

Hunter 771

Chapter 771: Nevermore: Lord of the Hunt

The Lord of the Hunt was an opponent Jake had been interested in for a long time. Well, alright, not that long, but ever since he heard of the title, he had been interested in fighting the one who held it. He already knew a bit about her, as she had shown up for every single one of his fights so far to scout him out, which had also given Jake the chance to check her out in turn.

She was an elf who really gave off those traditional wood elf fantasy vibes. She wore a hooded dark green cloak, wielded two swords and a bow, and had a distinct smell of nature around her at all times. It reminded Jake a bit of Dina, confirming the research that she possessed powerful nature magic to support her archery.

When Jake chose to issue the challenge, he had assumed her to accept pretty fast, as she had clearly already been researching him for months, yet she chose to wait an entire month, just like the Necromancer and Archmage. Jake really wasn't sure why but ended up concluding she needed more prep time... which could only mean she was getting something big ready. That, or she was just not in a rush to get her ass beaten.

One also had to remember that elves lived several times longer than humans, even if they were only G or F-grade level O's. Jake was very abruptly reminded of this when Polly shared she was fifty-seven years old, and Jake had to resist with every fiber of his body to not call her an old hag. Okay, he had not tried that hard as he had failed to resist only ten minutes after she told him, which had earned him a few angry slaps on his arm, but hey, at least Owen already seemed to know, so her age was no obstacle to Jake's matchmaking ventures.

Anyway, this difference in lifespan meant that waiting a month probably didn't feel as long to her as it did to Jake. At least, that was one theory he had.

The month quickly passed as Jake made all of his preparations based on the research he had done. He once more jam-packed his quiver with arrows, hoping it would be enough for the upcoming duel. One he really, really hoped would be an archery duel. Jake would very much like an archery duel, and for it not to turn out that the Lord of the Hunt was just a damn druid who carried around a bow.

Meeting up with the Battlemaster just before the fight, Jake got a few good pieces of advice.

"When you fight the Lord of the Hunt, don't just believe you are battling an archer. While that is certainly her main power, she has integrated nature magic with it near-flawlessly. Do not under any circumstances disregard any of her arrows, even if they miss, for they may never have meant to hit you in the first place. What's more, watch your feet and don't get yourself caught in her tempo, as if you do, you may just find yourself entangled in something you would very much prefer to not engage with," the middle-aged man advised.

"Man, you are incredibly forthcoming with information today," Jake smiled as he watched the timer till the fight would start count down. "Couldn't you have warned me about the Necromancer or the Phoenix Queen too? Especially that Necromancer guy."

"I could have, sure," the Battlemaster nodded as he smirked. "But I didn't. No, the reason I am giving you this advice is because she came and asked me yesterday about you. Now, normally, I would have said no and not said anything, but she said that if I gave some information on you, I could give you some information on her, too."

"Wait, so what would have happened if I hadn't decided to check in with you before the fight?" Jake questioned. Technically, he didn't have to talk to the Battlemaster after the fight was scheduled, but he just had to show up for the starting time.

"Well, then you would have missed out due to your own lack of manners," the middle-aged man stated curtly.

"You know what? That's kind of fair," Jake smiled. "Just one more thing. I really want a pure archery duel. Will I get an archer duel?"

The Battlemaster broke out in a massive grin as he chuckled. "Funny you should ask... because she asked the same thing."

Jake stood behind the bars as he observed his opponent through the gaps. Using his eyes and his sphere, he saw that she was indeed an elf, and even before the battle had begun, she already had a quiver full of arrows and a bow in her hand. Good start there.

Armor-wise, she wore stuff very similar to Jake, except she also had her big cloak. Currently, she had the hood down, revealing her long hair and face with odd tribal markings on it. As Jake observed her, so did she observe him, and based on the intensity of her gaze, he was facing a true genius. A person of unquestionable smartness.

For she was no doubt a Perception-focused fighter.

Using Identify almost on instinct, Jake was a bit taken aback at the result.

[Wood Elf]

It turned out that wood elf was an actual race. Jake hadn't known that but just assumed people who were called wood elves were just regular elves who lived in the woods... which was honestly a pretty bad assumption considering dark elves were their own race. Wait, did this mean there were high dark elves, the same as there were regular high elves?

So many questions, so little time, as the announcer was done with his empty speech introducing the fighters

"Without further ado, let's see these two archers face off! Lower the gates!"

As the gates lowered, Jake walked forward with calm steps as his opponent did the same. She also pulled the hood over her head, obscuring most of her features, but it also served another feature. Her cloak seemed to flow oddly, creating something akin to an optical illusion whenever she moved, with the effect reminding Jake a bit of the old Prismatic Cloak he used to wear.

Not that it would affect Jake much, but he could see how it could throw off other opponents, especially those morons with lesser Perception.

Jake stopped walking a good fifty meters from his opponent, strategically right next to a pillar. Funnily enough, his opponent did the same as they looked at each other. As he was about to speak, she broke the silence first.

"Tell me, he who is called Doombringer... are you truly an archer as they all seem to say?"

Her voice was so obviously hinting at something that Jake could only shake his head in response. "Why? Because a mere archer would never have the chance to beat you?"

"That is not the case. I merely wish to know if my instincts are correct. Archers are but warriors who use bows... it is their weapon, much like any other. It could be a bow, a sword, or a spear. So I ask once more... are you just an archer?" she said as her sharp green eyes were momentarily revealed beneath her hood.

Jake met them and grinned. "Meaningless semantics, but no, I don't call myself "just" an archer, and I am quite sure you already knew that. Which is why I have quite a pertinent question."

She smiled as she crouched down, successfully reading the mood.

"How dare you call yourself the Lord of the Hunt before a superior hunter?"

Right as he finished his words, his opponent had nocked an arrow and released it. Jake instantly dodged behind the pillar he had purposefully stood next to. In his sphere, he saw her nock another arrow. Thinking quick, Jake faked her out by not going all the way around the pillar as she expected but fired his arrow while never leaving the safety of the pillar.

It curved around, straight for the wood elf. Jake hadn't expected it to hit, and it naturally didn't as she quickly shot her second arrow into the pillar Jake was hiding behind, joining the first one. Then, she moved behind her own pillar, making Jake's arrow miss. With a thought, he made it explode, but the pillar absorbed the impact without even leaving a mark on her cloak.

Jake smiled as he nocked another arrow, but his smile soon faded. Good one.

Quickly moving, he got away from the pillar he had been behind before it turned into a problem for him. The Battlemaster's warning had been quite warranted as Jake saw that the two arrows she had shot earlier were more than just attempts to hit him. Each of them had sprouted after hitting the pillar, sending what looked like tendrils of grass into it to rapidly tear it apart from within. Like weeds ripping through concrete, she had planned to take away Jake's defenses.

Seeing Jake react faster than she had expected, the wood elf came out from behind her pillar and tried to land an arrow on Jake, but he easily dodged it as he shot his own after the elf, once more curving it around. The wood elf only narrowly managed to avoid it as it came from a tricky angle. After dodging, she also chose to abandon her pillar and moved out into the open.

A good choice. All the pillar had done for his opponent was obscure her view, while she had quickly identified that Jake seemingly didn't need visual contact to locate his opponent. So, despite how counterproductive it seemed, having the pillar as cover would harm her more than it would help.

One would think that an archery duel right out in the open would lead to a quick resolution, but it proved not to be the case. Jake and the elf both rapidly fired over a dozen arrows after one another, as both dodged flawlessly while keeping up their own assaults. The more time passed, the more sure Jake became.

Her instincts... are like mine.

Bestial Survival instincts. It was a skill Jake had been offered that had instantly been transformed into Moment of the Primal Hunter, but seeing the elf dodge as she did, he became sure she had something similar, but naturally far superior to the rare skill he had been offered back then.

Was it an innate talent? A special skill? A passive Transcendent? Jake didn't know, but he knew that he was facing another beast in human form as she erratically moved to dodge every single arrow he released with a huge toothy grin on her face. Smiling to himself, Jake faced her head-on for a few more seconds as the arrows kept flying for a few more seconds, but this couldn't last.

Through his sphere, he saw that the wood elf was also quickly running out of arrows, the same as him. She also seemed to realize this, and at nearly the exact same time, both of them switched strategies. Jake summoned a barrier of arcane mana to deflect a few arrows with the intent of winning the arrow trade duel, but the second arrow never arrived after he deflected the first one to strike the sand right between his feet.

Instead, it was shot into the air. Jake glanced up as the arrow seemed to bloom in mid-air before exploding. Tilting his barrier upwards, Jake blocked the small rice-sized projectiles with ease, but he quickly realized the goal had never been to hit him with them.

Instead, all the small projectiles turned out to be seeds, and from the lifeless sand, plants began to sprout. Jake had at first been worried and ready to blow up the area around him, but he quickly realized none of them were attacking. No vines sprouted to try and entangle him, and no wooden branches were shot up and tried to impale his foot. Instead, they were just shrubs, weeds, and grass... all of it harmless.

However, the relief was short-lived.

The many arrows the elf had shot during the fight were embedded in different places in the sand all around him, with a few also in the wall far behind him. As one, all of these arrows suddenly began to react with the intense nature energy from the newly formed undergrowth of the arena, with each doing something dependent on how far away they were from Jake.

If an arrow was close, it exploded into several grasping vines, while those at a medium distance sent out just one thin, sharp vine. Finally, those at a long distance – primarily those embedded in the arena wall far behind him – shot out small thorns like were they blowpipes.

Jake's eyes opened wide as he tried to dodge the dozens of attacks arriving at once. Releasing a blast of arcane mana to blow away some vines bought him a second of time, but when one entangled his leg – the one he had just deflected to be between his legs a few seconds earlier - he became unable as the wood elf naturally didn't just sit still while Jake was dealing with her trap.

Hardening his skin with a barrier of arcane mana allowed him to block most of the thorns that he now felt had poison on them, but the arrow from the elf wasn't something a quick barrier on his skin could block. An arrow struck Jake in the thigh, and as he also struggled to get free, he instantly grasped it with his free hand and sent a powerful wave of destructive arcane mana into it. This proved to be a good choice as he made it disintegrate right as it began to bloom within his leg... Jake really didn't want to know what would happen if an arrow bloomed within his leg.

The second arrow that the elf shot, Jake managed to deflect using his bow, though he still got a nasty cut on his shoulder. When she loosed the third one, Jake had already gotten free and stomped down to clear much of the shrubbery in his immediate area as he fled away from anywhere she had embedded any arrows.

Like him, her arrows were pre-prepared and meticulously made. Each of them had intense magic infused into them, making them all incredibly dangerous, even more so than Jake's own arcane arrows. Her shooting speed was also equal to Jake's own, despite his recent improvements and constant application of arcane energy to push his body further. Jake's only real advantage was that he could make his arrows curve, but she made up for that by being slightly faster movement-wise compared to Jake.

All-in-all, they were incredibly equally matched, and Jake didn't want to see himself be outdone. It wasn't fair he was the only one injured, right?

Moving quickly, Jake dodged an arrow as he shot one of his own into the air before quickly shooting another toward the elf who was standing out in the open. She dodged the arrow flawlessly as Jake shot another one that seemed like it would entirely miss, plus it was far slower than any of those prior.

He saw a moment of confusion on her face as Jake grinned right as he shot his fourth one, this one straight for her at full speed. She naturally dodged it, still keeping an eye on the third arrow... right as the first one he had shot into the air descended. Clearly, she had been aware of this one, too, but she had not expected what happened next.

The arrow Jake had shot into the air exploded before it reached the ground, hitting the third arrow that was still in mid-air. The shockwave sped it up and changed its trajectory far too quickly and in a far too unpredictable manner for the elf to be able to react in time as she, too, was struck in her thigh.

Jake tried to make it explode, but like him, she instantly grasped it and infused her own nature energy right as he tried to, stopping the activation as she snapped it off, still leaving the tip embedded to stop the bleeding.

Both archers stared at each other for a second. Jake had only five arrows left in his quiver, while the wood elf had two. Yet right at that moment, the wood elf gave a teasing wink as she lifted her cloak, revealing a second bundle of tied-up arrows at her hip with more than twenty additional ones.

Well, I'll be damned, Jake thought as he couldn't hold back a smile himself. When he had dodged around before, he and the wood elf had switched position, meaning Jake was now standing where she had been when they exchanged their barrage of arrows... meaning he was surrounded by his own stable arrows of arcane mana.

Arrows that were far too durable to break just from being shot into a wall or the sand, so when Jake sent out dozens of strings of arcane mana, he quickly yanked eighteen out of the sand and back into his quiver; the elf gladly giving him the time to do so as she also put her additional arrows into her quiver.

Their eyes met, both slightly wounded with nearly full quivers once more as round two began, yet also both unable to hold back a smile. Jake had to admit he was having fun, and clearly, so was the wood elf.

Chapter 772: Nevermore: Tending To Wounds

A question had been gnawing in the back of Jake's mind for a while. One that had been further amplified by Sim-Jake whenever he first met him and made even worse as he rose through the grades and went through the many opponents in the Colosseum of Mortals:

Did archers suck in the multiverse?

As in, was it just a worse way to fight than most others? Jake did have to admit that the number of archers he had seen or knew of that were at the pinnacle was limited at best, and not a single one of the Primordials used a bow. In fact, the strongest entity Jake knew of that used a bow was Gwyndyr, and he was apparently viewed as much as a fire mage as an archer.

Meanwhile, there were mages using all the schools of magic everywhere, and weapons like swords and spears were hugely popular. Even the Court of Shadows, an organization of assassins that Jake assumed would use bows instead, used fucking guns to shoot stuff. Sure, he knew it was because guns – which were just fancy wands – had better synergy with all their shadow magic stuff... but still.

Even Minaga, a being who had no skills and thus no Path he was better suited for than others, chose to make magic the thing he practiced the most. While he had learned all weapons based on what he said, including the bow, he had ultimately stuck with magic as his most powerful tool. Jake knew it was not as simple as him deciding that magic was best, but that magic had way more diversity and even the ability

to do rituals and formation magic using several clones at once, but when he was fighting one-on-one, he could at least use a bow here and there, right?

But, despite this lack of bow users, Jake had never doubted using it. It was entirely possible that Jake would have been more powerful if he had dedicated all his time to practicing magic and improving his melee fighting, yet he had never seriously considered dropping the bow, even when his other self from a different reality proposed it.

Ultimately, Jake just liked using the bow. He had fun fighting with the bow more than with any other weapon, and he firmly believed that he could reach the pinnacle no matter what weapon or method of combat he chose, so why not go with the one he enjoyed the most?

Due to the way Records worked, Paths were passed down, so if more gods used swords, they would naturally pass down Records and classes related to using swords. So, the problem in Jake's mind wasn't that bows sucked, just that there weren't enough powerful people around to pass down Legacies.

Also... not once had Villy advised Jake against using the bow. Not that Jake would have stopped using it even if the Primordial told him he should, but it at least meant that the Viper didn't think it was a hopeless Path. Jake just believed that there had never been anyone to truly display the brilliance of the bow, not even amongst the gods... and if that was the case, Jake just had to be the first, right?

Anyway, the point is that powerful people who were also archers were rare. So, to finally have a chance to face someone else who used a bow was an experience Jake reveled in.

The fact she was even a hunter only made it better, and meeting her eyes, it was clear she was enjoying the situation, too.

With both of them having arrows once more, their duel continued, but with the circumstances slightly different. Both of them were injured slightly and thus had limited mobility, making dodging harder. Could they have sought behind pillars to take cover? Yes... but they weren't only fighting to win but to prove who was better.

To take cover would be to recognize that you were inferior in an open duel, something both of them refused to do. For a predator to flee before another predator like that would be to willingly choose the role of prey, and both of them would rather risk losing than do that.

Jake was the first to land a hit as an arrow penetrated the lower leg of the elven archer. Right after, Jake found himself entrapped as an arrow that had been embedded in a pillar suddenly exploded, releasing a rain of thorns in his direction, forcing him to jump back and take an arrow in his forearm.

Gritting his teeth, Jake began focusing on shooting more tricky arrows. He made them bend at more unpredictable angles, taking her by surprise several times as several cuts began to mar her body, but Jake also took plenty in return, especially when she released a "shotgun arrow" that exploded into several bullet seeds that hit Jake hard, sending him reeling back as he hadn't identified it as a special arrow fast enough.

Soon enough, they approached the same impasse they had before: lack of arrows. Despite their wounds, both had avoided taking any lethal attacks and even when they were hit, they quickly minimized the damage. The elf, through her nature magic's slight healing properties, and Jake by plugging up any holes with what were effectively corks of stable arcane mana. Alright, admittedly, Jake's method was not as elegant, but it got the job done.

Jake's arrows in his quiver quickly fell to three, then two, before only a single one remained. He tried to make the final one count as he took aim. His opponent did the exact same, and there was a slight pause before they shot. Both knew that the first to shoot would have a disadvantage when it came to dodging the other's arrow, but waiting too long could also be a mistake.

Fine, Jake thought as he decided to shoot first... at the same moment she did. The two arrows flew straight for each other, hitting each other in mid-air as they both deflected one another. Jake didn't even get ready to dodge a follow-up shot because he knew he wasn't the only one out of arrows.

"We're both out, eh?" Jake asked loudly in a teasing voice after a second's pause.

"Not entirely now, are we? I know of your big finisher arrows," the elven hunter yelled as she smiled. "Interestingly enough... I have one of those, too. Shall we see whose is superior?"

Jake grinned at the proposal, having fully expected it to be the case. "Don't regret those words."

Right as he agreed, the elf raised her hand. Energy began to gather instantly as all the nature mana in their surroundings were dragged toward her. The arrows she had shot around the arena and hadn't activated withered; the remaining shrubbery or vines she had summoned turned gray and died as all of their energy was gathered into a singular point above her: within a single arrow.

At the same time, Jake took out his very own special arrow. The design was once more simple, as Jake hadn't been sure what would be good, so he just went with pure aerodynamic power. It was just long and sharp, with nothing special about it outside of the massive charge of destructive arcane energy within.

Jake nocked this arrow as he began charging his skillless Arcane Powershot. Across from him, the gathering of nature mana had also formed what looked like an avatar of the elven archer herself, and as she grasped her arrow that looked more like a big two-pronged spear with vines worming across its body, this avatar merged with her as her body also burned with power.

Seeing and feeling her arrow, Jake was certain. The arrow she had summoned was definitely an offshoot of Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, much like his Protean Arrow. This only made him smile more as he was curious: who had the better version of the skill?

His eyes met the elf's as he charged his arrow in concert with her. After a few seconds, her gaze told him everything he had to know as she grinned and released her arrow. Jake did the same as their two supercharged attacks clashed in the center of the arena. One of nature magic and one of destructive arcane mana.

The two very much opposing energies clashed as a large explosion shook the arena, sending out waves of multi-colored energy as the green and pink-purple mixed as they fought for superiority. None of their attacks had come out superior... but it seemed like none of them had expected their special arrows to work either.

Jake nearly failed to hold back a laugh as an arrow struck him in the shoulder, making him stumble back. She had clearly hidden another arrow within her clothes to take Jake by surprise. As for why he hadn't dodged? Well, you see, the elf wasn't the only one who had hidden just one final arrow.

Right after he had released his quasi-Protean arrow, he had rapidly shot a regular arcane arrow toward an inconspicuous pillar to the side of the elf. Right as the arrow got close to this pillar, Jake's infused Willpower activated to make it bend and made it change direction for the elf. Right as it began to bend as it passed the pillar where a stable arcane arrow was embedded, Jake made the embedded arrow explode to speed up his shot further.

The elf had a look of surprise on her face when she heard the explosion but didn't react in time. Usually, she would have been able to, but Jake knew how her skills worked. The reason she had failed was that her danger sense hadn't reacted... because Jake hadn't aimed for her. The arrow had instead struck her bow and severed the string, making it nothing more than a good whacking stick.

He didn't know if she had any more arrows, and Jake had judged this was his best course of action to win, as he wanted to force her into a melee now that they were both out of arrows.

Looking at her useless bow, the elf shifted her gaze to Jake, who was about to charge forward despite his injuries.

"I surrender," she said with a sigh just as Jake pulled out his katars, fully prepared for her to enter melee with him. She did have two swords, which he assumed she was capable of using, after all. Yet she seemed content as she raised her hands and smiled.

Jake was confused and hesitated. "Wait, just like that?"

"I've seen you use those katars of yours, and I know my limits. I see no reason to throw my life away when I have already been defeated," she shook her head. "So I repeat: I surrender."

Lowering his katars, Jake muttered mostly to himself. "A little anti-climactic of an ending, isn't it?"

Chuckling, she nudged her head toward the center of the arena, where a four-meter wide crater of destructive arcane mana was still burning away at the sand, with several thorned roots sticking up, yet to surrender to the destructive energies.

"I think we gave the audience a good enough show already, wouldn't you agree?" she asked.

"I guess?" Jake scratched his head after dismissing his katars, wincing a bit from the pain of moving his shoulder like that. The announcer also began to do his thing as he announced Jake's victory with all of the usual grandeur, with the crowd naturally going wild.

The elf looked at him and smiled as she tilted her head and waited for the announcer to be done with his entire spiel. "You know, I never got your real name. Unless Doombringer or Doomfoot is your real name?"

"Very funny," Jake scoffed. "Name's Jake. And I am going to assume your name isn't the Former Lord of the Hunt either?"

"Artemis," she simply said, taking Jake's verbal jab. "Now, I don't know if it is just me, but I am feeling a little too battered to just stand and chat here any longer."

Jake had to concur. While both of them had managed to avoid any lethal wounds, both of them were pretty damn banged up. Jake was borderline wearing shorts at this point due to the many thorned roots that had ripped away at him, while the elf had a few arrow holes here and there and over a dozen cuts ranging from minor scratches to pretty severe.

"Yeah, I guess we should get out of here. Either way, it was a good fight, Artemis," Jake said as he gave her a final nod before turning to leave through the hallway he had entered from.

She followed him.

Jake threw her a glance as she walked next to him, as she leaned in.

“You know, I have a Healing Pool at my residence, great for recovering from both injuries and fatigue,” she commented. “Would save you the points required to buy a potion and likely be a faster way to recover... plus, I can promise it will be a much more enjoyable method than just chugging down a potion and lying in bed for a day.”

“No reason to reject free healing when offered,” Jake shrugged, regretting the shrug instantly. Why did she have to shoot him in the shoulder again?

The two of them walked out of the arena, and after Jake gave a wave to the Battlemaster, the man just gave him a thumbs-up in return. Owen and Polly also made their way over, but when Owen saw Jake walk with the elf, he just threw Jake a knowing look before leading Polly away with him.

“Follow me; I know a way out where the crowd never is,” Artemis said as Jake went after her into a hallway with a few rooms lined up for people to rest inside. One of them had a large window that she led him through as they went up a hill and through a small forested area.

On the way there, Jake couldn't help but ask some questions. Particularly questions related to the current Champions. The Lightning Monarch had given some good information, but Jake was still curious to hear what the former Lord of the Hunt had to say.

Especially considering how similar their fighting style was... which was why the first thing he asked was who she thought she could defeat.

“Of the current Champions, at least the Champions who were there when you became one, I was confident in beating everyone except for the Warmaster and Phoenix Queen, with the Shadow Mistress a big uncertainty,” Artemis explained.

“Huh, so you had confidence in beating the Necromancer?” Jake asked, surprised.

Artemis just smiled. “The powers of death are intrinsically linked to nature, as it always finds a path to survival. While the battle would have been difficult, I believe I would have won, given enough time. On that note, I found your method to win very... exhilarating. Like a predator tearing the neck of large prey before disengaging to let your prey bleed out on its own. The image of you simply standing there on your pole, staring at him as he slowly met his eternal end was simply... beautiful.”

A bit creepy but okay, Jake thought, as he quickly moved on. “How about the Dark Mistress? As our fighting styles are pretty similar, and you rate her easier than the Warmaster, I plan on facing her next. Well, I already planned on facing her next anyway, as I can’t find jack-shit on the Warmaster information-wise.”

“The Dark Mistress is a master assassin, and in all honesty, my victory will depend entirely on whether my own instincts can overpower her ability to circumvent them. On that note, I believe your victory is all but a foregone conclusion,” Artemis smiled.

They finally arrived at her residence, which was a large mansion located on the outskirts of the city near the forest. Jake just followed her as they jumped the fence and headed for the house itself.

“When it comes to the Warmaster, I also cannot share much about him that will assist you. He is a weapon master, and his fighting style will depend on you. My advice would just be to go in with confidence and face him head-on,” she said, leading Jake toward a room placed right in the center of the building.

There, Jake saw what looked like a natural pond formed in the middle of the house. In fact, it looked like the entire building had been constructed around it. To call it a room wasn't even accurate, as there was no ceiling, and sunlight came down, making the water glisten. Plants covered the ground, as there were even a few small trees still in their infancy, still growing, likely with the help of the pool.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Artemis said as she stood facing Jake in front of the water, with the greenery in the background.

Jake looked at her and nodded. "Beautiful indeed."

Artemis smiled as she went close to Jake and leaned against him.

"Now... let me tend to your wounds as you tend to mine," she whispered into his ear as she licked a cut on his chin.

Jake responded by turning his head and leaning in, using his tongue to thoroughly examine if she had any internal injuries in her mouth.

Chapter 773: Nevermore: Artemis

"You really gotta be like that?" Minaga complained. "We were just about to get to the good stuff!"

"I question why we had to cut the feed too," the Wyrmgod chimed in, as he had nevertheless done as Vilastromoz asked. "Not that I see any value in observing it either, but there is no purpose in not simply continuing like normal."

"Because if you kept recording, I would be the one who would get shit for it from Jake later on," the Viper grumbled. "Plus, wouldn't that hunter god also complain if you choose to make an unauthorized recording of her?"

"Hm, perhaps. I had not considered that to be an option," the Wyrmgod said, deep in thought. "This is the first time it has happened, at least when I was actively monitoring the situation. Despite the images being created to mimic a level 0, they are still gods, making this rather unprecedented. Usually, the Nevermore attendees only get with the dungeon-created characters if they desire an outlet."

Vilastromoz nodded slowly with the explanation. While one could make a level 0 clone, they were still at least partly linked to the Records of their true selves, which was one of the reasons gods were willing to put their images in Nevermore to begin with. It would intrinsically form a connection with powerful rising stars of the multiverse through karma.

Umbra was a prime example of this. A faint karmic connection would be formed with all she faced in the arena, and through her powers, she would, at the very least, become aware of them. Anyone who could beat her image was someone she would thus investigate or even purchase recordings of the Wyrmgod to see more of.

While Vilastromoz did not know much of Artemis as she had risen as a god after the seventh era, he at least knew she was a pretty powerful hunter goddess from the Pantheon of Life and worked directly with Yggdrasil and Nature's Attendant. However, this told him nothing of her personality.

"Say, would this Artemis happen to be the more "open" sort of person when it comes to this kind of thing?" Vilastromoz asked. If that was the case, it would make sense. Some gods would get in bed with anyone they found even remotely attractive, with some going through several partners on a daily basis, sometimes even with multiple avatars. Of course, in the vast majority of cases, they didn't reveal they were gods at all but disguised themselves and went to random taverns and whatnot.

Minaga grinned. "Oh, quite the opposite, which is why I find this oh-so-interesting. There have been many who have shown interest in Artemis, even amongst the gods, but she doesn't even bat an eye at them. It even got to the point where some swear she is sworn to celibacy or maidenhood or something to make themselves feel better about being rejected. Needless to say, I don't believe she is that closed off to having partners... her standards are just rather abnormal and through the roof."

The Viper already felt a headache coming on.

"See, I have a theory... I think Artemis is the kind of gal who only likes those who are stronger than herself. She wants someone who is even more of a predator incarnate than herself, someone who can dominate her, and Jake, that little monster, definitely fits that bill," Minaga shared his thoughts proudly.

"And what do you base this theory on?" Vilastromoz asked the Unique Lifeform, who possessed no reproductive organs and was ostensibly asexual by nature.

"Well, I met her a few times," Minaga scratched his chin. "Though I can admit the majority of my theory was formed based on recent happenings."

"Right, so pure guesswork, more or less," the Viper sighed. There probably was some credence to Minaga's theory. Vilastromoz just hoped this wouldn't turn into an annoying situation.

"I do remain curious. The images have the same personalities as their true selves, and besides their level, they are the same person... especially after they lose," the Wyrmgod muttered.

“Wait... you actually implemented that?” Vilastromoz asked, recalling a conversation from many eras ago.

“He sure did, and I helped make it happen with my awesome magic!” Minaga grinned.

As for what they were talking about? Memory restoration.

Upon losing but not dying, the image would become fully aware of its identity as a god and regain its full memories. This was in part done so the god’s image could attempt to form a connection with someone who walked a similar Path to them and thus recruit them, but also because the gods just thought it would be more interesting that way. However, that being the case did just further complicate the situation.

“So, you are telling me that the image that dragged Jake back to her residence was aware that she is actually only an image of a god?”

“Yes,” the Wyrmgod nodded. “Interesting, is it not?”

“I am going with the “not” ...” Vilastromoz sighed. Yep, this could definitely turn into an entire “thing.”

“At least tell me Artemis does not have any request to see anything outside of the battles she loses, so she won’t be informed of this?” the Viper continued. What she didn’t know couldn’t cause any problems, and if she didn’t, it would be entirely up to Jake if anything had to be shared.

“Hm?” the Wyrmgod grunted. “Oh no, she doesn’t have anything like that. That is not standard at all, and I am sure she never expected her image to act as it did.”

“Well, that’s good at-“

“So I naturally informed her of her image’s irregular behavior as a courtesy.”

The Viper looked at his fellow Primordial as the dragon smiled, clearly amused.

“So, you’re from the Pantheon of Life?” Jake muttered as he leaned back in the pool, which was pretty much just a hot tub of healing. “How exactly does that fit with your Path as a hunter, which is about taking lives?”

Artemis, sitting in the water across from him, smiled. “The mere fact you gloss over my revelation that I am a god belonging to one of the most powerful Pantheons in the multiverse to question my Path... you continue to intrigue me.”

“I’m trying my best,” Jake chuckled as Artemis continued.

“To answer your question, the Pantheon of Life is about more than simply healing and preservation of life. It is also about the transformation of life, the natural cycle, and the glory of nature itself, and predators are as natural to the ecosystem as a tree or a herbivore. We hunters are also part of the natural cycle, but not as mere cogs. We are the ones who can control it. Bend it. We are the regulators who decide its direction, as we can hunt down anything we deem unnecessary or unwanted,” Artemis

said with conviction. "Of course, we cannot overdo it. If we hunt down every living being in the ecosystem, there is no ecosystem anymore. No new life... nothing to hunt. And is a hunter with no prey truly a hunter at all?"

Jake listened intently. This was his first time meeting not just another powerful hunter but a being who had walked her Path all the way to divinity. He didn't necessarily agree with her – in his opinion – somewhat limited definition of what a hunter was, but he still respected it.

"I see you are not entirely in agreement," the elven goddess said, clearly amused. "Good. What kind of hunter would simply follow another's Path blindly?"

"Someone with not enough Perception," Jake joked, surprisingly enough getting a giggle out of the god.

After a brief pause, the god spoke again.

"Say, you are a C-grade outside of Nevermore, right? Based on the fact you are a G-grade human, one of the people from the newly integrated universe?"

"Yep," Jake confirmed.

"What would you say to becoming my Chosen out there? To join the Pantheon of Life? I fully expect you to be with some other god already, but I doubt there are many as qualified to have a hunter as their Chosen as I, and I will handle any compensation required to the one who has currently blessed you," Artemis offered as she looked at him seductively. "I will be sure to give you plenty of private tutoring, and if you happen to become a god..."

“Tempting offer, not gonna lie, but I already have a Blessing,” Jake said, shaking his head. “Quite a good one at that. The True Blessing of the Malefic Viper.”

“Wait, the Malefic Viper? As in the Primordial? Wasn’t he sealed away in his divine realm or something?” she questioned with interest.

“Well, he was. Now he’s not,” Jake shrugged casually. “He reappeared just around the integration.”

“And you are his Chosen? Disregarding everything else, It’s odd for a snake to have a hunter as his Chosen... but perhaps even more odd for you to submit to one, even if it is a god. How does that conform to your Path as the ultimate hunter?” she asked pointedly.

Jake smiled, knowing that even if he and Artemis were clearly friendly, he shouldn’t just share every secret he had. “Let’s just say we have an arrangement quite unlike what most Patrons and Chosen have. One rather unique to the two of us.”

“Fine, I won’t probe,” Artemis shook her head, reading his intentions quite clearly. “I will also retract my prior offer to not embarrass myself further. While I do believe I have quite a lot to offer, it is not to the level of a Primordial.”

“He does have a lot of shiny stuff,” Jake said, enjoying the warm, healing waters.

Artemis looked in thought for a while before she spoke. "Are you aware how these images that we gods have left in Nevermore work?"

"I thought I did until you clearly proved you are fully aware you are a god," Jake said. "But I will assume that as an image, you are pretty much entirely separate from your true self, and your self on the outside won't be aware of your memories."

"Right," she said. "In fact, the second you leave this Challenge Dungeon, I will cease to exist as I am erased alongside it. Ah, but don't feel bad; that's just how things work and what this image was created for in the first place."

Jake nodded, already knowing that part well. "What are you getting at?"

"Impatient, are we?" she smiled, tilting her head. "What I am getting at is that my true self will not be aware unless someone informs it. I shall leave the ultimate choice of what you will do from here on to you. Out of the two of us, you are the only "real" being, are you not? You can choose to seek me out as a god, which I will admit may prove difficult, as I will be less than receptive to some random C-grade approaching me – even if he is the Chosen of a Primordial - but if you ever do want to meet, just show me or one of my followers this sigil."

She raised her hand as she summoned an intricate seal that didn't really depict anything in particular. She held it there for a few seconds before she dismissed it, Jake having already committed it to memory.

"Is it some kind of identification seal?" Jake asked.

"Something like that," she nodded.

“Of course, you also have the choice of never bringing up what happened in this Challenge Dungeon with my true self. Assuming the Wyrmgod hasn’t already informed me, that is,” Artemis continued. “If he has informed me... well, I may send someone to fetch you, but seeing as you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, it may instead turn into a subtle political exchange that I will sneak into. Do you currently have any connections to the Pantheon of Life?”

“One of my party members in Nevermore is the granddaughter of Nature’s Attendant,” Jake shared. “In all honesty, I got enough going on that pretty much every Pantheon wanting meetings with me these days wouldn’t be overly surprising or out of the ordinary if you sent someone.”

Many were thirsty for some of that Jake Juice to make some banger variants, after all.

“Due to your Bloodline?” she asked, making Jake raise an eyebrow.

“What? You thought it wasn’t obvious you have one? The pure suppression of instinct and domineering aura I felt was not something a mere level 0 G-grade could have, but something of a far higher concept. While I was still in the arena, perhaps it could be argued you had an equally powerful instinct, but that you still surpassed me even after I regained my memories... A Bloodline or Transcendent is the only reason, and I wage it’s the prior,” Artemis laid out her thoughts while licking her lips.

Jake nodded, feeling like the hunter in front of him was too damn good at seeing through stuff. It wouldn’t surprise him if she also had some improved intuition or something to make such accurate deductions all the time. Then again... she was a god.

“Say, seeing as you are a goddess of the hunt and all, how about offering a lowly mortal hunter some hunting advice? Perhaps a few archery tips here and there?” Jake had to shoot his shot.

“Sure, we can exchange some pointers, but not more than that. My power and ability to display my power is still restricted to the same level as when we fought,” Artemis shrugged, actually surprising Jake a bit. He had expected her to outright reject the notion, especially seeing as he was the Chosen of another god. It was pretty nice of her to do tha-

“Mind you, I am not just doing it to be nice but to sow a seed of karma with you, which will make it far easier to track you down if the Wyrmgod does inform me in the outside world,” she smirked. “Does that disappoint you? Ultimately, you are still only a mortal, and if I get no benefit, why would I selflessly help you?”

“Only a mortal, huh?” Jake said as he stood up and walked toward her through the shallow pool.

“But one who brings plenty of benefits,” Artemis smiled, leaning back as Jake approached.

The next few days were spent with Jake taking advantage of having a god with experience in archery give him some pointers, primarily by just fighting with him in the forest outside of her residence. With her healing pool, recovery was also swift, and Jake had to admit that the company while healing up made the experience quite a bit more enjoyable.

Alas, Jake would not delay for too long. About a week after his fight with Artemis, he returned to the Colosseum to sign up for his sixth Champions fight against the Mistress of Shadows, or Umbra as she was actually called.

Jake had gotten used to fights either happening really fast or only after a month, so he was a bit surprised when Umbra scheduled it for eighteen days after he issued the challenge. It struck him as a bit of a random time until he returned to Artemis' residence, and she shared that day would have a crescent moon, and considering Umbra had scheduled the fight to be as late in the day as possible... yeah, it was definitely not random.

Not that Jake complained about having a bit more prep time. He didn't really need it, but he wouldn't say no to having more time to duke it out with Artemis in the forest. They even did some archery training in between.

Chapter 774: Nevermore: Umbra

Out of all the beings in the Colosseum that Jake was aware of, Umbra was the most powerful, at least on the outside. She was a true pinnacle being who stood side-by-side with the Primordials. Yet, despite knowing this, Jake never really felt any trepidations when he was about to face her.

Artemis also seemed very unconcerned with the fight itself but was more interested in how Umbra would address the fight. She couldn't say anything directly, though, as she was still under the influence of Nevermore's rules to not share information. She couldn't even give any tips on the fights themselves, outside of very vague statements that didn't really help.

On the night of the match, it was already way past sundown as the crescent moon hung far up in the air. The arena had artificial magic lighting, so it wasn't like the arena was dark when Jake walked up the steps and stood behind the bars. The stands were also filled despite the less-than-optimal lighting conditions.

Also, due to the magic lighting, one thing that benefitted her greatly was abundant. The many pillars, the audience stands, and every piece of clutter spread around led to shadows everywhere. What's more, multiple light sources resulted in several more shadows than normal, meaning something like the pillars were surrounded by shadows in all directions. Even Jake threw several shadows due to the lamps hanging around the entrance area.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a near-perfect battleground for Umbra. Looking at her at the other end of the arena, Jake saw a hooded dark elf who seemed to almost meld into the shadows simply by existing. Due to her cloak, Jake couldn't see what kind of armor she wore, but he assumed it to be light leather armor due to her identity as an assassin.

She observed him back as the bars began to lower. With a sigh, she walked into the arena, Jake and her meeting in the middle like he had done with every other opponent. Seriously, it wasn't a rule that you had to have a little introductory chat before fighting, but he had one with every single opponent anyway.

"So, here we finally are," Umbra said, speaking first. "Not that surprising, now is it? I have kept an eye on you for a while, which I am sure you already knew."

"I have noticed that I had a stalker a few times, yeah," Jake nodded. "Seemed a bit overkill to watch what I ate for dinner if you were just researching me. Heck, if you wanted to know something, you could have just walked up and asked, and I would have probably answered truthfully."

"Usually, I would scoff at such a statement, but based on my observations, that is entirely possible," Umbra sighed. "Alas, I deemed it best to not approach. Oh, I also hope you do not think negatively of me for having us fight at a time advantageous to me."

"Hey, it's less bullshit than the number of earth mages who were clearly just strong in the arena because the floor is made of sand," Jake shrugged with a smile.

Umbra sighed again. "Your casual demeanor doesn't exactly help my confidence, but seeing as you are of the truthful sort, let me ask you something. Do you believe I stand any chance of winning this bout?"

"In all honesty? No, not unless you can pull some serious bullshit out of your ass," Jake said, being as truthful as she wanted him to be.

"Would it surprise you to hear me concur with that conclusion?" Umbra said as she summoned a black dagger into her hand. "Nevertheless, I shall try my best. I will show you all that I have and truly determine the limits of your powers... and simply hope that is enough."

With those words, her entire body swayed as the dark elf disappeared into a nearby shadow. Umbra's presence was entirely erased, and even using his sphere, Jake couldn't locate her. He also knew why. While it was honestly a bit bullshit a level 0 could do it, she had entered the shadow realm. An odd realm that Jake didn't fully understand but that Umbra was known as the master of. One where space no longer operated as it usually did, allowing her to do something similar to what she did next.

Despite disappearing in front of him, a figure exploded out from a shadow right behind him less than half a second later, her dagger aimed straight at his guts. Jake reacted instantly, dodging to the side as he pulled out his bow in one hand and a katar in the other.

Umbra tried to strike him again, but he deflected several blows using his weapons before the dark elf disengaged, merging into another shadow. Jake instantly nocked an arrow as he waited for her to appear again, something she did only a second later. Before she had even fully emerged, Jake shot an arrow at her, forcing Umbra to block with her daggers. Jake made it explode at that very moment, making the dark elf slide backward, stumbling a bit from the blast. He hadn't done any real damage, though, as the shadows that lingered on her had entirely blocked his destructive arcane energy.

Jake felt her gaze on him as she leaned to the side, merging into a pillar right beside her. Waiting with another arrow ready, Jake was taken a bit by surprise, as rather than an entire elf, only an arm throwing a dagger emerged from a shadow. He still shot his arrow, but the hand merged back into the darkness before it hit, resulting in him only blowing up some sand.

Several more daggers were thrown at him within the next few seconds, as in the middle of the barrage, his opponent fully emerged once more, this time charging right for him as she threw four small daggers she had tugged between her fingers.

Side-stepping the daggers, Jake prepared to face the dark elf as his danger sense warned him. Rather than engage, he jumped back right as the four small daggers she had thrown flew into a pillar, merged with its shadows, and flew out of another nearby pillar aimed for right where Jake would have been.

Umbra clicked her tongue in annoyance as she stepped back and spread out her hands. Jake stood there, having switched to his two katars, as he wondered what she was doing. Right then, Jake saw movement within two shadows to her side. Out of them emerged two figures entirely cloaked in dark mana. Umbra's body also changed as the same shadowy aura fully embraced her body, making her appear identical to her shadow clones, and all three of them disappeared into a single shadow in unison.

Then, three shadows walked out of the pillars surrounding him, brandishing black daggers.

Heh, that's a pretty good one, he thought as all three shadow clones charged at him from all directions. Jake remained standing entirely still as six daggers total plunged into his body, harmlessly phasing through it. It was only a fraction of a second after he was struck by the daggers that he swayed to the side as a black bullet swished by, hitting the wall in the distance and causing a small explosion of dark mana.

Jake looked at the origin of the bullet and saw Umbra had emerged holding what looked like a sniper rifle on the opposite side of the arena. Making a show out of summoning two clones to actually summon three and try to snipe him from a distance was a pretty good strategy that would probably work against most people. Sadly for her, Jake was not like most people.

Looking at Umbra appearing a bit miffed in the distance, he couldn't help but yell out to her. "That was a nice attempt!"

She didn't seem to appreciate his comment as she fired another bullet that Jake easily dodged. He could admit that had any of those bullets hit him, it would probably have been game over, or at least he would have been significantly injured. Enough so that she could easily finish him off.

Likely realizing she wouldn't get anything done with her gun, Umbra put it away as she merged back into the shadows. Instantly, she appeared nearly right beside Jake, swinging her dagger as Jake raised a katar to block. She continued her barrage of attacks, Jake slowly backing away as he dodged and parried.

Umbra was faster than Jake by quite a bit, signifying she had more Agility, but Jake had a slight edge in Strength. However, her speed didn't translate into any successful hits, as Jake could easily keep up with her despite his lower speed due to the overpoweredness of his Bloodline.

It also didn't help that Umbra's fighting style was very skewed toward feints and exploiting her unique magic. Having her arm swinging a dagger suddenly turn into two mid-swing would probably take most by surprise and make it hard to dodge, but to Jake, this was just Umbra wasting resources as he could easily tell the true arm and the shadow arm apart.

She kept trying new things over and over again, switching up her strategy slightly on the fly, but Jake stayed one step ahead at every turn. Jake could feel her frustrations mounting, but Umbra didn't let it affect her combat prowess in the slightest.

Also, while it was true his opponent failed to land any hits, Jake wasn't doing that much better himself. But... he did know he was winning in the resource department. As a fast assassin, Umbra was not built

for long jeopardy but to end the fight as fast as possible through, well, assassination. Swift, deadly hits that would quickly either injure your opponent and significantly weaken them or outright kill them.

Umbra knew this, too, and knew she couldn't let things go on as they were. She still continued fighting head-on for a bit longer while still trying to take him by surprise with her thrown daggers and shadow trickery. But, as she slowed down to try and preserve her stamina and mana, Jake took advantage and landed a deep scratch on her shoulder, making her retreat promptly.

"I see that there is no victory if I continue like this... so let us not delay needlessly," Umbra said. She made it sound like she was surrendering, but Jake felt the energy begin to gather as the dark elf's form began to sway. The shadows all around the arena seemed to deepen, and he felt the magic begin to take hold as a domain descended.

"Abyssal Shadow."

In an instant, the world turned black. There was no light, no warmth, nothing for one's Perception to grasp onto. It was a world of pure shadows, where all senses died. Sight, hearing, touch, taste, balance, smell, direction... it was as if nothing existed but the thoughts in your own mind and a feeling of dread from what may be lurking within the darkness.

Jake moved his arm but didn't even feel it. He only knew it had even moved due to the feedback from his sphere. His movement was also slower, reminiscent of someone underwater.

Within this darkness, a single figure appeared only a few steps behind him. Her movements were slow as Umbra was clearly also affected by the Abyssal Shadow domain. Getting closer, she brandished her dagger, ready to plunge it into the back of Jake's head as he turned around at the very last moment and punched.

Umbra had clearly expected this as she stepped back to avoid getting hit. What she had not expected was Jake expecting she would have expected his punch, so when his fist revealed itself to be holding five arrows of arcane energy, she was taken by surprise.

Jake let go of the arrows as they all exploded. For a brief moment, the domain of shadows was dissolved where the explosion had been. Jake dove forward through the destructive arcane energy that was rapidly being suppressed as he, for but a moment, laid his eyes on Umbra's form.

Fear Gaze activated as he stabbed forward. Right before she was hit, Umbra unfroze and managed to sway to the side, resulting in her only getting hit in the shoulder. A second explosion of destructive arcane mana sent her floating back through the water-like Abyssal Shadow, yet before she even landed, the domain began to dissolve.

Color returned to the world as Jake's senses rapidly returned. For a moment, the faint light in the arena was almost blinding, but he quickly adjusted and looked at Umbra kneeling five or so meters away while down on one knee.

Just as he prepared to potentially engage, Umbra sighed loudly. "I surrender."

Jake could say he was surprised, but he honestly wasn't. From start to end, it felt more like Umbra was testing the limits of his abilities rather than actually fighting him to win.

Not that he could really blame her... for an assassin; Jake was the worst matchup imaginable.

“Thanks for the fight anyway,” Jake smiled.

Umbra just nodded. “Alas, it was not one I was meant to win. I wish you luck facing the final Champion, but let me just give one piece of advice... reconsider facing the Grand Champion.”

Jake raised an eyebrow and wanted to ask more as the dark elf merged into a nearby shadow and reemerged back at her exit to the arena, clearly not interested in talking any longer. Jake just looked after her as the announcer began doing his announcing, with Jake just shrugging to himself.

You telling me to not face the Grand Champion just makes me want to do it even more...

Vilastromoz put all thoughts of Artemis and that entire mess to the back of his mind as he nodded at the outcome of the battle between Umbra and Jake. It had gone as expected, and nobody was surprised by the outcome, so much so that none had even wanted to bet on him losing, no matter how good the odds were. If Jake couldn't defeat Umbra easily, then what normal challenger would ever stand a chance?

Umbra had also clearly known this, and her image had used the opportunity to test Jake's limits rather than simply fight to win.

If Vilastromoz had to describe Umbra with just one word, it would be careful. Two words? Calculatingly careful. She was the very first god, outside of Karroch – the Tutorial designer - who truly took note of Jake. Vilastromoz knew this was because he got an item related to her early on, and she used that connection to scout him out, but her actions had still been decisive. She wanted to recruit him from the get-go, but he had stumbled upon the Challenge Dungeon, leading him to Vilastromoz before she ever got the chance. There was no doubt in his mind that had Jake never found that dungeon, he would have been blessed by Umbra now... potentially even her Chosen, if not at the very least, a candidate to be her Chosen.

Yet even when she had failed to get Jake, she had made moves to forge a positive relationship.

She had gone as far as to make Jake's brother into a Judge, one of the highest-leveled titles mortals could get within the Court of Shadows. While his brother did have some talent of his own, and his presence-resistance was through the roof due to his familial connection to Jake, he was clearly not worthy of all he had been given by his own merits. Especially not the Legacy of Tenlucis.

Vilastromoz also knew that many had found her actions odd.

The Court of Shadows was not a faction that had trouble recruiting members. They were in a similar position to a faction like the Order of the Malefic Viper or Valhal in that it was viewed as a privilege to join. Sure, they did give benefits to members, but all factions did that, and what they gave was only what could be expected.

Umbra's personal Blessing and attention were not something any mortal could expect. The mere fact she had given it to Jake's brother proved how much she valued Jake... at least, that is how most people saw it. In truth, Vilastromoz knew Umbra better than that. He knew of Jake's powers, and he knew that Umbra was also aware.

See, the reason Umbra was so keen on having a good relationship with Jake wasn't just because she valued him. It was because of the danger he posed.

She was afraid of him... of what he could become. Even if it was a trillion to one chance he would ascend to godhood and become able to match her, that was a risk Umbra couldn't take. A Jake close to her power level would be devastating, as he effectively hard-counteracted her.

It was similar to if someone with a Bloodline that made them entirely immune to poisons appeared. Vilastromoz would observe them with a lot of interest... but he wouldn't want to kill them. This was for the same reason Umbra had never even considered killing Jake.

Because his status as a potential danger also meant he was a possible opportunity. Gods at the pinnacle had very few things that could push them to their limits, especially in the area they were best in. No one currently alive in the multiverse could detect Umbra if she decided to observe them and they hadn't made prior preparations, such as formations.

Yet Jake could... he could pressure her where she was strongest. Force her to improve. Force her to find a way to even hide from a Bloodline, something there was only one way to do:

To make a Transcendent skill... or improve the one you already had.

But at the same time, she couldn't risk him becoming an enemy, for should he reach the stage where he could help her improve, he would also be at a stage where he could potentially slay her. It was an odd balance one had to strike, weighing risk and opportunity. It was truly a paradox. She had to want someone to become powerful enough to kill her in order to find out how not to get killed by him.

A risk she was clearly willing to take, especially after her performance in the match against Jake.

"Let me guess-" Vilastromoz said to the Wyrmgod, but he didn't get further as his fellow Primordial answered.

“Umbra had already requested the recording of her match with your Chosen before he ever entered Nevermore. Pre-paid, too.”

The Viper just nodded, having fully expected that to be the case. He just hoped Umbra would continue her strategy of mostly casual observing while only trying to make moves through Jake’s brother... because his poor Chosen certainly didn’t need more direct attention from gods than he already had.

Chapter 775: Nevermore: Warmaster

“I told you it would be easy, didn’t I?” Artemis grinned as Jake entered her mansion. Without even thinking about it, he had just headed there by default when he thought about “going home.”

Jake did feel a bit bad about bailing on Owen and Polly, but after his match, he saw the two of them walking around hand in hand. They looked like they were in their own little world, so, in reality, wasn’t Jake just being a good friend by not following them like a third wheel? Yep, definitely.

“You did, you did,” Jake nodded. “But I also expected it to be on the easier side from the moment I learned Umbra was an opponent in the Colosseum. Assassins just don’t have a good time against me.”

A statement that was true even before the system based on the life of Sim-Jake.

“I reckon that for most people, she will be considered the hardest. She is a nasty opponent that you need proper preparations to win against when you can’t rely on your usual senses,” Artemis nodded as she looked to be in thought. “But... you did destroy her more thoroughly than I had expected. It wasn’t even a fight. It was just pure domination from start to end, with her unable to do anything but try and learn the limits of your abilities, and from the looks of it, she wasn’t even able to do that.”

"I am indeed awesome; thanks for noticing," Jake smiled teasingly.

"Your awesomeness may cause you issues, though. The recording of your fight with Umbra will definitely make its way back to her, and when it does, she will have a keen interest in you. Your Bloodline is a threat to her Path, and she definitely won't risk you running loose without at least keeping track of you. So watch out for if she entices people close to you to join the Court, and-"

"A bit late for that," Jake shook his head. "She discovered me during my Tutorial. Pretty damn fast, too, as I got an item related to her. After that, she likely wanted to recruit me, but I joined up with the Malefic Viper, so she missed her shot. A shot that then ended up hitting my little brother from the looks of it, giving him a Blessing from Umbra, the Legacy of some dead god called Tenlucis, and even made him a Judge."

Artemis stared at him with wide eyes for a while before she smiled and tilted her head. "Either you two siblings are both utter monsters... or she values you that highly..."

Jake already knew it was the latter. While Caleb was good and pretty damn talented, he wasn't a pinnacle genius on his own. He could become close, but he just wasn't on the same level as someone like Eron, the Sword Saint, Carmen, or Arnold. All of these people would have reached greatness no matter who backed them or who they knew.

"Which one do you think it is?" Jake asked.

"First off, you are a Bloodline Patriarch, right?"

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. There really was no reason to hide it, as anyone who checked out his parents and brother would easily confirm it.

“Then, seeing as he doesn’t have your Bloodline and going by pure statistics, I will say it’s the latter,” Artemis said, sighing. “You are really a complete monster for her to want positive relations with you so much.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Jake smiled.

Artemis walked up to him and grasped his clothes as she dragged him toward the healing pool. “Oh, it was.”

Jake, after a long and arduous journey to recovery using the healing pool with Artemis, soon found himself back in the arena. It had only been four days since his fight with Umbra, and he had only really needed to regenerate all his resources and make new arrows for the upcoming fight.

Usually, he would also spend his time between matches preparing, but that wasn’t really possible with the Warmaster. Polly had tried and found nothing of substance, Artemis couldn’t really share anything either, and what information packets Jake could buy with Colosseum Points were all stupidly expensive and severely outdated. As in, most of them were created decades ago. The Warmaster was apparently someone who became a Champion a long time ago, and he wasn’t around due to some unknown circumstances when the last Grand Champion rose.

Ah, on a side note, Umbra did not pop up at all during these few days. Jake had fully expected her to appear as she would also get her memories back like Artemis, but that didn’t happen. Then again, that Phoenix Queen lady had also survived their battle and hadn’t appeared again. He didn’t know for sure she was a god before, but Artemis had confirmed she was.

So, it was probably just Artemis who was the odd one for hanging out with Jake after their fight.

Anyway. Back in the arena, Jake naturally went up to the one in charge of scheduling all his fights. As usual, the middle-aged man stood in his usual spot, seemingly waiting for Jake as he walked in.

“You only got one fight left before you’re the Grand Champion, huh?” the Battlemaster smiled the moment he saw Jake. “It’s damn impressive if I say so myself. You are the first in quite a few years, and your run has been quite a sight, with the audience definitely fans of the Doombringer. You are the strongest we’ve seen since the only current Grand Champion did his Gauntlet, of that I am sure.”

“That’s high praise,” Jake joked. “I guess you can already guess what I am here for? As you said, I have six down and only one Champion to go. There is no reason to delay the fight, so I would like to officially issue the challenge.”

The Battlemaster smiled and shook his head. “Let me check in with him real quick when he is available...”

Jake waited patiently as he wondered who the last opponent would be. Warmaster sounded like it could be someone from Valhal like Gudrun, but then again, every single faction had people who could be described as Warmasters. Shit, the Necromancer looked like he could have been called Warmaster.

“Alright, I got an answer. He is ready to go immediately.”

“Huh?” Jake said. “That was fast. So it begins in two hours like with the Lightning Monarch?”

“No... it begins whenever both fighters are ready,” the Battlemaster said with a slightly mischievous grin. “Now, shall we get going?”

“Wait...” Jake said as he finally put two and two together. “You’re the Warmaster?”

In retrospect, he should have probably seen it coming.

“I used to be called that, yes, but I retired quite a few years ago. I only ever show myself for these Champion fights,” the Battlemaster said with a smile. “So you must excuse me if I am a little rusty in the arena.”

Jake just smiled. “Do your best, old man.”

“I will, I will. Now let’s get going,” the Battlemaster... no, Warmaster said as he began to talk toward one of the tunnels leading to the arena. “See you on the battlefield.”

Looking at him enter the tunnel, Jake shook his head as he headed for his own tunnel. What a plot twist for the Battlemaster to actually be a Champion himself! Though it definitely wasn’t as shocking as the revelation that Minaga was actually a god.

“Six battles... six victories. Six Champions, brought to their doom by the Doombringer himself! Now, only one man stands in his way. A master of war and our very own Battlemaster here at the Colosseum of Mortals. For years, he has guided fighters toward the arena, but today, he stands here himself as the

final obstacle before a new Grand Champion ascends! Will his fate be like the others... or will he show us all how he earned the title of Warmaster!? Let's find out! Lower the gates!

Jake looked at the familiar man entering the arena across from him. The Battlemaster, or Warmaster, who usually wore practical clothes and simple garments, had switched them for a set of full plate armor while he wielded a sword and a shield. He walked into the arena with heavy steps, and Jake had to admit his aura had spiked quite a bit.

Despite their conversation only minutes before, they once more met in the middle of the smack-filled arena. Because, yes, even if they had scheduled their fight and started... nine minutes after it had been scheduled, the stands had still been filled to the brim. It made no sense at all, and Jake was honestly getting tired of constantly questioning it. The feeling of annoyance just lived rent-free in his head.

"Looking good there, nice equipment," Jake complimented the Warmaster. It wasn't an empty compliment, either... Jake was utterly certain not a single piece of equipment or weapon was anything less than legendary.

"Thank you, there are plenty more where they came from," the Warmaster smiled. "Now, let us fight with our best and hold nothing back. I have seen your fights already, and I know I cannot slack off... so I'll go all out from the beginning."

"Just as I like it," Jake smiled as he jumped back while he pulled out his bow, signifying the battle had begun.

The Warmaster responded by charging after him with impressive speed as his boots lit up with mana, signifying he used some enchantment on them. Jake wasn't taken by surprise as he quickly shot an arrow that the man deflected with ease using his shield as he closed in on Jake, who couldn't move backward as fast as someone running forward.

Jake was prepared to dodge as the man swung his blade, but what happened next wasn't something he had expected. The sword he presumed to be of legendary rarity began to crack all over mid-swing with red fractures as it suddenly exploded without warning, releasing a blast of molten metal and fire.

Cursing internally, Jake instantly pulled out his katars and tried to block whatever he could, but a few wayward fragments still hit him. Meanwhile, the Warmaster had been hidden behind his own shield, avoiding any damage.

Stumbling back to recover, Jake quickly tried to attack as the Warmaster had lost his weapon... only for him to pull out a scimitar that also radiated the feeling of a legendary item. Jake was on guard this time as he engaged but found the Warmaster fighting like a normal person for a few moments as they exchanged blows. He was very defensive, though, and hid behind his shield at all times, never truly giving Jake the chance to land a blow. Despite his heavy armor, he remained incredibly flexible and quickly moved his weapon and shield like a true expert. The man clearly knew how to use his weapons.

Right as Jake began to think nothing tricky was going on, the scimitar suddenly started to frost over. Cursing again, Jake reacted in time as an explosion of frozen metal fragments pelted him. Luckily, he had gotten some distance and could block all the hits that mattered... as he saw the Warmaster pull out a spear that he pointed toward Jake. That one legendary rarity, too.

A flash of lightning wormed across the body of the spear as it shot out a lightning bolt, striking Jake head-on before he had a chance to react and sending him flying back. Another bolt came a second later, but this one Jake managed to block with both katars as the lightning was effectively grounded by the dense, stable arcane energy within them.

Several more bolts followed up as Jake welcomed the change to a range battle. He pulled out his bow and retaliated as he used his near-precognitive ability to dodge the lightning bolts. Knowing that just shooting head-on wouldn't work, Jake began to shoot far more tricky arrows.

The Warmaster blocked two arrows with his shield before a third one struck him in the shoulder. Despite the powerful armor, the stable arcane arrow proved sharp enough as it penetrated through, but before he could explode it, odd energy from the armor itself invaded the arrow and made it crack and shatter.

Right as that happened, the spear also ran out of juice, and the Warmaster discarded it on the ground as he took out a second shield, making it borderline impossible for Jake to land any more arrows.

He is like Gudrun... he has a shitload of different tools, Jake was now sure. One had to remember that all items in the arena were ones that the person himself had crafted or bought using Colosseum Points, and seeing as Champions couldn't do Show Matches... it meant that the Warmaster was exploding weapons he had likely spent months, if not years, making.

There was also the fact to consider that the Battlemaster had seen every single one of Jake's matches from start to end. Even the Show Matches. He knew exactly what Jake was capable of and had seen all the tricks he had shown this far.

"Say, how many of those weapons do you have?" Jake asked as he had just stopped shooting any arrows toward the man holding two large tower shields. If the man wanted to be a turtle, Jake saw no reason to waste arrows on his shell.

"I guess you'll find out," the Warmaster said as he smiled while he slowly moved toward Jake.

Jake backed away but soon realized he was closing in on the back wall of the Colosseum. Right as he noticed this, the Warmaster put away his shields as an axe appeared in one hand and a sword in the

other. The man stepped down as he charged, his boots exploding with power as he was propelled straight toward Jake.

Two katars appeared to block the man as Jake barely had time to react properly. What's more, he was incredibly careful when it came to engaging the Warmaster directly, as he didn't know when one of his weapons would suddenly explode or show some other innate ability.

For a good reason, too.

After exchanging a dozen moves, the Warmaster swung his axe downward for Jake's shoulder, and mid-swing, it suddenly sped up to become several times faster. Jake's danger sense had warned him something was up as he swayed, narrowly avoiding the sharp edge as the weapon hit the ground.

An explosion of sand sent Jake temporarily airborne as he flew back, having blocked the shockwave successfully. The Warmaster came out of the sand cloud even before Jake landed on the ground, the axe replaced with a second sword as dense air mana collected around the man.

Tens of swift whirlwind slashes struck Jake right as he landed on the ground, making him back away immediately as he dodged and blocked every hit. The swords of the Warmaster only seemed to be speeding up as he rapidly cut, every hit sending out cutting winds that slowly ripped away at Jake's leather armor.

Jake kept blocking for several more seconds before he finally saw his chance. He saw that the next two attacks would be aimed high, so he quickly twisted his body and ducked as he performed a leg sweep. The Warmaster was taken by surprise as his legs were swept out under him, and he could only try to block when Jake punched forward with his katar, launching him backward as he rolled in the sand several times upon landing.

Without missing a beat, Jake charged forward to follow up, going on the offensive.

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The Warmaster, still on the ground, raised one of his swords toward Jake as it began to shine with mana. Jake temporarily abandoned his attack and dodged to the side as the entire blade was shot out like an arrow, as the man kept holding onto the hilt.

Jake thought he would have a chance to attack, but the Warmaster twisted his wrist as Jake's danger sense warned him and made him duck right as a whip-like blade flew in from behind. The blade he had shot out had segmented itself into several sharp metal pieces with strings holding them together, and with a mere movement of his wrists, he had made it twist and whip around.

After dodging a few more slashes, the Warmaster pressed a button on the hilt of his sword, and the entire blade was dragged back and reformed the whole sword. Jake, who had been forced to make some distance, stared for a while as he spoke.

"Not gonna lie... I always thought those segmented snake swords or whatever they are called were hugely impractical and not useful weapons," Jake said as the Warmaster had managed to fully stand up.

"Oh, but they are a questionable weapon, and as a general rule, I would not recommend them," the Warmaster smiled. "At least in any prolonged combat. However, they do tend to be useful for surprise attacks. The thing is that the skill required to control one is so high that it is rarely worth the practice. Of course, there are masters out there who still made it their primary weapon, none of which are to be underestimated."

"And yet, despite it apparently being so hard, you, a blacksmith, have chosen to learn the weapon?" Jake questioned.

"The best smith is one who truly knows the weapons he makes," the Warmaster nodded. "In my eyes, to be a Weapon's Master Blacksmith is to be a Warmaster."

Jake smiled. It was a good philosophy in his eyes and one he knew many similar to the Warmaster shared. However, it often came about the other way around. That an archer would become a fletcher to make their own bows, a mage learning to craft magic tools to assist them in combat... or a hunter would become an alchemist to poison his arrows and help him recover during fights. Okay, Jake was a horrible example as his becoming an alchemist wasn't planned but had happened entirely by happenstance, and he just made the best out of what he got.

"Then, by all means, show me the weapons you have mastered," Jake said semi-jokingly as he pulled out his bow again.

The Warmaster didn't hesitate as he charged forward once more, trying to close the distance and not fight Jake in a ranged battle. His speed was still impressive when he charged, but Jake had found quite a weakness as he did a wide dodge to the side as the man charged past him.

He took a while to stop as he skit across the sand, failing to block an arrow Jake had shot right as he dodged. Trying his charge again, the result for the Warmaster turned out identical as Jake once more made distance, taking advantage of how the charge of the Warmaster worked.

Jake had identified it as coming from his boots and had at first believed it just made him faster. This turned out to not be entirely accurate. Instead, it was a charge-like skill that propelled him straight forward at an impressive speed, which naturally resulted in significantly reduced maneuverability, making it much easier to dodge than Jake had first assumed.

After Jake had dodged two times in a row, the Warmaster also seemed to realize the jig was up as he switched approach. Rather than use the enchantment, he ran normally and chased the faster Jake around the arena for a few moments, Jake landing several shots on the man, though he sadly was still unable to explode the arrows due to the peculiar armor. The Warmaster continued until Jake suddenly stopped running as he noticed what the man was doing.

As he ran, the Warmaster slowly set up a net with a thin wire barely visible even with Jake's high Perception. He strung it up between the pillars, limiting the space Jake could dodge inside unless he found time to destroy the wire.

Something Jake chose to promptly attempt as he purposefully missed an arrow right as he stopped, aimed toward one of the wires. Yet right as he did, the Warmaster seemed to slightly relax how taut it was, making it slack just enough for the arrow to miss.

He didn't stop his charge either as he closed in on Jake, still wielding his two swords. Getting close enough, he swung with both as they split into segments and fell like whips. Jake dodged as best he could, but the movements of the odd snake swords were just too unpredictable, resulting in a few cuts landing here and there.

Jake instantly put away his bow once more and charged toward the Warmaster, who was also still going toward Jake. He had done so with the expectations of taking advantage of the snake swords effectively being whips, but the Warmaster had been prepared as he simply let go of both weapons as two machetes appeared in his hands.

Fucking hell,

Jake thought as he dodged a machete swing. He was not too deterred, though, as he pushed forward, unleashing a barrage upon the Warmaster. The man tried to fight back, but with time, one thing had been obvious... Jake out-specced the Warmaster in Agility by quite a bit, while they were roughly equal in Strength.

Forced to switch one of his weapons to a shield, the Warmaster could defend again, but it wasn't enough for him to get the upper hand. He also had to drop the second machete, as while it was fast, it did take longer to dismiss it and summon a shield than just abandon the weapon outright.

At least Jake thought that was why he dropped it as he kept fighting the Warmaster until suddenly he saw the dropped machete lift off the ground behind him through his sphere. Jake kept acting as if he didn't know as the Warmaster positioned his remaining machete between Jake and the dropped one as they both seemed to attract one another.

Magnetism, Jake quickly concluded.

Jake made a feint where he acted like he would commit to a big attack. Right then, the second machete flew for him from behind, but Jake abandoned his attack mid-way through and dodged to the side. The Warmaster let out a soft chuckle as he threw the machete he wielded after Jake and used his boots to charge backward.

This one, Jake had also been ready for as he also kept retreating as both machetes clashed mid-air and exploded, sending out fragments of metal flying everywhere. Jake summoned a barrier of stable arcane mana to block all the fragments as the Warmaster naturally just used his shield.

"Should have guessed that one wouldn't work," the Warmaster muttered as he once more charged Jake, who was still maintaining his stable arcane barrier.

For what felt like the umpteenth time, he had replaced his weapons as he now had two hatchets in his hands... or, well, he had them for a few moments as both began to burn right as he threw them, forcing Jake to turn his body and place the barrier in front of the hatchets as both exploded, sending him skirting back.

The blast had broken his barrier and left him with a few burns, but those two hatchets had not been as potent as the earlier weapons... which indicated he was either trying to bait Jake or was genuinely running out of high-rarity weapons.

Even so, the man refused to back down as he closed the distance with two longswords now in hand. Jake took a moment to fully stabilize as he dodged the longsword swings and backed away a few steps. Right as he did, one longsword that he thought was stabbing toward him was dropped as, mid-thrust, it was replaced with a spear.

Jake barely blocked with his bracers as he was still left with a nasty cut and skirted back as he quickly swayed to the side a moment too late. The spear in the Warmaster's hand had instantly been dropped and replaced with something else the moment he had finished his thrust. What had appeared instead was a cursed object that Jake felt truly disappointed in seeing in the hands of someone who dared call himself a master of weapons.

It was a pathetic crossbow.

Had this pathetic crossbow hit him in the shoulder, meaning it had been a good move from the Warmaster to use it, the weapon doing the exact job it was made to? Yeah, sure, but it was the principle of even using one to begin with Jake was against. All for purely logical reasons, of course.

He just really didn't like crossbows.

With a groan, Jake pulled out the bolt as the Warmaster didn't miss a beat and went in again, the dropped longsword replaced with a shortsword. He engaged with the expectation that Jake was weakened from the bolt... unaware of the mistake he had just made.

Jake didn't even consider being defensive, as he was done playing around after the insult of being hit by a crossbow bolt. He dodged the first swing as he stabbed forward, and after finding himself parried once, he skirted to the side as he made it to the right side of the Warmaster.

The man turned to face him as Jake attacked again with ferocious intent. He didn't hold anything back as both katars began glowing with arcane light, and both started to give off small shockwaves of destructive arcane energy with each blow. These shockwaves didn't really do any damage, but they did mean that the usual impact the Warmaster expected from every clash had changed, throwing off his tempo.

It was only a matter of time before Jake managed to land a nasty stab on the Warmaster's arm. Before he could get it free from the katar, Jake twisted the weapon and forcefully moved his arm away as he blocked the man's other weapon and kicked him on the side of his leg, making him fall slightly off balance.

He stumbled for a few steps as Jake kept attacking. Jake made a move to stab the Warmaster in the chest, but his foot suddenly slipped when he stepped on the dropped longsword from earlier. Opening his eyes wide, Jake was thrown entirely off balance as the Warmaster took the presented opportunity and lifted his uninjured arm high as he swung down with his full might.

Jake smiled to himself as he allowed himself to slide fully along the length of the blade as he went nearly entirely prone. The weapon descending toward him didn't arrive. Instead, a spray of blood hit Jake from above.

Not missing the chance he had created for himself, Jake lunged forward and stabbed into the knee of the Warmaster right as the man summoned a mace and slammed it into the ground, forcing Jake back.

When the dust settled, one could see a faint red line floating in the air and the Warmaster down on one knee as he cradled his arm that looked halfway cut through. Jake didn't want to assume anything and pulled out his bow along with a massive pre-prepared quasi-Protean Arrow and-

"I surrender!" the Warmaster yelled in a pained voice as he looked at Jake. "To use my own wire against me like that... heh, I guess I really am getting too old for this damn arena fighting business. I should just stick to working as the Battlemaster."

Jake smiled as he went over and offered the Warmaster – or Battlemaster – a hand. "Eh, I wouldn't say that. You are definitely better than a few of the other Champions."

"A minor consolation to someone who met his downfall to his own weapon... what an ironic end," the Battlemaster sighed. Right then, the announcer did his announcer things.

"We have a winner! No... we have a Grand Champion! The Gauntlet of the Grand Champion has been completed once more as seven Champions have fallen before the Doombringer as he now stands at the apex of the arena of Mortals, a true master! Glory and honor await... unless he still finds himself unsated. Unless he wants to face one more person... one more challenge. Will he face the current Grand Champion? Will he dare face... the Warrior?"

For the first time in a while, Jake actually listened intently to this speech as he was taken aback by the title of the Grand Champion.

"Warrior?" Jake questioned the Battlemaster, who he had helped stand as the medics began running in. "Seems like a pretty damn basic title for a Grand Champion."

"Yet one that symbolizes him perfectly," the Battlemaster said while the medics checked he wasn't going to die before simply standing back, waiting for Jake to be done talking.

"I guess I'll see for myself," Jake smiled. "You're gonna be fine, right? Can you stand."

The Battlemaster scoffed and pushed Jake's hand off as he stood pretty stably. "I didn't surrender because I was on my deathbed but due to that large arrow of yours. I knew I didn't have the tools to handle that one, which is also why I kept up the offensive to never give you a chance to use it, so when you got your chance, I knew the fight was over."

"That's pretty fair," Jake said. "I guess I'll see you at the usual spot?"

The man just nodded as Jake said his goodbyes and made his way out of the arena as a system message appeared before him.

Congratulations! You are now a Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing at the very pinnacle!

All objectives but one have now been completed within the Colosseum of Mortals. There is only one thing to do:

To become the sole Grand Champion.

As the Grand Champion, you are allowed to participate in weekly Show Matches, each rewarding 25,000 Colosseum Points. These Show Matches will be of ever-increasing difficulty, with the Colosseum Rewards remaining stable.

You are no longer allowed to buy equipment using your Colosseum Points.

At any point, you can choose to leave the Colosseum of Mortals. Any excess lives will be converted into 100,000 Colosseum Points for the final point tally.

As a reward for becoming the Grand Champion, you are given the chance to face the Grand Champion, who is simply known as the Warrior.

Jake read the message as he walked out of the arena and hadn't really expected anything new, which is why he was surprised when he saw that Show Matches were back and even more surprised when he was told that buying new stuff using his Colosseum Points was also off limits now.

Luckily for him... he didn't plan on doing either. He didn't want to spend more points than he already had on equipment. He already gained all the stats he could, and his weapons were pretty good. Plus, if he did go all the way, it would feel wrong if he did so in large part due to just having good equipment.

Show Matches were also not appealing. 25,000 points just wasn't enough, and he would rather focus on beating the Grand Champion. Even if he chose to stay and do Show Matches for another full year – assuming he could even do that with an ever-increasing difficulty - it would only amount to around 1,300,000 points, and while that was a lot... Jake also had a lot of points already.

Bonus objective gained: Defeat the only other Grand Champion and fully conquer the Colosseum of Mortals.

Current rank: Grand Champion.

Colosseum Points: 6,382,110

Lives remaining: 9

Jake had more than six million points now, the Champion rank alone more than doubling his total points. There had been no final big reward from reaching the Grand Champion rank, and he didn't know if this was because he had lost one life or not... but based on the prior message of losing lives no longer being penalized, he doubted it.

He also had 9 more lives available. 9 chances to win the final fight against the Grand Champion. But... in his gut, he had doubt if it was enough if he was right about who he would face in the final fight.

Looking at the name of the Grand Champion, there was only really one name that sprung to mind. One man who Jake believed was indeed fully described with just the title of Warrior. The only being Jake had ever seen kicking the living shit out of the Malefic Viper and the strongest human – if not being - alive in the multiverse:

Valdemar.

Chapter 777: Nevermore: Warrior (1)

"Valdemar is a fucking monster in human form, plain and simple," Artemis said in between her bites of food. "Mind you, I am not saying that he is the Grand Champion, but if that is the case, you have quite the battle ahead of you, and, well... be happy you have multiple lives."

Jake nodded, fully knowing that was the case as he chilled in the healing pool a bit away. "Say, if you fought this theoretical Grand Champion version of Valdemar... how would you rate your chances?"

"Well, if we fought a hundred times..." Artemis said, pausing for dramatic effect. "I would probably be able to not die within a minute in at least some of them."

"That strong?" Jake muttered to himself.

"I just told you he is a fucking monster. Valdemar is a being no one dares mess with in the entire multiverse. Other Primordials steer clear for the most part, and no faction wants to risk pissing him off. You must understand that even among those deemed his equals, he stands out. Most Primordials are diverse fighters. They have other essential pursuits. Their Paths include nurturing their factions, crafting, alchemy, research into magical concepts, dungeon engineering, or even making freaking pocket watches... but Valdemar only does a bit of casual brewing. He is the only Primordial that is just a pure warrior, through and through," Artemis explained.

Jake remembered having gotten a similar explanation from Villy at some point, but Artemis just hammered it home. He remembered the thoughts he had of Valdemar that had made Carmen kind of angry... but they still rang true.

"He is really just a guy with an axe," Jake said, mostly to himself.

"Calling a Primordial just "a guy with an axe" doesn't sound like something even the Chosen of another Primordial should do," Artemis said as she threw Jake a sharp gaze as she had stopped eating.

"Doesn't make it any less true," Jake shrugged as he looked at Artemis. "Nothing's wrong with being simple. Simplicity is good. There is power in removing all complications and just having the core of a concept left."

"Your phrasing still sounded borderline heretical," Artemis said, with a slight tinge of concern in her voice.

"Only borderline?" Jake smirked. "Isn't it downright heretical to have a Challenge Dungeon where the objective is to beat up gods as a mortal?"

"That is different. All images are here with consent from the one who placed them here, with the express intent of having them used as opponents. And despite being a god on the outside, I am not a god in here. If I were a god, you wouldn't be able to even talk to me like this or stand straight in my presence, something I am sure you are quite aware of. No, the only reason you can even have this conversation and treat me as an equal being is because we are both made to be level 0," Artemis sighed. "That's just how the multiverse works."

Jake smiled a bit to himself. Yeah... that was how it worked for everyone besides him. "Eh, it's how it works until someone comes along where it doesn't work like that anymore. There is a first for everything, right?"

Artemis looked at him suspiciously for a moment as she smiled. "I kind of hope that's the case so you don't become a disappointing mess when my true self inevitably seeks you out. I would find that very unappealing."

"Time will tell, time will tell," Jake waved her off. "For now... this simple hunter has to focus on preparing to fight a simple warrior."

Jake made sure he was fully ready to face Valdemar before he sought out the Battlemaster. He created his regular arrows, made his special arrow, and recovered his resources. There really wasn't more than that he could do, seeing as gathering information was not really a thing.

Not due to a lack of information, mind you.

He had met up with Polly and Owen, who were now definitely officially dating, as they went out and celebrated him reaching the Grand Champion rank. Artemis had come along too and found it amusing how Jake interacted with the dungeon-created characters, but he hadn't paid that any mind.

Polly had agreed to help gather some more information and, after a few days, had returned with a lot of eyewitness accounts, written records, and plenty of other snippets of information. What didn't exist was recordings, though Jake had a suspicion that recordings wouldn't help much going by the other intel.

Because they all just talked about how overwhelming he had been, often winning in a few attacks at most. Jake felt that rather than teach him about Valdemar's fighting style, everything he gathered was just hyping Valdemar up as a true final boss who was seemingly borderline unbeatable. Jake was very excited to find out if that was truly the case.

When Jake finally entered the Colosseum, the Battlemaster was back in his usual spot, wearing the same clothes and without a single mark on his body from their fight.

"You've recovered well, huh?" Jake said first thing.

"I've had worse," he waved him off. "It was an enjoyable fight, though I doubt I will enter the arena again... it was way too expensive."

Jake chuckled a bit and shook his head. Maybe the guy shouldn't have a fighting style that revolved around blowing up your own weapons, then?

"So... I can already guess why you are here. To issue your challenge to the Warrior," the Battlemaster said.

"Right on," Jake nodded. "How does it work?"

The system message he had gained upon becoming Grand Champion didn't outline the procedures for challenging the Grand Champion but just said he could do it now. He really hoped he wouldn't be told there were several months of wait or something.

"From the moment you issue the challenge, the match will be scheduled for fifteen days later. No ifs or buts from either party. A Grand Champion match is simply so monumental that the Colosseum needs this time to hype up the match and sell tickets," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake was happy to hear it would only be fifteen days and seriously had to strain himself to not call out the horrible excuse for the set schedule. Oh, they needed time to sell tickets? Utter bullshit.

"Well then, I would like to issue the challenge here and now," Jake said with confidence.

The Battlemaster smiled as a few seconds passed before he spoke. "It has been done."

"Say, you got any advice you want to volunteer? Any tips or tricks for the fight?" Jake asked the Battlemaster.

"You know that I like you quite a bit, right?" the Battlemaster said with a sigh. "So I only really have one piece of advice... know when to surrender. Even if you do not win, you are still a Grand Champion, and no one can take that away from you."

Well, that's a bleak outlook, Jake thought to himself. Not that surrender was ever an option. Jake had nine lives to spend, after all. Of course, he really hoped he wouldn't have to use all of them... but doing it on the first try did seem like a tall order.

"I'll keep that in mind," Jake nodded as he went back to the forest close to Artemis' mansion for some more archery practice with a literal hunter goddess as he mentally prepared himself for the fight.

Fifteen days quickly passed as the entire city close to the Colosseum was buzzing. The bars held special promotions, a small festival of sorts was held in the center square, and s of "The Doombringer vs. The Warrior" were placed everywhere.

Jake didn't partake in many of the festivities as he focused on training until the fateful day arrived, when he found himself back in the Colosseum, standing before the large hallway leading into the arena. Owen, Polly, and even the Battlemaster had joined him as he waited for the counter to reach zero, signaling it was time for him to enter.

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"Good luck, Jake. Show that Warrior what you got," Owen said encouragingly.

"Go in with a careful approach and feel him out before you try to commit to any major attacks!" Polly advised.

"Try not to die," the Battlemaster just shrugged... which wasn't much better than Artemis, who had told him to try to not die too quickly before he left her place that morning.

"I can only do my best," Jake smiled as the timer reached zero, and it was time for him to go. The tunnel felt longer than usual for some reason as Jake walked down it, and he had an odd feeling in his stomach. Am I nervous?

The answer was yes... but he was equally excited. Memories of the vision he had seen during Path of the Heretic-Chosen flashed in his mind. The absolute power of Valdemar, his overwhelming fighting spirit... a power that Jake could only suspect was a Transcendent skill.

Walking up the steps, he heard the loud cheers of the audience as the large arena soon appeared before his eyes. It was the same as usual, with the large stone pillars spread throughout and sand covering the entire floor.

As he looked across from him, toward the area where the other Grand Champion was supposed to stand, he saw... nothing.

Wait, he hasn't shown up?"

"Welcome! To the arena! Today, two titans clash before our eyes as Grand Champions meet. Two absolute pinnacles of mortal existence, fighting it out till there is only one man standing. One, a Warrior who has never lost a fight, and the other, a man who has brought doom to anyone unlucky enough to face him during his rapid ascend through the ranks. A true Doombringer... who today shall meet someone who does not know doom. Who will come out on top? Who will be the ultimate Grand Champion? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"

Jake was incredibly confused as he nevertheless pulled out his bow and walked forward as the bars also lowered on the other end of the arena to show the empty entrance. He walked a few steps forward as he suddenly heard it. Heavy footsteps echoed from the hallway ahead of him, and soon enough, a familiar figure appeared.

As his opponent walked up the steps, the first thing Jake saw was the glinting edge of an axe. The second thing he saw was the bearded man he recognized immediately from the vision with the Malefic Viper, and as his entire body was revealed, Jake could only stare.

He was bare-chested; the only clothing he wore was a pair of linen shorts, sandals, and metal bracers on his arms. He only had a single weapon in the axe swung over his shoulder as he slowly entered the arena, and as Jake looked at him, he got an odd feeling.

Many monsters throughout the multiverse were known as beings built solely for combat. Their evolutions had only taken them further and further toward the ideal of making them the ultimate killing machines... their bodies perfectly designed for the task.

But looking at Valdemar... Jake got the feeling that the being before him transcended any other ideal. His body was perfectly designed to fight, every powerful muscle hiding explosive power. Jake knew that the human body had some innate limitations... but he felt not an iota of weakness from the man before him. He was the most powerful human in the multiverse, after all.

As Jake stared at Valdemar, Valdemar stared back at him as he spoke, not even the Grand Champion fight free from the meet-in-the-middle-and-talk custom.

"A fellow human, eh? Impressive that you made it all the way to Grand Champion... from the looks of it, you are even one of the younglings trying for the Leaderboards, eh?" Valdemar said with a big smile as he looked at Jake. "Ah, but even if you are a human, I won't be biased toward you, alright?"

Turmoil entered Jake's mind as his eyes opened wide. "You... know where this is?"

"In... an arena?" Valdemar said, looking confused for a moment before he seemed to get it. "Ah! You are talking about us being in a Challenge Dungeon in Nevermore? Yeah, I know. Seeing as you asked that question and looked at me with surprise, I am going to guess this is your first attempt? Say, how many lives ya got?"

"Nine," Jake just answered without thinking.

"Damn, did pretty well in those Champion fights, huh? Let me guess: Umbra was the one who got one over ya. She is a real tricky one," Valdemar said with confidence.

"It was the Necromancer..."

"The Undying General? Ah, that makes sense too I guess," Valdemar shrugged. He just stood there silently for a few moments, looking at Jake as if waiting for him to talk. Jake just looked at him for a bit, unsure what to say before he finally spoke.

"How will this match work? Just like all the others? If you got your full memories as a god, then..." Jake muttered.

"It'll work just like normal, and don't ya worry, I can't do any of my fancy axesmanship in here!" Valdemar assured him.

Jake wasn't sure axesmanship was a real word, but he sure as hell wasn't going to point that out.

Still standing with his bow, Jake tried to let some of the tension in his body go as he knew things were about to start. "And, just to clarify, my win condition is to kill you or make you surrender?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, me dying will definitely make you win! Of course, if I think you are good enough, I might just give ya the win... but you have to prove yourself, aight? Again, I'm not gonna show ya any favor to a fellow human!

So... I don't necessarily have to kill him or fully beat him, Jake thought with relief. He instantly caught himself as the thought struck him. Wait... I'm relieved... I guess I shouldn't be that surprised...

Jake... didn't want to admit it, but standing before Valdemar, his instincts were screaming at him. Part of him wanted to fight, to prove his superiority over another human, but an even bigger part of him – primarily the survival instinct part – was telling him to just fucking run.

But, today, Jake let the first instinct win as he smiled at Valdemar. "Then, by all means... let's have a good one."

"Right on," Valdemar laughed loudly as he lifted his axe off his shoulder at the exact same moment Jake knocked an arrow. Making use of the distance, Jake wanted to try and land an arrow or two before Valdemar closed the distance.

Valdemar began walking toward Jake as he released the first arrow. Jake had expected the man to dodge, but he just kept walking as the arrow struck him in the shoulder and penetrated with the entire arrowhead.

"Sharp ones you got there," Valdemar said with a grin as he just kept walking. Jake tried to explode the arrow in his shoulder, but he couldn't connect to it at all... as if whatever trace of Willpower inside was being utterly suppressed.

The second arrow was blocked as Valdemar swiped it away with his axe as he began to pick up speed.

Jake took precautions and dodged back as Valdemar went into a full-on sprint. He closed in rapidly, his axe raised above his head. A golden aura began to envelop his body, making Jake hesitate for a moment as he recognized it from the vision, and he felt a presence spread that made his body feel heavier.

His moment of hesitation proved unwise as the axe came down a moment later.

At the very last moment, Jake had dodged, but it felt like the axe almost dragged him in as it came down. When it hit the arena floor, a pillar of sand nearly ten meters high was kicked up as Jake was thrown across the arena, his left arm bloody from simply enduring the sheer pressure from the swing.

Jake landed as he stumbled a bit, trying to stabilize as he now was completely certain... this first fight was not one to win, but one to figure out how to not die too quickly.

Chapter 778: Nevermore: Warrior (2)

Three minutes and fourteen seconds.

That's how long Jake lasted in the first fight against Valdemar before he found his skull crushed. Not even by an axe either, but from a fist smashing his head into the sand so hard his face caved in. Three minutes and change didn't seem like a long time, but when he mentioned it to Artemis, she had been damn impressed he had even survived that long.

At the beginning of their fight, Jake had held on well. He had kited Valdemar around, avoided his blows as best he could and tried to get a read on the man. He tried to read his tempo, his tendencies, and his habits as Jake looked for any minor flaws or openings to exploit.

Jake found many flaws and openings... too many, in fact. Valdemar was left wide open whenever he attacked, and he barely seemed to protect his vital areas while fighting. Most of Jake's attacks, he just

ignored, while he only bothered to block those that either took little effort or could actually prove dangerous. Valdemar did make sure to avoid any attacks to the face and neck, but hitting anywhere else didn't seem to bother him much.

In total, Jake landed eleven arrows during the fight. He could have landed more, but he wasn't fighting to win or even deal damage but to learn from his opponent. He had battled to figure out how he could drag out the fights and not just die immediately... because that was the number one lesson Jake took away from the fight:

Don't get hit.

It seemed like a basic lesson, but Jake usually did take some hits. He would sometimes exchange blows to deal more damage to his opponent in trade for taking a bit himself, or he would block attacks he either couldn't or judged he didn't need to dodge.

Against Valdemar, that was not a thing. The reason he had ultimately lost his first life was because Jake had stupidly thought he could parry Valdemar's axe and direct it into the sand. What had happened instead was that Jake broke his wrist, had his entire body twisted, and was unable to react when a fist slammed into his face.

Blocking or parrying any direct hits was thus entirely out of the question. At least when it came to the axe... Jake still wasn't sure when it came to Valdemar's fists. Because, yes, the guy also liked to punch and even kick... and holy fuck should Valdemar have gotten the title of Doomfoot instead of Jake.

Doomfist, too, considering a punch from Valdemar was more powerful than the hammer blows from the Necromancer. His kicks were even more powerful. But... Jake had discovered that he wasn't entirely powerless. Because while Valdemar was overwhelmingly powerful, Jake could still dodge him, even if he did sometimes get hit with blasts from the sheer power of the Primordial's blows.

In movement speed, he had Valdemar slightly beat if he just sprinted away, the boots that allowed him to run in the sand helping quite a bit. This only really counted for elaborate movements, though. Valdemar's charging speed was insane as he pretty much kicked off the ground whenever he moved, propelling himself forward, not much unlike the Warmaster.

When it came to swinging speed, Valdemar was an utterly ridiculous monster, and it felt like his axe borderline just teleported around as he swung it. This also played into another thing Jake discovered: Valdemar never half-arsed anything.

Usually, fighters did feints, weak blows to land a stronger one, or, you know, had any kind of strategy or complex thought behind their moves. Valdemar didn't do any of that. He fully committed to every single attack, no matter what. He didn't do small jabs; he only threw haymakers. This was what left him full of openings... but also what made him so unbelievably powerful with every single attack.

So... yeah. All direct hits were to be dodged for sure.

All in all, Jake believed his first death had been a good one. Oddly enough, he didn't feel that bad about the death at all, likely because he had "planned" to die. He had accepted that deaths would happen and was ready for it to happen again. His Bloodline was even silent, though he had a good feeling it was just building up and preparing for the one fight Jake decided he was going for the win.

Because Jake was naturally not doing all this just to get killed nine times in a row... he was doing it to eke out a victory in the end. The Challenge Dungeon was made to be beatable, so Jake sure as hell wanted to beat it. He just needed to do the proper groundwork first by dying a few times.

Right after Jake had died, he had once more appeared in an entirely white room as a system menu he had a feeling he would see quite a few times in the coming period popped up in front of his eyes.

Three Resurrection Points Available:

1. The day the challenge to the Warrior was issued.
2. A week before the fight with the Warrior begins.
3. The same day that the fight with the Warrior took place.

Choose one Resurrection point.

Jake had considered for a while before choosing to go back to a week before the fight began, as he did have some preparations he wanted to make. Primarily regarding the arrows he would bring into the fight.

When he theorized Valdemar would be the final boss, he also assumed the man wouldn't wear any heavy armor. But, for some stupid reason, Jake had assumed that a bare-chested Valdemar wouldn't have muscles so stupidly dense that he may as well have worn tough leather armor. With that in mind, he changed the arrow design with only the act of piercing tough flesh in mind. He could already leave nasty flesh wounds, but Jake wanted to do far more than that... he wanted arrows that could pierce straight through some weak areas to hopefully deal meaningful damage while also making the holes bleed way more. He accomplished this by changing the design of the arrows so that they would no longer automatically plug any holes they made.

Because the objective of Jake's eighth life was to test exactly how durable Valdemar was.

"The way you're looking at me makes me think this isn't your first attempt," Valdemar said in a casual tone as he saw Jake stand across from him, ready to retreat and make some distance, yet not backing down in the slightest as he straightened his back and looked directly at the Primordial.

Jake was back in the arena a week after his first encounter, and the pressure from the man hadn't lessened in the slightest. He had just learned something valuable, though:

Only Jake would have memories of all their former encounters, so he would definitely be able to make use of that. Of course, he couldn't just lay an exact game plan, as the world wasn't deterministic, so each encounter would play out slightly differently, even if Jake did the same things.

"It's my second one, Got eight lives left," Jake answered.

"And yet you still stand straight," Valdemar grinned widely. "Good! No need to keep talking then!"

Valdemar exploded forward without warning as he charged far more aggressively than he had in the prior fight. Jake reacted in a flash as he jumped to the side to avoid the charge while shooting an arrow. Being in full sprint, Valdemar was hit in the thigh by the arrow as it pierced deeply, but the attack didn't impede his movements at all as he kept heading straight for Jake.

Jake didn't even try to bring out his katars as he ducked under the first axe swipe, feeling his hair nearly get ripped out from the rush of air that followed the attack. A fist came straight after, but Jake was ready and jumped right as Valdemar punched the ground, borrowing the momentum of the shockwave as he shot another arrow that curved around and hit the Primordial in the arm.

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Before the dust had even the slightest chance to settle, Valdemar ripped his fist out of the sand, sending a spout of sand flying upward, clouding himself within it. For a moment, Jake thought he was trying to hide... but he had literally just ripped his fist out fast, not caring at all if he made a smokescreen. He continued the attack as the glinting axe exited the sand first, swinging toward Jake, who was still a good three meters away while still retreating. A faint golden crescent wave shot out, and Jake raised his durable bow as he infused it with a bit of arcane mana.

Now, there was one thing Jake could block, and that was these energy waves. They were dangerous if they hit him straight-on, but he was fully capable of blocking them as long as he used his bow or katars along with a bit of arcane mana. More so than him just blocking, they often even ended up helping him.

Riding the wave of energy of the blast after he blocked it, Jake got enough distance to shoot two more arrows, one hitting the chest of Valdemar, with the other one getting blocked by his axe. He shot one final arrow into the air before the monstrous warrior arrived and cleaved downward with his weapon, kicking up another explosion of sand and sending Jake skirting back.

He didn't have time to shoot any arrows as he quickly switched to his katars. Valdemar had left his axe embedded in the sand to continue his attack faster as he instantly closed the distance, using his explosive speed while he performed a wide kick. Jake didn't even try to block as he managed to barely bend his back and dodge it, a few scratches still on his chin as it was cut by the wind and sand.

The follow-up was a haymaker that Jake once more barely avoided as he landed a single stab on the punching arm, sending a bit of blood flying. The Primordial just grinned in response as he swept his arm sideways, making Jake back away.

Right then, the arrow Jake had shot earlier descended from above, hitting Valdemar in the collarbone, the impact making his knee buckle for a fraction of a moment. A flash of surprise appeared on his face as he looked at the arrow sticking out of his collar before gripping and tearing it out without flinching.

"You're a real fast and tricky one, aren't ya?" Valdemar said as he casually turned his back and walked back to pick up his axe. Jake didn't even hesitate to pull out his bow and shoot two arrows. Valdemar turned his side to Jake and raised his arm, just taking the arrows in his left forearm, where they penetrated all the way to – but failed to damage – the bone. Lifting his axe with his other arm, he fully turned and regarded Jake.

"Using a bow with some weird mana, too..." the Primordial smiled as he turned his arm and looked at Jake's arrows sticking out as he casually swung his axe and deflected another arrow Jake had shot. "And... those punching daggers. What were they called again?"

"Katars," Jake answered, not even bothering to shoot any more arrows.

"That's it! Yeah, katars," Valdemar smiled happily despite the several arrows sticking out of his body and the blood rolling down his chest from the nasty hole in his collarbone and the chest literally sticking out of his one pec. "I tend to make a bit of a game figuring out what god my fighting pals are with... but you, I find pretty darn hard to place. So, ya mind just telling me?"

Jake couldn't help but smirk as he shook his head. "I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, though I can see that being pretty hard to see, considering I am not exactly using poisons of any kind."

Valdemar's smile suddenly faded as he looked at Jake seriously. "Are you lying to me?"

"No?" Jake said, slightly confused by the change in the man's aura. "The Malefic Viper is back and out in the open, and I am his Chosen."

"You're telling me that the Vilas has not only left his divine realm but given his big Blessing to a human? One from the new era?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Jake confirmed.

"Heh," Valdemar chuckled to himself as he started full-on laughing as his voice bellowed for several seconds before he finally calmed down and looked at Jake. "Good! Real good! For too long have I been waiting!"

Jake, who had just been casually talking, realized he had made a mistake as Valdemar's aura suddenly began spiking. Golden energy erupted from his body as he made a huge, toothy smile.

"Hey, mate... ya said ya still got eight lives, right!?" Valdemar yelled.

Jake tentatively nodded.

"Hah! Well, losing this life's on you for getting me all fired up!" the Primordial yelled happily as the sand around him began floating into the air, vibrating in his presence.

In the next second, he exploded forward like a golden meteor. Jake reacted as fast as he could when he dodged, releasing arcane energy throughout his body. He boosted his body as much as possible as he barely avoided the first downward axe swing. His chest armor was still cut up, but Jake managed to avoid taking any lethal damage.

There was not a single thought of counterattacking in his mind as Valdemar instantly followed up as he cut upward with his axe, releasing a torrent of sand that Jake tried to borrow the momentum as he blasted arcane mana beneath him to try and get into the air.

He was a moment too slow.

Jake had made a bad judgment call as a hand grasped his foot right before he was out of reach. He was dragged down again and smashed into the sand hard, pushing out all air from his lungs as he stared up at a maniacally grinning Valdemar, who was shining like some golden god, as he promptly brought down his axe to end the fight.

At that final moment, with time seemingly moving a little slower than usual... Jake became absolutely certain. That golden aura originated from a Transcendent, no two ways about it... the problem was just that Jake still had no idea exactly when he activated it or how it worked yet.

All he did know for sure... was that bringing up the Malefic Viper and getting Valdemar all excited was definitely not the play.

So, the eighth life had been a bit of a learning experience, but not the one he had wanted, so during his seventh life, Jake tried to finally test the limits of Valdemar's durability. He managed to land far more hits than during any of the prior fights, but even as Valdemar was left bloody all over... it never seemed to impact his movements much, and eventually, Jake was unable to keep up and lost another life. Toward the end, Valdemar had begun to be more defensive and blocked more hits, so at least it felt like there was some progress.

His sixth life was spent without ever taking out his bow. Jake had gone in to fight entirely in melee to try and better survive close combat, as he began to realize his strategy of just dodging and running away wasn't sustainable if he wanted to win. He would simply run out of energy before Valdemar would fall.

Either way, fighting in melee proved quite the challenge, but Jake did better than he had expected, surviving for even longer than the first fight he had with Valdemar, fighting for over four minutes.

Every fight, no, every moment, felt like he was under constant pressure trying to keep him down, but with time, Jake began to adapt. He began to get a better read on Valdemar, and he began to understand how he fought. Jake himself also got better as his initial apprehension had now been entirely turned into excitement. Valdemar was powerful... far more powerful than Jake himself, and despite knowing that, he wanted to still fight. He wanted to win.

He wanted to see the true limits of Valdemar's Transcendence... and show him the limits of his Bloodline in turn.

Chapter 779: Nevermore: Warrior (3)

To use his own life and death as a mere resource in his preparations did feel odd to Jake, but in truth, he had no other choice. Valdemar was simply too overwhelmingly powerful for Jake to possibly defeat him in a single attempt, and Jake also suspected he was just a straight-up cheat, as while he didn't use any skills... well, it wasn't like the S-grade Valdemar fighting the Malefic Viper in the vision had used many either. The only real thing Jake remembered him using was that Fang of Man skill, along with what Jake assumed to be a self-made brew to help cleanse the toxins.

So, all Jake could do was keep dying as he accumulated knowledge through several deaths.

When he only had five lives remaining, Jake fully confirmed that Valdemar had indeed entirely transcended the limitations of a G-grade human body. For Jake, in his current state, having a kneecap broken or his tendons severed would make him unable to move properly, even if he could force some movement using his internal energy. The action would be stilted and far slower than usual, though.

Valdemar did not have these same limitations. During this life, Jake had managed to fully destroy his one kneecap during a borderline suicidal attack, only to see Valdemar continue running toward him, the entirely crushed knee somehow just holding up due to the golden aura. Ultimately, he concluded the only way to limit Valdemar's range of movement was to cut off a limb entirely... or some-fucking-how kill him outright.

As for how Jake could accomplish that one? Well, he had hoped that his big arrow could be a solution... so when he had four lives remaining, Jake stayed at his own entrance area as he took out his quasi-Protean Arrow and began charging his skillless Arcane Powershot before Valdemar even entered the arena.

It was a bit scummy, but he had to at least give it a go. Valdemar had walked up to the arena as Jake finished charging the attack. Without hesitation, he had let it go, only for Valdemar to laugh loudly as he took it head-on. Axe met arrow as a massive explosion rocked the arena, sending destructive shards of arcane mana flying everywhere as the large arrow fragmented like a grenade.

When the dust settled, Valdemar still walked out of the cloud of dust, small wounds covering his chest, but otherwise completely unharmed, his body burning with golden aura. So, in conclusion, Valdemar swinging his axe really hard was roughly equivalent to Jake's strongest attack...

That life had ended pretty quickly after that, as Jake had caused some self-damage with his quasi-Powershot, making him a tiny bit slower than before, which naturally resulted in a rapid demise. Jake did get a bit more experimentation in during that life, though... because he had noticed one thing already several lives ago.

While Valdemar's stats were through the roof, he was lacking in Perception. The arrow Jake had shot up that hit him in the collarbone hadn't been a one-off... so that was where Jake could focus. He would exploit the one weakness he had found to land meaningful blows and hopefully pull out a victory that way, if possible.

When he had three lives remaining, Jake began to implement some level of proper strategy as he also finally did something he should have done far earlier. While Jake wanted to figure out how the hell Valdemar's Transcendence worked and had done many things to test it, there was one thing he had neglected to try:

Just asking the guy.

After a few clashes, Jake found himself on the backfoot but also managed to land some hits. So far, the fight hadn't gone terribly, and Jake finally questioned the Primordial.

"How does that golden aura of yours even work? It's a Transcendence, right?" Jake asked, in all honesty, not really expecting any answer. It was actually pretty dumb of him to even ask. Why would someone like a Primordial just tell some random mortal something like tha-

"System does sure call it a Transcendence," Valdemar nodded as he looked to really rack his brain for a moment. "As for how it works... well, it just does."

"It.. just works?" Jake questioned the pretty empty statement with a deadpan expression.

"Oh, look at you judging! Then tell me, how does that weird mana of yours work!" Valdemar asked, crossing his arms.

"Well, it's an arcane affinity, so it's pretty normal that I don't know exactly how it works," Jake answered promptly.

"So you don't know how it works," Valdemar stated with confidence.

"I do know what it does," Jake mumbled. "I can make it stable and destructive, making it either incredibly durable and practically a physical object, while the destructive variant deals incredible damage."

"That just sounds like normal mana," Valdemar scratched his beard. "Ya sure ya didn't just accidentally color your mana purple or something?"

"Pretty sure I didn't," Jake sighed. "And it's inspired by normal mana, it's just... more."

Valdemar just smiled, his facial expression full of satisfaction as if he had just won some major argument. "As I said... ya don't know."

Jake felt kind of defeated arguing against a guy who didn't rely on logic, as he countered. "Well, I answered you, so at least tell me what your odd golden aura does. To me, it just looks like it somehow makes you stronger."

"It's my fighting aura! It's from my fighting spirit!" Valdemar grinned widely. "At least that's what I call it."

"Fighting spirit?" Jake asked. That just sounded so... vague? Undefined. Jake also had fighting spirit – a lot of it – but that didn't make him glow like some golden god who could display insane levels of power. It couldn't be that simple...

"Yep, my fighting spirit," the Primordial laughed as he raised his axe high. "The spirit of a legend! A hero! A warlord!"

His golden aura erupted again as he was firing himself up as he looked straight at Jake. "A warrior."

Surprisingly enough, he didn't attack but just looked at Jake for a moment, almost waiting for him to do something. When he didn't, Valdemar just shook his head.

"You're still waiting for the right time, aren't ya?" he asked. "Still got some lives left to spare?"

Jake frowned slightly as Valdemar seemed to know something. In the end, Jake only subtly nodded as Valdemar nodded in turn, recognizing the situation. He seemed almost saddened as he looked at Jake.

"Ya know, that's the real problem with these Challenge Dungeons and events where you can't really die. It's all so damn fake," Valdemar shook his head as he looked Jake straight in the eye. "Without putting our lives on the line, how can we feel truly excited!? How can we give it our all if we know we are safe! Only with a blade to their neck can a true warrior show their full power!"

His golden aura fluctuated as he said this, though it didn't seem to weaken in the slightest.

"People tell me I have a good nose for these things... and looking at ya, I can see ya got something in here," Valdemar said as he pounded the left side of his chest. "But why pull it out when your life isn't even on the line? Why fight with desperation when you are not truly desperate!?"

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Jake was taken aback by the passionate words of the Primordial, who seemed almost angry at the very existence of the dungeon. But... he could also only agree. Jake had just died several times without really caring. Instinctually, he understood that death in the Challenge Dungeon was not true death. It didn't trigger the depths of his survival instincts, even if it had come close the first time he had died against the Necromancer.

If this was the real world and Jake found himself facing Valdemar at a similar level... he would not have fought as he did in the Colosseum. He would have fought with true desperation and pulled out everything he had... he would have fought with his life on the line, as he had when he faced the King of the Forest. He would, at the very least, have gone for mutual destruction.

"I can see from the look in your eyes you understand," Valdemar said in an elated voice. "Ya still got some lives... but when ya have only one attempt left, properly challenge me. Challenge me to a duel of the ages! Challenge me to create the ultimate Legend of the Colosseum! If ya do that, I shall face ya with the respect such a challenge requires. Ah, but be careful... I may get a little excited at the prospect."

"I will keep that in mind," Jake nodded solemnly. "Now, let's finish this attempt."

"I hope ya learn something!" Valdemar laughed. "Should make the true duel far more entertaining!"

With those words, the Primordial charged, and Jake faced him for nearly six minutes before he finally fell.

Two lives remained.

After his talk with Valdemar, he realized that during their final duel, he would have to not hesitate in the slightest but do all he could. While it was possible for Jake to just go back to the save point before he issued the challenge and spend a year practicing, he never considered it. Instead, he turned toward something he had written off as not an option a long time ago:

Boosting skills.

Jake had already touched on it against the Lightning Monarch, but for a level 0, having a consistently active boosting skill just wasn't viable. Instead, Jake had switched to using short, controllable bursts of arcane energy while fighting to help himself, but the increase was far from the insane 60% Arcane Awakening could provide at full power.

If Jake did use the full Arcane Awakening... well, he couldn't. Boosting skills were skills for a very good reason. They were borderline required to be skills, as consciously controlling the extreme flow of energy

through your body while fighting was pretty much impossible, and the only reason why boosting skills were widespread was that the system handled everything.

However... even if Jake did call it pretty much impossible, it wasn't entirely impossible. The Lightning Monarch had an arcane affinity extremely well-fitted to boosting yourself, which also meant that in a situation where he lost control, it wouldn't damage him too much. For Jake, if he was running arcane energy through his body and lost total control, his entire body would disintegrate or explode.

Learning to safely emulate a boosting skill without the skill part would likely take Jake years. So, he decided not to do that but just accepted the downside of an uncontrollable boosting skill. Accept that death would be the inevitable conclusion after he activated the boost.

His second-to-last death was one Jake committed solely to making sure he didn't kill himself too fast during his last fight with Valdemar.

When he entered the arena, Jake had begun to boost his body early on. He had felt the burning sensation of pure destructive energy coursing through his veins, slowly destroying him from within with the promise of power in return. A power that it delivered as Jake got more powerful in every aspect as he engaged the Primordial.

For the first time, Jake truly kept up and fought back with vigor. He landed several devastating blows, nearly ripping off Valdemar's arm at one point, even if he lost his own in the exchange, and successfully stabbed him a few dozen times. All that coming after he landed quite a few arrows. For a while, it looked like he could truly fight equally with the Primordial - a while being a good fifty seconds, in this case, before he reached his limits. His resources began to run out, and his body could no longer take the forceful circulation of destructive energy as it began to fall apart. He didn't even have the time to die to his own skill, though, as Valdemar's axe finished the job before nature had the chance to take its course.

One life remaining.

Jake chose to return to the day he issued the challenge when he revived. Not because he needed the extra prep time but because he wanted to spend the time getting in the best mental state he could while also enjoying his remaining two weeks with Artemis, Owen, Polly, and even chatting with the Battlemaster. No matter what, the next fight would be the last.

After two weeks of relaxation, Jake was back in the Colosseum. During this period, he had tried not to think too much about the fight... but as he walked down the tunnel toward the arena, he felt his own heartbeat begin to speed up. This time, there was no trace of fear or trepidation but only pure excitement.

Jake was down to his final attempt. A final duel with the most powerful level 0 human alive... or, hopefully, the soon-to-be second-most powerful level 0 human alive.

It was time to find the one true Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals... no, the true Grand Champion of humanity.

The level 0 G-grade version of humanity, anyway.

"That last match was impressive," the Wyrmgod commented. "Better than I expected... but not quite enough. Not against Valdemar."

"Yeah," Minaga nodded. "We did kind of overdo it with this Grand Champion, didn't we? Even if we did try to even the playing field by not necessarily requiring them to kill him and giving him his memories."

Vilastromoz stayed silent as he just observed. He didn't really have any questions about why they had done as they had with him retaining his memories and all. There was zero risk of him showing favor to people from his faction or other humans. Valdemar would never surrender just to give someone a free win... his honor simply wouldn't allow it. In fact, it was potentially the only way to allow anyone to beat him.

"Say, Vilas... do you think Jake can win?" Minaga asked, clearly not that confident himself. "I would have said yes under normal circumstances... but Valdemar's Transcendence is... yeah."

The Viper thought for a moment before smiling and waving off the question. "It will be tough no matter what, but wouldn't I be a horrible Patron if I didn't even believe in my Chosen?"

He said that, but in truth... Vilastromoz had no idea. It was two people full of unknowns fighting, and based on their talk during Jake's third-to-last life, he got the feeling anything could happen. Jake had his Bloodline that could do something ridiculous, while Valdemar had his Transcendence. Something that the Viper also had to admit he didn't comprehend.

Transcendent skills came in many forms. Jake already knew of his swordsman pal, who had an interesting one he could activate to temporarily experience a change. The Undying General was a person who could activate his Transcendence to make himself impossible to kill for a period, while the Transcendence of Eversmile was a skill that could be activated to completely destroy someone, effectively erasing them from the Records of the multiverse. Or, as a final example, Aeon who could activate his to truly stop the very concept of time for a period.

And while these were all incredibly powerful, they all had one keyword attached: activate. They needed to be used. One needed to trigger them, with every use having some associated cost. Often something extremely valuable or even an antithesis to what the skill did. They were all skills no one would use haphazardly but always saved as their final ace.

Even the Holyland created by the Holy Mother had a great cost associated with it. Not only did keeping the skill active cost a lot of the faith energy she absorbed, but Vilastromoz also knew she had to pay an astronomical cost when she first established it, and should the Holyland ever get damaged or be destroyed entirely, remaking it would prove extremely difficult and costly, to the level of his fellow Primordial potentially considering it impossible.

However... to this date, Vilastromoz had no idea what the hell the cost of Valdemar's Transcendence was. At first, he had thought if maybe the cost was a permanent sacrifice in intelligence and wisdom – and not the stats – but the man had proven uncharacteristically smart and wise at times.

He had come up with many more theories and even tested them. Was his simple fighting style a requirement? Was it some hidden special resource? Vilastromoz had even considered that he had entirely transformed his stamina and mana resource pools into a special new Transcendent resource... but none of them proved accurate.

The worst part was that Valdemar himself also clearly didn't know. He wasn't even sure when he got the Transcendence, making the Viper think it was potentially from before the system had even arrived. He just had it, and he used it all the time. This is where it truly stood out, and the Viper had realized something:

His Transcendence didn't need to be activated. It was a passive skill. Vilastromoz had, in all honesty, not considered that Transcendent skills could even be passive before he met Valdemar, but the man had proven him and everyone else wrong. All while just shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

But... at the same time, the Viper also didn't understand Jake's Bloodline. Nor did he even fully understand his arcane affinity. It was two humans that truly puzzled him fighting, so the Viper couldn't help but look forward to the outcome. To see what Jake could pull out of his ass this time around... or if Valdemar's eternal bullshit once more proved superior.

“Since you said you believe in him, are you willing to bet on your Chosen?” Minaga said, the forever-opportunist. “I like Jake... but I vote on Valdemar winning the duel. I’ll even give you good odds.”

The Viper considered for a while as he looked at Jake walking down the tunnel. In the recording, he saw him walk with steady steps as the Viper saw the look in Jake’s eyes and just smiled.

“You’re on.”

Chapter 780: Nevermore: Hunter vs. Warrior

During the first era, humans had been viewed as a weak race. Even weaker than the other enlightened races. They lived for a short time, especially at lower grades, and the only real thing anyone agreed they had going for them was their higher reproductive speeds. They didn’t have any good racial skills, and their stat distribution was spread out to create jacks of all trades but masters of none. Moreover, as enlightened, they leveled slower than beasts or monsters and had to adopt a far more diverse path by focusing on both a profession and a class. Compared to other races, they just didn’t have much going for them.

As an example, the elven Altmar Empire began to rise during the first era, and other powerful factions were slowly rising and gaining recognition, with elves, dwarves, scalekin, and beastkin all finding their niches and fighting back against the monsters. Humans were just viewed as among the weakest of the enlightened races and an inferior variant... until Valdemar appeared.

With a single axe in hand, Valdemar showed the power of humanity as he exemplified the notion of a one-man army. He conquered empires, slaughtered armies, and became an unstoppable force none could stand against, with even monsters fearing him. Eventually, after there were already few, if any, that could face him, he rose to godhood as the first enlightened.

Without Valdemar, humanity would be far weaker than they were today. Jake would be far weaker than he was, and not just because of the Fang of Man skill he had gained, but due to the sharing of Records. Every single human was affected by the Records Valdemar sent echoing out into the multiverse through his rise to power, the same as how every snake was affected by the Malefic Viper.

In some ways, one could even call Valdemar the Forefather of humanity. The strongest and most influential human in existence... a human who stood at the peak of existence. It was something Jake recognized as fact, simply due to knowing history, yet, as stupid as it sounded, it wasn't something he could fully accept.

Because to accept that Valdemar was the peak of humanity would be to acknowledge him as his superior. Even if he was stronger right now... Jake couldn't accept losing when the playing ground was at least somewhat evened by the Colosseum of Mortals.

Walking up the steps to the arena with steady steps, everything felt the same as every other fight. The clamoring crowd, the announcer, Owen and Polly in the stands... everything was the same. The only true difference was Jake.

When he saw the large arena he had laid his eyes on so many times before, he only felt a sense of calmness. Yet, at the very same time, he faintly felt his own heart beat with excitement as it wanted him to let loose. But Jake knew patience. When he went all-out, he would be on a pretty short timer, and for this final confrontation, he would do everything in his power to pull out a victory.

For the ninth time, the announcer did his thing, and the gates lowered as Jake's final battle against Valdemar began. He casually walked toward the center of the arena as he waited for his opponent to arrive. A few seconds later, he heard footsteps as the Primordial appeared, looking a little surprised at Jake just standing there, waiting.

“Definitely not ya first attempt, eh?” Valdemar said with a big grin as he also walked toward the middle of the arena. “But the look in those eyes is still good. How many times have we stood here before?”

“This is the ninth... and I am on my final life,” Jake answered truthfully.

“Got here with nine lives, eh? Impressive. Gotta make the last one count, then,” Valdemar said with a shrug as he slightly shifted his weight, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

Jake smiled as he pulled out his bow. “I plan on doing just that. So let’s make this fight into an ultimate legend unlike any the Colosseum of Mortals has ever seen before.”

His words made Valdemar pause briefly as he laughed. “You’re no slouch, eh? A proper challenge! Good! Good! I asked you to say that, right?”

Golden energy began to shimmer around his body as he asked, Jake nodding in response. “It’s my last attempt, after all... so I might as well make it legendary.”

“Then come! Face me, and let’s have a good one, eh!” Valdemar laughed incredibly loudly before looking directly at Jake, his massive grin still marking his face. “Remember... you asked for it!”

Valdemar exploded forward immediately with incredible speed, but even so, Jake had already reacted and gotten on the move himself. The Primordial was many things, and predictable was definitely one of them, making it easy to read when he was about to attack or not. Actually responding to the attack was a whole other story... but Jake would manage. He had to if he wanted to execute the plan he had spent nine lives making.

Making use of this initial opening, Jake loosed two arrows toward Valdemar, the first one hitting him in the arm as the Primordial was turning. The second one was swept away, and Jake knew that releasing a third one wouldn't be worth it as Valdemar would easily block it. He had a limited number of arrows and had to conserve them, after all.

With his heavy but swift steps, Valdemar was soon upon Jake again. The straightforward slash that looked easy to dodge was avoided by only a hair's margin as Jake weaved in between the man's hits as he still took some light damage from the remnant golden aura and sheer wind pressure.

Jake had switched to his katars and managed to land a few light cuts and shallow stabs until he was forced to make distance before Valdemar could land a too-dangerous blow. He still wasn't using his boosting skill and was thus still heavily outclassed in power and attack speed. His only real advantage was his higher movement speed and dodging ability, but that had its limits. However, Jake had a plan.

Even if he was disadvantaged now, he wanted to set a tempo for the fight. A status quo of him running away and avoiding blows until he would unleash his boosting skill to land a hopefully impactful blow to gain him an advantage for the rest of the fight.

So that is exactly what he did. A dozen arrows were expended as Jake and Valdemar both took several minor wounds to their bodies as they exchanged blows. A single mistake from Jake would spell his doom, while Valdemar had plenty of leeway in every clash, the man even taking the fight pretty calmly. Jake knew his opponent could unleash more power than he currently was, but he equally knew that the Primordial had a tendency to rise to a challenge and match his opponent in power. Well, if matching them in power meant still thoroughly overpowering them. The point was he could overpower Jake more than he currently was if Jake powered himself up too early. Once he did go all-out, Jake knew he would have less than a minute to hopefully eke out a victory.

“You’re a fast and tricky one, eh!?” Valdemar laughed as he pushed Jake back, forcing him to skirt across the sand for a few meters before coming to a stop. “Imma give it to ya, ya either fought me a lot more than the ten times allowed, or you’re a damn dodging prodigy!”

“As I said, I have spent nine lives fighting you already,” Jake smiled as he met the Primordial’s eyes. “And you say I am only dodging... but the arrows sticking out of you kinda say otherwise.”

“Bah! They’re just flesh wounds!” Valdemar shrugged unbothered as he stopped talking and continued his assault, Jake once more meeting his tempo. He had done this exact fight several times before and knew that soon Valdemar would change things up as he got bored of the status quo. He would change the tempo by displaying more power than usual and do a hyper-aggressive attack.

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That moment would be Jake’s time to strike.

A minute or so more passed as Valdemar slowly picked up the pace as usual. Jake used a few more arrows during this time and tried to keep his distance and be in melee range as little as possible, but he couldn’t avoid taking minor injuries here and there.

By now, his armor was pretty shredded in many places, having done its job of blocking Valdemar’s energy. In fact, the Primordial was clearly more injured than Jake, even if his movements didn’t show at all. This wasn’t anything special, and far from the first life it had happened, but it was a good start.

Soon enough, Jake felt the mood shift. Valdemar was done evaluating Jake as he charged once more, giving off an even more ferocious aura than usual. Jake dodged the first swing as the Primordial grinned

to himself right as his body exploded with his fighting aura. With a roar, he stomped, releasing a shockwave of pure force, pushing Jake back through the sand as Valdemar used the momentum of his own stomp to lunge forward with a wide downward swing, aiming to take Jake's arm. His explosive power would take most by surprise... but Jake had expected it.

Valdemar's strike left him wide open; his attack performed with the expectation that Jake would avoid as he had done with every other major attack. However, rather than continuing to borrow the energy of the shockwave to dodge backward, Jake did just the opposite.

Bracing himself, Jake stepped down hard as his foot exploded with arcane energy. This energy then spread throughout his entire body within moments, making him even faster as he propelled himself toward the surprised Valdemar at a speed the Primordial couldn't have predicted. Jake went under the head of the axe before it managed to strike down and entered extreme-close range, both katars ready to strike.

His opponent was completely taken by surprise, yet he still reacted well. Jake had wanted to strike the heart or neck of Valdemar, but his free left arm moved into a defensive position instantly, forcing Jake to make the executive decision to strike lower where he couldn't defend. Due to the lunging blow, Valdemar could not easily move his legs, which Jake took full advantage of.

One katar stabbed forward, penetrating deeply into the Primordial's guts, while the other stabbed down into his thigh. The arcane energy coursing through his body empowered the blows further as a sound reminiscent of static electricity sounded out from the clashing arcane energy and Valdemar's transcendent fighting aura.

Not missing a beat, Jake twisted his body around Valdemar, who tried to catch him in a bear hug, using the momentum of his movement to twist the katar in the Primordial's thigh as he sliced the katar in the stomach across his flesh, sending blood spilling out.

Jake wanted to do more, but he was forced to quickly kick off the sand and send himself back to dodge an elbow descending toward his skull, the attack moving far faster than anything Valdemar had done prior. However, even as Jake dodged, he was forced to block a wave of golden aura as it clashed with his own arcane energy, Valdemar having truly risen to the occasion as the golden aura around his body was more intense than ever.

“You were holding out on me!” Valdemar said as he held a hand to his stomach and slightly shifted his weight away from the injured leg. Despite calling Jake out, the man had a huge grin on his face, looking ecstatic that Jake had more to show for himself.

Jake clicked his tongue at seeing his attack not doing as much as he wanted, but he was still kind of on track for the plan.

“Had to make it a little more exciting,” Jake smiled while pulling out his bow, trying to take advantage of Valdemar’s limited mobility. He knew that the Primordial would not be held back by having most of his thigh muscles torn apart for long, after all. Plus, it wasn’t like Jake had the leeway to dally with arcane energy, tearing his body apart from the inside.

With high precision, Jake carefully used some of his remaining arrows as Valdemar blocked what he could with his axe. He was down to less than a dozen only twenty or so seconds later, but in turn, Valdemar had a few more bleeding holes across his body, primarily on his forearms and even one in his left pec.

“My turn!” the man yelled after the twenty-second attack window as the wound on his thigh had been temporarily “fixed” with his fighting aura. The huge wound was almost shining now, and despite not healing, it didn’t seem to affect him much at all as he charged, having picked up his speed even more than before.

Something he needed to, as post-boost, Jake was far, far faster than before. He easily dodged a simple combo before landing a light cut on Valdemar's wrist, sadly not hitting any veins. Jake tried to do more, but Valdemar exploded in golden light, pushing Jake back a single step. Barely avoiding a punch, Jake landed a solid stab but was too slow to dodge a fist that rammed into his side, sending him flying into a pillar.

Despite feeling the pain all the way to his bone, Jake only used this opportunity to make some distance and shoot two more arrows. Taking a hit had slightly lowered the time his body would last while boosting, but he should still have enough time. He also still had one more major trick up his sleeve... or, well, in his ring.

The fight continued with Jake dodging swings, landing stabs, and shooting arrows while Valdemar just did as usual, though with far more ferocity and power than before, as both he and Valdemar truly pushed themselves.

Throughout, Jake was looking for an opportunity to land the trump card he was waiting for. An opportunity that soon presented itself as Valdemar made a huge downward swing that embedded itself into the sand. Jake acted like he got baited in by charging as Valdemar grinned while ripping the axe out and turning the handle, performing an upward strike that exploded with golden energy.

The ground erupted with sand, golden aura, and arcane energy as a geiser of these three shot into the air... along with a single person.

Right at the moment Jake dove in, he switched his katars for his bow and blasted himself upward with a blast of arcane energy. At the same time, he had blocked with his extremely durable bow, shooting himself into the air, borrowing the power from Valdemar's blow.

Jake flew more than ten meters into the air, and already on the way up, he pulled out the final big attack he had prepared. A large, two-meter-long quasi-Protean Arrow appeared, and while spinning in mid-air, Jake nocked it as he reached the zenith of his impromptu flight.

Locking eyes with Valdemar, who still stood below, Jake began charging a quick skillless Powershot. The Primordial simply grinned as he shifted his stance to take on whatever attack Jake was preparing, not a shred of hesitation in his eyes.

After only a second of charging and borrowing all the remnant arcane energy from the arcane boost he could, Jake released the Arrow with impressive power, especially considering the added velocity from Jake falling.

Now, could Valdemar dodge this arrow? Easily... but Jake knew he wouldn't. Jake knew that even without any provocation or goading, the Primordial would take the attack head-on. Sadly for him, Jake didn't plan on letting Valdemar block the arrow so easily.

Right as the man swung his axe to destroy the quasi-Protean Arrow, the arrowhead suddenly exploded as a mist of dark mana spread and shot into Valdemar's face like ink from an octopus. Out of the explosion erupted a barrage of stable arcane fragments flying forward like a shotgun right toward the Primordial. Valdemar was quick as his golden aura intensified, and his axe swing annihilated most of the fragments, and his passive aura blocked the rest, nullifying the attack.

Valdemar grinned for a fraction of a moment before the true attack arrived. Out of the dark smoke emerged four sharp spikes that had been part of the arrow's body, having been slightly delayed due to the arrowhead exploding. As he had just finished a swing, Valdemar could not raise his axe fast enough and had to block with his arm at the very last moment to not have a spike hit his eye.

Two other long, sharp arcane spikes hit his stomach and thigh, respectively, as the final one missed and penetrated into the sand. The two spikes had hit the wounds Jake had made earlier and, with the existing damage, had managed to penetrate all the way through and into the sand.

Jake, still in mid-air, quickly released a blast of arcane energy upward to bring him down to the ground quicker as he was in quite a precarious situation while falling, and he would rather take the damage from the fall than leave himself vulnerable. Valdemar also knew this, but he luckily couldn't move with the two-meter-long arcane spikes penetrating through his body, letting him only attack with a ranged crescent wave of golden energy.

The blast struck Jake just before he hit the sand, sending him flying back. The intensity of the golden energy was higher than anything Jake had ever experienced before, confirming one thing for him:

In this fight, out of all of them, he had by far done the most damage to Valdemar.

Hitting the ground hard, Jake tumbled through the sand several times as the quiver that had been strapped to him flew off, having had its strap cut by the golden blast. The few remaining arrows spilled all over, but Jake had no time to think about it now. He quickly stopped his roll and took a knee as he looked at the heavily injured Valdemar standing a good twenty meters away, already ripping out the two arcane spikes pinning him down.

This was definitely Jake's best performance so far. His one problem just was... his time was running out fast. His current body was not made to endure the overflowing arcane energy coursing through it, and the damage he had taken from Valdemar's blows certainly didn't help either. He was already long past the point of return, and there was only one thing left to do:

Land a decisive blow before his body decided to give out.

With that in mind, Jake didn't hesitate as he charged straight for Valdemar to finish this fight once and for all.