight timer, and even breathing hurt like hell, and his body was beginning to feel sloppy.

I need to end this...

Charging forward again, Jake unleashed a flurry of attacks as he tore apart much of the Necromancer's armor. His opponent struggled as he tried to land attacks, but Jake did all he could to not take more damage than he already had.

Sadly, he was far from in an optimal state. In a crucial moment, a coughing fit overtook him, making Jake slightly too slow, dodging as a hand wrapped around his forearm and pulled him closer.

Jake had been caught as the Necromancer wrapped his arms around Jake and squeezed him against his body. His sense of danger was going haywire, and he tried the only thing he could think of. Jake barely managed to get his arms free as he stabbed both katars into the Risen's neck. His opponent barely reacted as Jake roared, and he tore his arms apart with as much power as he had, even releasing a small arcane explosion.

A head wearing a helmet with a single antler on it flew into the air as blood splurged all over Jake. It landed with a heavy thud on the sand... but the relief did not come to Jake.

The arms trapping him squeezed harder as Jake had all the air in his lungs pushed out. The blood covering his body from the severed head began to evaporate as the miasma formed all around him. Jake struggled with every shred of strength he had, even making his body explode with arcane energy to try and get free, but he found his pathways clogged up by the poison.

Soon, the miasma closed in. Jake kept trying to get free as his body weakened... his resources emptied, and his internal organs began to decompose. His vision went dark as time seemed to slow down, and he pulled on the final thing he had. A deep thumping sound echoed a single time, but instantly, Jake stopped it as he got an odd sense of wrongness... a second later, a message echoed in his mind, and his consciousness ceased to exist.

You have died.

Vilastromoz sighed as he looked at the fight reach its conclusion. Jake's strategy had been all fine and good, assuming he faced a normal opponent. However, the one named the Necromancer was far from normal and not someone who would die merely from having his chest blown apart.

He was a general working directly under his fellow Primordial, after all. The highest-ranking general in the entire Risen faction, in fact, and a man that not even Primordials had any confidence in killing. Not necessarily because he was as powerful as them, but because the mere act of killing him wasn't exactly an easy ordeal.

So... yeah, there really wasn't any shame in it, was there? If one did have to lose a life during the Challenge Dungeon, doing so to the Transcendent known as the Undying General wasn't the worst.

Even if it was a significantly weakened version. The true Undying General was not a duelist, after all, but a general who led armies into battle. He commanded legions of gods in the war against the Holy Church and had, throughout the eras, slain thousands of gods belonging to them. He was a true menace on the battlefield, and even during the times the Holy Mother herself made an appearance, she failed to slay him for good.

Outside of his ability to be borderline impossible to kill, his powers revolved very much around leading these armies and making them more powerful while also borrowing their power as his own. He was a fearsome being that the Blightfather sent to any conflict he wanted to ensure victory in, striking fear into the hearts of any who stood in opposition to the march of the Undying Army.

So, yeah. Jake had picked the first opponent to kill him pretty well.

Besides, there was an upside.

"To bet against your own Chosen... how shameless," Minaga muttered, shaking his head.

"Are you going to renege on a bet again?" the Viper raised an eyebrow, not displaying the slightest sense of shame from betting on Jake dying. "In the presence of your great friend and fellow colleague? If that is so, Jake will also be super disappointed that you could display such shamelessness."

Through grumbles, Minaga muttered that, of course, he wouldn't as he practically threw the Viper an ingot of metal that Vilastromoz gladly accepted. He also reminded himself to thank Jake for dying once he got the chance. Dying like that was definitely a great friend move.

Of course, if Minaga wanted to bet again, the Viper would put his money on Jake winning the rematch.

Jake appeared in an entirely white room the very next moment as a system menu popped up in front of his eyes.

Three Resurrection Points Available:

1. The day the challenge to the Necromancer was issued.
2. Fifteen days after the challenge to the Necromancer was issued.
3. The same day that the fight with the Necromancer took place.

Choose one Resurrection point.

Reading the options, Jake had to admit that he had kind of wondered exactly how this entire "multiple lives" thing would work, and it turned out it was pretty much a save system with different checkpoints. Well, at least that was better than blacking out and waking up in a hospital bed while being told he "barely made it" or something else dumb like that.

Considering his choices only for a moment, he decided on the second one.

Jake made his choice, and in the blink of an eye, he found himself lying in a bed back at the townhouse. An odd sense of Deja-vu hit him, which shouldn't be that surprising considering he had just returned to a prior point in time, but he still felt the need to check his system menu to confirm it wasn't just his own mind fucking with him.

Lives remaining: 9

He had really died. It was an odd feeling indeed. Well, okay, it wasn't true death, but just a Challenge Dungeon death, and he had a feeling being put in a similar situation outside of a scenario with multiple lives would have ended differently. The fight certainly would have, as Jake would have bailed out the second the Necromancer yelled Undying and became seemingly immortal.

Also... it was quite the way to die.

"For my first fucking death to be to poison is oddly... is ironic even the word? No matter what, it's pretty damn funny for the Chosen of the Malefic Viper to be poisoned to death," Jake muttered as he grinned stupidly to himself.

Not having Palate of the Malefic Viper seriously sucked. It was the kind of skill Jake just took for granted, but it really was utterly broken, wasn't it? How in the hell did a skill even give such insane resistance and even immunity to poison? Jake had the feeling that if he had Palate, the fight would have been easy despite the Necromancer being some freak semi-immortal Transcendent.

Anyway... Jake had lost, but his spirit hadn't diminished in the slightest. His opponent had been an incredibly powerful monster in the form of a Risen, and Jake had gone in with a lack of information and a bad plan. At least it was a bad plan for the type of foe he was fighting.

That is why Jake had chosen to resurrect fifteen days before the fight. He wanted to make new preparations, but he didn't need to go back an entire month or even choose another opponent. No, even if he had lost once, he was confident in winning the rematch.

He also mentally addressed what had happened in those final moments before he died. Jake had felt a sense of desperation and tried to reach for something that he now wasn't quite sure of what was... but he knew that the moment he did, he felt it was a bad idea to do. It was a "there is a time and place for everything" moment, and a Challenge Dungeon like this was obviously neither. Exactly what Jake had tried to do... Jake had a feeling he didn't necessarily ever want to find out.

Sighing, Jake got off the bed and stretched. He had preparations to make, and as he walked out of the bedroom, he saw Owen and Polly approach through his sphere... which was when he realized something.

For the next fifteen days, he would be forced to rehash the same conversations while potentially even having to explain why he knew things he clearly shouldn't be able to.

So, it appeared there was still a major punishment from dying in the Colosseum, at least on the mental front.

Chapter 770: Nevermore: Death & Flames

Exactly how long is this gonna take? Jake wondered as he balanced atop the pole of stable arcane mana, holding his bow ready. It has to have a time limit or something, right?

Staring down, he observed the arena below, mainly using his sphere as the dense miasma covered pretty much everything. Inside this cloud of thick miasma, right smack-center of the arena, lay a torso with only a head attached. Fifteen meters away to one side was a leg, an arm was nailed to the wall in another direction, the second leg was thrown all the way to Jake's starting area, and the final arm was nailed into another wall directly opposite the first. Well, alright, the limbs weren't all in complete condition, but the majority of them were spread out like that, with a few fingers and plenty of minor parts just lying about below.

Jake had entered his rematch with the Necromancer, now knowing what kind of foe he would be dealing with. He spent his fifteen days preparing everything he could while replaying the same damn social interactions again with Polly and Owen. Only through sheer struggle did he overcome the urge to bring up future knowledge and attempt to convince them he was actually a time god.

As for the fight itself... there was not much to say. Jake had learned all he needed about the Necromancer's fighting style during their first fight, and for the second time around, he didn't bother with some big finishers.

Instead, he quickly moved to get the upper hand by using his special arrow to take off one of the Necromancer's legs. After that, he promptly separated it from the Necromancer and, one by one, severed his limbs primarily using ranged attacks. With one leg, the Necromancer couldn't really dodge anything, and using mana strings, Jake was quicker at yanking away limbs than the Necromancer.

Of course, that still meant he had a cloud of miasma to deal with, but Jake also had a way to handle that.

When Jake had entered the fight initially, he had not only brought what he could store in his Ring of Deft Hands but also several poles of stable arcane energy with one end sharpened, making them look almost like spears. Two of these were now used to hold limbs in place; two had gotten destroyed, and Jake was standing on top of one that had been embedded into the top of one of the pillars. There were still a few left in the miasma below, but he didn't need those anymore.

Once the Necromancer was well and truly cut up, the miasma nearly covered the entire arena, at which point Jake penetrated the pole into the top of one of the pillars and stood on it. The miasma was heavier than air, it seemed, and it never went higher than a little above the pillars, so when Jake stood on a two-meter pole, he was entirely in the clear. It was also a nice way to practice his archery while balancing.

Because even if the Necromancer had lost all his limbs, he still tried to get them back. Jake hadn't seen it the first time around, even if the Necromancer did mention during their short conversation before the fight he was capable of it, but the dude could summon skeletons. Weak-ass skeletons, but skeletons, nevertheless. He didn't try to fight Jake with them but used them to retrieve his limbs, so Jake still had to keep an eye out and shoot a skeleton once in a while as the minutes passed.

Standing there, waiting for the Necromancer to just die already, he had plenty of time to fully reflect on his prior loss. It had been his first "death" ever since the system arrived, even if it wasn't a true death. Jake would have thought the feeling would have been more upsetting, but he felt oddly fine with it... because he knew that if this had not been a Challenge Dungeon but the real world, he would have just upped and left the second the Necromancer became seemingly immortal.

Jake wasn't averse to retreating if the situation wasn't salvageable. He just treated the Challenge Dungeon differently, as he knew dying was just part of the experience. If he treated the real world like the dungeon by just staying moronically in a fight he couldn't win, Jake would have died quite a few times already, such as when he nearly fell to that damn mushroom below Haven when he was still in E-grade or versus the Termite King.

Comparing a true death to one inside a Challenge Dungeon was just idiotic. Besides, many Challenge Dungeons were designed to only end when one died. Maybe the Colosseum of Mortals even worked like that. One also had to remember that these were fights taking place in an unfavorable setting where Jake would avoid fighting if it was a true fight to the death.

The arena was just ridiculously advantageous for someone like the Necromancer. Seriously, it was a small, enclosed arena versus a semi-immortal guy who was all about outlasting his opponent who created a cloud of miasma. A cloud that, under any normal circumstances, Jake could have just stayed away from for the entire duration of the fight, making it a total non-issue.

Finally... if this had been a fight in the real world, Jake would have been willing to risk far more. For if true death was on the table, he would be willing to pull on anything to survive and, at the very least, try to ensure mutual destruction.

Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as he suddenly felt the miasma below start to thin out, signifying something had changed with the Necromancer. For a second, Jake considered if there was a second phase or some shit like that, but when he focused... he felt that the soul of the Necromancer had left his body as his final words echoed out.

"Your victory... well-earned..."

With those words, the miasma seemed to evaporate instantly, and even the small insignificant smidgens in Jake's body were eliminated.

"And we have a winner! The Doombringer has brought doom upon the Necromancer! It was a grueling and hard-fought battle, but the Gauntlet of Champions continues for the challenger! Now go! Rest, and return to continue your conquest!"

Cheers, and all that sounded out... and Jake's suspension of disbelief was seriously beginning to wane. Did nobody in the audience care that the fight had effectively been Jake bisecting his opponent and then waiting on a pole for a good ten minutes for him to die? If Jake had been an audience member, he would have demanded his money back, especially considering you couldn't even see the arena for the majority of the fight due to the miasma.

Anyway, Jake had to remember why he was there and once more reminded himself that trying to understand the dungeon was a fool's game. So, rather than waste his time and mental energy, he walked out of the arena, his next objective already in mind.

Three Champions down, four to go. And Jake, after doing some research, had already decided on who he wanted to fight next. Originally, the plan had been the Lord of the Hunt, but during these fifteen days, he happened to encounter a certain Phoenix Queen, which had made him quite curious about her.

She had a Bloodline, after all.

Jake couldn't wait to find out what it was all about... and she seemingly couldn't either. While the Archmage and Necromancer had both wanted a full month, the Phoenix Queen made the wait just three days. This did put Jake on a bit of an unexpected timer, but he just had to make a special arrow, as he already had a game plan for everything else she could throw at him. Besides the Bloodline stuff, of course.

"Not that interesting of a rematch," Vilastromoz shrugged.

"Hey man, we had to make him a one-trick pony, or the fight would have been impossible," Minaga said, leaning back. "And Jake dealt with his one trick and won. Pretty simple, really. Or are you saying we should have given him the Undying Banner?"

The Viper nodded, smiling at the notion of him having that monstrous artifact. Naturally, the real Undying General would not die to something that simple, and he had plenty of methods to control his miasmic cloud and keep his opponents and allies inside of it, but for the Challenge Dungeon, they had to make him way weaker or he would indeed have been impossible. It was very much the same reason why Jake didn't meet a single opponent that could fly. While Jake could still handle a flying opponent, to some, it would just mean a default loss, as they, at level 0, simply would have no means of fighting back.

Of course, that didn't mean there weren't more unfair opponents. In fact, of the final four Champions, Vilastromoz would rate two of them as straight-up unfair, with the first of which being Jake's next opponent.

It was a fight he was genuinely curious... for it would be a clash of opposing Bloodlines. A Bloodline rooted in the power of illusions that sought to fool your opponent's senses and fool reality itself and one that was purely Perception-based. It was a rare opportunity indeed.

Though, perhaps, knowing Jake... Vilastromoz should not have been surprised by the outcome.

The entire arena was a bloody hellscape. Everything was on fire as an inferno roared, brought on by a single beastkin floating around with labored breathing as she unleashed her magic. Transparent flaming wings sprung from her back, spewing out fire like there was no tomorrow. All in an attempt to burn a singular archer within this sea of flames.

Jake, standing toward the middle of the arena, was entirely covered in flames, yet they seemed to not bother him. At times, he would still dodge seemingly nothing as he loosed the occasional arrow, forcing the Phoenix Queen to try and dodge or block. She had about a seventy-percent chance to avoid getting hit, but with time, the damage was accumulating.

What's more, was the mental damage she was taking as nothing she did seemed to work. Jake was pretty burnt in many places, but the more time passed, the less he got hit.

Jake had taken a bit to figure out what the Bloodline of the Phoenix Queen was all about, and it had taken a bit longer than he would have liked. In the end, he concluded that her Bloodline was linked to illusions, more accurately, fire illusions.

The Phoenix Queen was capable of creating flames that were both real and unreal at the same time. Illusory flames that were obvious illusions to Jake's Bloodline-powered senses, yet at any moment, they could become real and burn you, with the opposite also being true: very obvious real flames suddenly turning illusory, doing nothing.

Nothing mundane could truly distinguish them, and the most dangerous was when she mixed the two, creating flames that were real but that you couldn't feel. These flames could even be "real" to the body but only illusions to your clothes, making you burn without your equipment getting affected. It was like they bypassed the Perception stat and even armor entirely, and she could set someone on fire without them feeling an iota of pain. If they watched their Health Points, they could probably see it going down, but there really was no other way...

Well, there was no other way for anyone normal. Jake was far from normal.

See, the reason why Jake had taken so long to understand the Bloodline – and even now, he wasn't entirely sure on most things – was that... well, it didn't really work properly on him? At least it didn't seem to work correctly based on the reactions of the poor Phoenix Lady.

Jake could still easily distinguish the real from fake flames, and while she could change their states, it wasn't instant, so he had a pretty easy time dodging the fires that actually hurt while they were still transitioning from fake to real. And with the vast majority of the flames being illusory at all times, Jake had plenty of space to judge with, even if the arena looked fully on fire.

Needless to say, a level 0 could not fill the entire arena in a sea of flames by themselves, especially not for a prolonged period, but when ninety-five percent or more of the flames didn't actually exist? Yeah, that definitely saved a lot of mana.

Not that it helped the Phoenix Queen much that she saved this mana... as chances are she would run out of health before mana.

Ultimately, no two Bloodlines were equal. When the two of them were put on an even playing field by being the same level, the main decider was whose Bloodline was better... and, well, Jake won handily there. If Jake had been level 250 and faced the Phoenix Queen as a level 280 or something, chances are, she could have fooled even Jake's Bloodline because, at that point, two Bloodlines clashing was akin to two normal skills clashing, as they were both equally outside the rules of the system.

So, with a level and power advantage, her flames should have been able to fool Jake... maybe. In all honesty, Jake wasn't sure if it could totally fool something like his Danger Sense and Intuition as they didn't "interact" with the magic directly but were more something based entirely on himself. His Sphere, though? Yeah, even the level 0 Phoenix Queen's illusory flames took Jake a moment to see through, even now that he kind of understood how they worked.

By this point, the fight itself had already been going on for nearly five minutes. Jake, despite being at a disadvantage at the beginning as he tried to understand his opponent, now firmly had the upper hand as the Phoenix Queen focused on dodging, relying on her high speed brought on by her summoned fire wings.

Using her illusory flames, she tried to hide her form and even made fire clones of herself, but Jake easily distinguished them and focused on the only real beastkin floating around. She did try to hide using all means possible, even making sure to pull out any arrows Jake struck her with so he couldn't use his own mana to track her.

Not that it helped her when he could see the entire arena using his sphere. Again, it was quite a bit more difficult than normal, as most of the illusory flames did look real to his sphere at first glance, but with focus, he would tell the difference between more complex illusions like her clones and the real thing pretty easily.

With her illusion not working and Jake capable of dodging most of her attacks, she didn't have much more to show for herself. Jake, deciding to finish the fight, set up a trap as he cast a net of arcane strings that managed to entangle the Phoenix Queen's foot, and before she could burn it off and get free, Jake landed his special quasi-Protean Arrow. The design of this one was pretty simple as Jake wasn't sure exactly what he would need, but he did know that she wasn't heavily armored, so he went with one to maximize damage.

That turned out to be a good choice, as the Phoenix Queen was blasted back. Jake had hit her square in the chest, sending blood flying everywhere. She crashed into the back wall of the arena, her entire middle section crushed, and when the arrow exploded, her entire body was practically obliterated. In the end, she had been a caster, making her quite squishy, and to ensure his victory, Jake had no real choice but to just go for the kill.

At least, he thought he had gone for the kill.

The scattered blood and guts suddenly turned into deep red flames and flew toward the corpse of the Phoenix Queen, gathering as it formed a new body. The faint cry of a phoenix echoed throughout the arena as the beastkin's body was entirely remade with seemingly not a single injury.

Jake was momentarily taken by surprise at her resurrection – which he really shouldn't have been as she was called a bloody phoenix – and quickly nocked an arrow. However, before he could shoot, she opened her mouth.

"I... I surrender!" she yelled with labored breathing as she leaned against the wall. At the same time as she declared her loss, all of the flames disappeared like dew in the morning sun. Taking a second look at the Phoenix Queen, Jake understood why she had surrendered. Whatever resurrection move she had made had also turned her into a sitting duck, and based on how weak she felt, she was in no condition to fight. Probably wouldn't be for a long time.

"We have a winner! Once more, the Doombringer..."

Jake didn't listen much more as he just smiled and raised a hand as the support staff of the Colosseum rushed in to help the Phoenix Queen stand. With confident steps, he walked out of the arena headed straight for the Quartermaster to get his armor replaced, as while he had avoided most of the flames, he was still pretty much half-naked after the fight.

Having such an easy opponent after the Necromancer was a nice feeling... and a nice example of how these level 0 fights were very much a rock-paper-scissor kind of situation, much like the Battlemaster had explained. Someone like the Phoenix Queen could have probably beaten the Necromancer by burning away his miasma, while Jake would assume someone like Umbra could just kill the Phoenix Queen before she truly had the ability to display all her skills.

And... in all honesty, Jake could have probably beaten the Phoenix Queen way earlier, too, if he hadn't wanted to understand her Bloodline first. He was a counter to her, after all, so if he didn't have an easy time, how was anyone else supposed to even beat her?

Of course, if one wanted to become the Grand Champion, one had to beat people they were weak against. They had to become the infamous gun in the game of rock-paper-scissor. In other words, become a complete cheat that could beat anyone. Even if it did take an extra life here and there.

Either way, this was four Champions down, with three to go. As for who the next target was?

Well, it was high time to prove that Jake was the true Lord of the Hunt.