

## Hunter 781

### Chapter 781: Nevermore: One Last Shot

Jake was smart enough to know when he was outmatched, and despite all his boosts and the many injuries he had inflicted on Valdemar, he was still at a major disadvantage. The only reason he even had a shot was because of Valdemar's fighting style being so damn straightforward and Jake having had nine whole lives to learn how to fight him. He could take Valdemar by surprise, a luxury Valdemar did not have.

Not to say there was much to learn about Valdemar's defensive style. Shit, the man only ever blocked and deflected attacks. Never once did he try to dodge or tactically retreat. He was an unstoppable force that just kept barreling at you until you crumbled, and he would rather take a stab in the stomach and hit you in the face than sidestep an attack. He truly was a ridiculous opponent.

Yet, despite being fully aware of this uphill battle, Jake refused to back down as he charged at the Primordial, who was still recovering from the two arcane spikes pinning him down. He had already ripped out the one in his thigh and had just ripped out the one in his stomach when Jake got close enough to use his katars.

He had wanted to explode the arcane mana spikes, but Valdemar's fighting energy had messed with his ability to do so, but at least they seemed to have done some serious damage to the man. In fact, Jake was pretty sure that Valdemar would be dead by now if not for his superhuman physique and fighting aura... but then again, without Jake's superhuman traits, he would also have long died to his injuries.

Jake's first attack on Valdemar was a straightforward stab toward his heart, one his opponent naturally easily blocked. From there, Jake unleashed a flurry of stabs and cuts as Valdemar stood his ground, seemingly recovering slightly with every passing second. Jake could only hope that wasn't truly the case as he didn't let up his assault, landing wound after wound on the man's body.

Sadly for him, even if Valdemar wasn't technically recovering, he did grow stronger, and his wounds did begin to bother him less and less. The thigh that couldn't turn became more flexible, and the large bleeding hole straight through his guts didn't even bleed anymore but instead looked like a glowing golden sun in the pit of his stomach.

With every second, Valdemar slowly regained the advantage and began to push Jake back. Growing more and more reckless, Jake desperately tried to land something – anything – that could turn the tides, but during this period, Valdemar had been nearly entirely defensive, never allowing Jake to land any potentially lethal hits. To make matters worse, his time was rapidly running out.

Eventually, Jake decided to allow himself to be forced away as he was pushed back. He flew through the air a bit before landing close to where his quiver had dropped before. Picking up an arrow, Jake took out his bow and quickly shot one, only to see it be reflected easily.

He considered picking up another arrow, but he knew it wouldn't work as he looked at the Primordial slowly walking toward him, the thigh at least still bothering him. Wracking his brain, Jake tried to find some way to fight back, but he was out of tricks.

No... there is that...

Jake was speaking of an ability he had already written off as useless before but was now willing to reconsider. It was the one truly "new" thing Jake had learned in the Challenge Dungeon: his Fear Gaze. Instinctively, Jake knew that against Valdemar, it would likely have no positive effect. Fear Gaze was effectively a clash of souls, and with Valdemar being Valdemar, there was a high chance that Jake would take far more damage than the Primordial would receive. Especially considering Valdemar still had all his memories, making it an even more perilous strategy.

But, in this final life, Jake wanted to try everything. No, he had to try everything. He was out of cards and was now willing to foolishly gamble on such a high-risk attack. But... hey, what did he have to lose? Worst case scenario, he would die, and based on how Challenge Dungeons worked, the system would heal him right up in the process of tossing him out. At least he hoped it would also fix mental and soul damage.

With determination, Jake rose once more. He was wobbly on his feet, the muscles throughout his body entirely shredded already by his own arcane energy. He was purely sustained on energy by now, like a terminal patient on life support. The moment he ran out of energy, he would die, and even if he somehow gained infinite energy, his body had an expiration date that was rapidly approaching.

One last shot.

Gritting his teeth, Jake met the eyes of Valdemar. He saw that the Primordial had a hint of tiredness in his own gaze, but compared to Jake, who was dealing with intense exhaustion, there was no comparison. The man smiled as he seemed to understand this would be Jake's last attack.

Pushing himself to his limit, Jake borderline emptied out his resource pools as he sprung forward, straight for the Primordial. He wasn't going to set up the attack with anything fancy but would just do a straight charge without any trace of fear.

His opponent didn't seem surprised at first but did frown when Jake did something supremely risky. To make up for the height difference, Jake jumped as he yelled loudly, seemingly aiming to plunge both his katars into the Primordial's skull. An attack that clearly wouldn't work, hence Valdemar's confusion.

In a natural response, his opponent simply swung his axe toward Jake. Anyone could see Valdemar's attack was primed to cut the airborne Jake in two from shoulder to groin before he would accomplish

anything. The longer weapon would reach Jake before he had a chance to land his katars... but Jake did have a weapon that was even longer than an axe.

Dismissing both katars, Jake's bow appeared as he stabbed the sharpened tip toward Valdemar's left eye with both hands. The man quickly reacted as he moved his free left hand to simply catch the spear-like tip of the bow. Jake's odd move had clearly confused the Primordial due to its recklessness as he looked at Jake, who met his gaze directly.

There was no more room for fear or hesitation as Jake lay his soul bare and used Fear Gaze. Every shred of desperation, hope, and pure determination was poured into it as a clash of souls occurred. On one end, an indomitable hunter, and on the other, a golden god of war. Singing pain shot through Jake's mind as he felt the backlash from the clash... but...

Valdemar's hand that had moved to block the bow had been delayed. For but a fraction of a second, he had stopped moving, and even his golden aura temporarily stopped its ever-flowing movement. It was so brief that only a few of the spectators in the stands would have time to notice, but despite its brevity, it was enough.

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The sharp tip of the bow stabbed forward into the eye of the Primordial as Jake's mind was barely lucid enough to register it. Right as Jake felt the feedback of hitting something, a wave of golden energy exploded out of Valdemar as the axe swinging for Jake also let out a crescent wave, blasting him back with a nasty cut across his chest.

Valdemar had tried to jump back as he had instinctively released this golden wave but stumbled as he leaned back too fast, ending up falling on the sand. As he tumbled awkwardly, drops of blood flew into the air before the Primordial stopped rolling, still down on one knee.

Jake landed on the sand with a heavy sound and instantly tried to stand, but his legs buckled as he fell down on both knees, blood oozing from his new wound across his chest. Lifting his gaze, he saw the now one-eyed Valdemar staring back at him with astonishment as he only now seemed to realize what had just happened. This had been Jake's final gamble, and despite having failed... well, at least this felt like a bit of a win.

"Made you retreat and dodge," Jake said with a chuckle that quickly turned into a cough as blood filled his mouth. He had said it would be his last attack, and based on how he felt and the massive headache he felt, that would truly be the case. He knew his soul had taken some serious damage that he really hoped the system would help fix.

Valdemar, holding a hand to his bleeding eye socket, regarded Jake for a few seconds before he smiled and stood up. "Ya sure fucking did."

Despite wanting to, Jake couldn't join him in standing. He simply wasn't able to anymore. Talking had already been a damn struggle.

"For a fraction of a second there, I felt something I haven't in a long time... I wouldn't quite call it fear, but it was pretty damn close. Close enough that I hesitated," Valdemar muttered as he kept staring intently at Jake.

"You know what? If I don't recognize someone like you as a fellow Grand Champion of the Colosseum, then who the fuck is worthy of such a title? Just saying, no one should complain about favoritism here even if you are a fellow human!" Valdemar said with a bit of a belly laugh as he spread out his hands. "So there you have it. You've earned my recognition and beaten the Colossus of Mortals. Congratulations, mate, you've earned it."

Jake's eyes opened wide as he faintly heard the sound of a notification... but he didn't pay it any attention.

Rather than any notifications, his eyes were fixated on a Valdemar that only a second had looked a single step away from death, suddenly acting like he was barely injured. And it wasn't just an illusion either, as the golden luster surrounding his body only grew more and more abundant.

Jake realized that despite everything... Valdemar had truly been holding out on him till the very end. Golden aura erupted from his body and intensified even more than before as he was practically burning with power as he stood there, but in contrast to Jake's destructive arcane energy, Valdemar's fighting aura didn't have any negative effects at all based on what Jake could see.

"I know ya gave it ya all, and the fight is over... so let me give you a final honorable moment with a proper sendoff. A proper final attack to end our duel!" Valdemar smiled as he lifted his axe and gripped it with both hands. A storm of golden fighting aura hit the kneeling Jake as Valdemar truly looked like a golden god at that very moment. Sand was kicked up as a beam of pure fighting aura shot into the air and encased his axe, making it grow several times in size.

The energy was so intense that even the empty eye socket now had a golden glowing eye within it, staring back at him. Every single wound was like a broken vase fixed with gold, once broken, now made whole again. With time... likely only a day or something, Valdemar would be back to his prime and fully healed.

"You are truly a worthy warrior! So farewell, and may we meet again!" Valdemar said, with a tone of genuine respect. Jake wanted to say something, but he didn't even have the energy to speak anymore.

I gave it my all, right? So to lose like this isn't that bad, is it?

Jake thought as the golden axe of pure fighting aura more than five meters long descended toward him. Jake had to admit that Valdemar was simply a monster, and his Transcending skill was just straight-up cheating. Even if Valdemar didn't choose to do this final attack, Jake had seconds left to live.

So, with his broken body and empty resource pools, Jake simply looked up at the giant axe descending as time seemed to slightly slow down as his death approached. Yeah... this ending...

"A better outcome than I expected," the Wyrmgod said as the decisive blow descended upon Jake. "Your Chosen is indeed impressive... the improvements he showed over those nine lives and his ability to adapt is truly noteworthy. The mere fact he managed to get Valdemar's recognition is proof of that, and his victory in the Colosseum is wholly deserved."

Minaga just shrugged. "I already lost my bet when Jake became a Grand Champion. Ah, but I guess he does deserve a thumbs up for good performance."

"I never doubted I would win my bet with you, but I will admit there was a slight tinge of doubt if I would also beat the Wyrmgod," Vilastromoz smiled at Minaga as he watched the fight approach its end. "So yeah... Jake performed well. As expected of my Chosen, of course."

He had made a bet with the Wyrmgod that Jake would be able to go all the way, and in the Colosseum of Mortals, gaining the recognition of Valdemar was considered "beating" the Challenge Dungeon. Defeating Valdemar by killing him simply wasn't a realistic goal to set for the challengers, and Valdemar surrendering was never going to happen either.

So for Jake to push Valdemar that far... honestly, it already surpassed the Viper's expectations a little. The bet he had made was very much a gamble, but he believed in Jake's ability to surpass expectations. Valdemar being the final boss was definitely not expected, though, and the Viper honestly wasn't sure if it was favorable or not that Jake had faced a fellow human.

Valdemar was a bit like a harsh older brother toward other humans. If it had been an elf or any other enlightened race, Vilastromoz was relatively confident that Valdemar would have acknowledged them after getting pinned down by two large magical spikes. But toward a fellow human, Valdemar would be harsher and truly expect them to go above and beyond what could reasonably be expected. He wanted, no, demanded for them to show all they had and then a bit more.

Despite this possibly being slightly unfair for humans, the Wyrmgod was actually fine with this being the case. Not because he hated humans but because the opposite would be far worse. If Valdemar went easy on humans, the Wyrmgod would have a lot of annoying political issues, and with enough complaints, it was even possible the system would evaluate that the Challenge Dungeon wasn't functioning properly. Sure, he could also have chosen not to make Valdemar the final Grand Champion, but if given the opportunity, Vilastromoz knew the Wyrmgod couldn't resist, no matter the potential negative politics surrounding it.

The Viper was happy he didn't have to bother with such politics. Also, in all honesty, it was only good that Jake had truly been pushed to his limits. This fight would be a good lesson in his life, and how he had managed to die ten times was impressive, as he hadn't let the experience demotivate him at all but only helped him to improve. It was a great sign for his mentality going forward.

Overall, the three gods only had praise for Jake's performance as the axe descended upon him, exploding most of the center of the arena where Jake had been kneeling.

"Say, what Challenge Dungeon do you think Jake will try next? On the one hand, I hope he does mine, but on the other hand, I am not sure my feeble heart ca- what the fuck?"

Minaga's train of thought was cut off as all three gods stared at the recording on the screen. The Wyrmgod's eyes were already open wide as he had seen what happened in the arena a moment before everyone else... yet he hadn't been able to say anything due to his shock.



This ending...

Time moved at a crawl as Jake didn't feel anything. His body was broken, his resources empty, and his life about to end... yet...

...Fuck it.

The axe descended with power no level 0 G-grade could possibly survive as it hit the ground, releasing an eruption of golden light and sand... the noise of the explosion drowned out as the sound of a heartbeat echoed through the arena.

Chapter 782: Nevermore: Hunter

Jake had invited death nine times to learn about Valdemar and hopefully find a path to victory. He had done everything with the goal of somehow winning and defeating Valdemar, and in all honesty, he could see a scenario where he would have accepted his loss.

That is until he realized Valdemar had never truly taken him seriously. He had, through his own will, increased his fighting aura to a level far above anything he had done in the fight prior. Jake hadn't forced him to either... he had just done it to show Jake how truly powerful he was. It probably wasn't to make Jake despair, but just because Valdemar liked to show off, but to Jake, it felt like all his struggles had been for naught.

Again and again, Jake had underestimated the power of Valdemar's Transcendent skill. Till the very end, he never saw the Primordial's true limits while inhabiting a level 0 body... but then again, did Jake ever really give it his all?

As Valdemar had said, they were just in a Challenge Dungeon. Nothing was authentic in there. There was no true death, but just a potential loss of some points or a lost attempt on a hard opponent. Compared to experiencing the end of your own existence, it was completely meaningless. The stakes were too low... and perhaps this was where Valdemar truly set himself apart from Jake. Because at that very moment, when Valdemar used his final strike, Jake became certain that Valdemar truly was in control of his Transcendence. At least enough to “fool” it into recognizing the battle as one with real stakes.

But Jake...

With every death, he had restrained and stopped his final survival instinct... the final act of his Bloodline to allow him to survive. He got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that using it was a final act of desperation and not something to casually do. Jake was confident that had this been the real world, his Bloodline would have reacted without even giving Jake a chance to stop it, but here, with no genuine danger, he had a choice.

Every prior time, Jake had chosen to suppress it and not take a massive unknown risk by unleashing something best saved for a true moment of desperation. However, this time... this time, Jake was done holding anything back as he wanted to show Valdemar everything he had. So when the Bloodline came knocking, rather than restrain it this time, he let it loose with that one thought:

Fuck it.

The moment he did, time itself seemed to stop. Valdemar’s massive golden axe looked as if it moved at a snail’s pace... and then he felt a heavy heartbeat. It echoed throughout the arena as a pulse reverberated through his body. A pulse of unknown energy released directly from somewhere deep within Jake’s Truesoul. It did not stop simply when it hit the edges of his physical body but spread out. A hundred meters, two hundred, five hundred... it continued hundreds of kilometers all around him. It was incredibly vast, yet a familiar range.

Because the pulse released had filled not just Jake's body but his entire Sphere of Perception – the range he could usually only see with Pulse of Perception, too.

Right as the realization struck him, Jake's vision went black. Then sound died, all smells disappeared, and he no longer even felt his own body or could taste the blood in his own mouth. For a mere moment, all his senses were gone as if he was struck in some void, and then...

Only clarity.

Every detail, every sound, taste... the feeling of the heat of the sun, countless grains of sand touching his body as it had gotten stuck under his torn clothes... not a single thing was missing. He felt it all. His usually heightened senses had reached a new level above anything else before, and as Jake stared up at the axe descending toward him, he saw not just the fighting aura but what existed between him and the axe - the mana in the air, the concepts that constituted the reality the axe was traveling through.

Raising a hand, Jake didn't think much but simply sent out a small whisp of energy infused with his will. It merged into nothingness as the golden axe momentarily seemed to disappear from sight. At nearly exactly the same time, the ground around Jake exploded, golden fighting aura ravaging the entire middle of the arena, except for one small area around Jake.

Standing there completely unharmed, he looked up casually as what looked like a small black dot in space still floated for a few seconds where Jake had commanded the whisp of energy to move. Like a dead pixel on a screen, there was simply nothing there, and when the axe had pierced through this spot, a part of it had met the same fate as everything else when it simply ceased to exist, allowing none of the golden energy to ever reach Jake.

Time still seemed to move at a crawl as Jake slowly stood. Slowly, because he simply couldn't move his body fast enough to keep up with how he perceived reality. By the same the erupted sand fell down, reality had mended itself as the black dot was gone. Gone, but not forgotten.

"You... how did that happen? A hole in space? Void magic? No... it was more like it just opened up by itself?" Valdemar said, confused. "What did you do?"

Jake didn't answer but instead looked at his opponent as he took a deep breath. "Seven seconds."

It was not a taunt or a provocation. It was simply the time it would take for him to win... and the time he had left.

Seeing as his resources were all emptied out, Jake addressed that flaw first. With a thought, the sand around him rose into the air and began disintegrating as the grains returned to Origin and became pure energy that Jake casually commanded into his body. Within a second, his body – but not his resource pools – was filled with energy. Enough for him to burn during what was to come.

Six seconds.

Valdemar, who had just been staring, suddenly displayed a light smile as he nodded. "Then come."

Jake's body filled with pure arcane energy the very next second. His arcane energy, which usually took on a pinkish-purple color, turned a darker shade as it almost became red. Sparks appeared in his vicinity, yet his body didn't seem to burn with energy. There was no fancy display outside of crackling discharge around him, as it all stayed contained within him.

Before, Jake had boosted his body haphazardly without control. Foolish and inefficient, he could admit, especially when it seemed too easy to control now. It was so simple to tame as the energy followed his every whim now, as the world lay bare to his senses.

He regarded his bow and found it lacking as a new one of pure arcane mana appeared in his hand, condensed from the environmental mana. The same level of inadequacy proved true for the scattered arrows in the sand as he condensed an arrow and nocked it.

Five seconds.

Valdemar, who had invited Jake to come, didn't sit still even if he had welcomed the attack. Roaring golden energy filled the arena as he charged forward faster and stronger than ever before, as the luster that made him look like a golden god had simply never fully faded. Jake rapidly shot his arrow as he infused even more power into the blow.

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The arrow pierced forward as it seemed to warp everything around it, absorbing even more energy during its flight. Valdemar chose to meet it with his axe, but Jake found humoring Valdemar's attempt to make this a direct clash of power laughable. Even now, he knew he stood before a man with far more pure raw power than Jake could possibly command in his current state.

Right before the arrow and axe clashed, the arrow dodged the blow. As if it had a mind of its own, it expertly flew by the head of the axe, and even Valdemar's attempt to block his face with an arm was

predicted as it changed direction for a second time and shot under the arm and into his chest, exploding.

Valdemar was blasted back by the condensed arcane mana and flew more than a dozen meters back and hit the back wall of the arena, sending stone blasting out. Jake considered shooting another arrow with the same power but stopped himself as that didn't appear feasible.

Sadly, he was still limited by his level and lack of skills and the fact he was a mere level 0. The limitations meant his heavily weakened mind would break if he tried to do something like that again. It was unfortunate he was in this state, but it would have to make do for now. Without any useless hesitation, Jake charged forward as two katars of arcane mana appeared in his hands.

Four seconds.

He moved even faster than before as space itself seemed to give way, voluntarily moving out of the way at Jake's behest.

The wall Valdemar had been blasted into exploded the very next moment as a massive golden crescent wave shot out. With little difficulty, Jake jumped over it and continued his sprint toward the emerging Valdemar.

A large bleeding wound marred his chest, and arcane energy still burned on his body, but his golden aura was as strong as ever. With a roar and almost fanatic gaze, he also charged forward to meet Jake in a direct confrontation.

Three seconds.

Valdemar had already been predictable before, but now, it was almost funny. With his heightened sense of perception, even the axe seemed to move relatively slowly now, though it was still the fastest thing around... well, besides Jake himself.

Dodging to the side, Jake stabbed Valdemar with one of his katars, the weapon slicing through fighting aura and flesh alike. Valdemar quickly responded with a heavy punch as Jake positioned his second katar for Valdemar to punch into. The hand began to glow golden, and at the very last moment, Jake chose to abandon his attempt to counter as he instead avoided the punch entirely. If he hadn't, Jake would have likely cut off one or two of Valdemar's fingers but lost a hand himself in return. He had to admit that even if he could read the Primordial, his pure, overwhelming power was still awe-inspiring.

Mana began to condense in the air all around them as five arrows of pure mana were formed, all aimed toward Valdemar. Jake would have preferred to summon them closer to the Primordial than he did, but the one place Jake felt no sense of control was everywhere the golden fighting aura touched. Valdemar's Transcendent skill created the type of energy that Jake simply had no way of ever touching or affecting, as it belonged to Valdemar and Valdemar alone. He was its Origin and its creator, and there was simply nothing for Jake to do to it.

With a mental command, Jake sent all the arrows flying toward Valdemar, who let out a loud roar, releasing a shockwave of golden energy that only managed to slow down the arrows that all hit him in the back and right side.

Immediately after these five arrows hit, Jake summoned another five, but he felt a heavy strain as he did so. His clarity was wavering, but he had to maintain it for at least a little longer. Valdemar was far more prepared for the second barrage of arrows which were all coming for his right side, where he wielded the axe. Jake also attacked in tandem with these arrows, his attack seemingly with the intent of limiting Valdemar's ability to swing his axe by potentially putting the entire arm out of commission.

Two seconds.

As Valdemar focused all his attention on Jake's attack on his right side, he didn't notice what was going on to his left. Lying partly covered in sand, not even four meters away from them, was an arcane spike from Jake's quasi-Protean Arrow he had shot earlier. The one that had missed.

Without any warning, it shot out of the sand straight for Valdemar's left side as Jake commanded the spike made of his own energy. The Primordial's eyes opened wide as his fighting aura expanded out of him to try and lessen the impact of the attack, but Jake had predicted that move. Using the very last of his mental energy, he looked straight at Valdemar as he welcomed their souls to clash once more through Fear Gaze.

For a mere one-tenth of a second, Valdemar's fighting aura froze as the spike pierced into his left forearm and, as Valdemar had been extending forward with his right side, forced the arm behind his back and out of the way.

Valdemar didn't seem surprised by the Fear Gaze this time but only showed pure determination. He was midway through an attack when Jake made his move, and rather than abandon it, he did just the opposite. He empowered it. His right began to take on a golden luster as the fighting aura seemed to merge with his skin, the man having clearly decided to finish Jake off here and now.

With power outmatching the finishing strike from earlier, the axe chopped down like an executioner's axe from god, aiming to cleave Jake's entire body in two.

From the beginning, Jake knew a trade had to be made if he wanted any chance of victory. And, in truth, his goal had never been the right arm. He was nearly out of time, after all, so he had to end it here and now. Valdemar would have time to react if he gave even a little space... so Jake also committed fully to



his plan. Rather than disengage or dodge, Jake kept charging straight into the axe. Only at the very last fraction of a second did he react as he slightly shifted his weight and swayed to the right.

Jake's left ear was entirely obliterated by the golden energy of the axe as it practically slid down the side of his skull and into his shoulder, sending his left arm flying into the air, the powerful swing also mangling the entire left side of his body as even a part of his hip was cut off. However, it had created an opening. The katar of arcane energy was gone as Jake's right hand formed a claw as he pierced forward while the arcane energy that formerly made up the katar surrounded and infused it. The golden aura standing in his hand's way tried to stop it, but most of Valdemar's Transcendent aura had been focused on attacking, making his defenses lacking.

One second.

The clawed hand went through flesh and aura alike and pierced the Primordial's chest, right through the same wound the very first arrow Jake had shot after his powerup had left. His fingers folded around the beating organ that Jake knew not even Valdemar would be able to live long without. Without missing a beat, he squeezed and poured in the final energy he had stored within into the heart that beat in his palm.

A torrent of arcane energy burned into Valdemar's body as Jake's hand became a conduit to infuse pure destruction into the Primordial. Reddish purple veins spread around the hole Jake's hand had created, and a moment later, the heart in Jake's grasp disintegrated as pure destruction turned it into nothingness.

Jake quickly pulled his hand out and only managed to take a simple step back at the very last moment.

Zero seconds.

He had barely pulled back as the world around him began to spin. All his senses once more disappeared as the world turned into a void. Less than a second later, a faint sense of perception returned as Jake felt the entire world contract all around him. His sphere shrank back to the usual range he limited it to as all his other senses also began slowly returning to normal. The world was still murky and indiscernible as Jake left like he was devolving.

What was left of the original pulse of energy that had been released from his Truesoul poured back into Jake as, in the final moment before he had lost his clarity, he had infused it with a final command. Energy entered his Truesoul as it gobbled up everything, and Jake's body restored itself as his wounds began to heal in seconds, with a new arm and ear instantly regenerating, and even his resource pools were filled, revitalizing him fully.

Only after all of this was done did Jake's senses return enough for his eyesight to come back, and he found himself only a mere two steps from a still-standing Valdemar who was looking straight at him. His fighting aura was still burning, and he had a smile on his face, even as blood dripped from his mouth.

"What's your name?"

Jake's eyes were wide open as he felt incredibly weird as if the world didn't seem quite right. Everything seemed slightly blurry, and he barely heard what Valdemar said... but he didn't feel any danger from the man in front of him and thus still managed to answer. "Jake... Jake Thayne."

"Jake, huh..." Valdemar nodded slowly as he smiled and looked Jake straight in the eyes. "A name worth remembering... from a fight worthy of being called legendary."

The arena was entirely silent as Valdemar stood there, looking at Jake as his golden aura slowly disappeared, and the luster in his one remaining eye faded as there once again was only one Grand Champion.

Chapter 783: Nevermore: Rewards/Cost of the Impossible

Jake looked at the still-standing corpse of the Primordial as he tried to fully understand everything that had happened. Alright, that wasn't entirely accurate... he knew what had happened; he remembered everything without any issues, but it all still felt oddly hazy. The same kind of hazy as his mind and vision currently were.

As he still stood there, taking in the atmosphere and collecting himself, a certain someone made himself known once more, kind of ruining the tense mood.

"We have a winner! The undefeated Warrior has met his doom at the hands of the Doombringer in a battle truly worthy of a Grand Champion match! Only a single Grand Champion now remains, having defeated all others in his path, becoming the most powerful Grand Champion we have ever seen! Where is this limit!? Perhaps we will learn one day, but for now, go, our Grand Champion. Rest. You've earned it!"

Jake thought the announcer was a lot quieter than usual, making him frown a bit at the commentary. While still frowning, he saw a man approach from the entrance to the arena, and as he got closer, Jake saw it was the Battlemaster, who seemed to be in a brilliant mood.

"You fucking did it," he said with a massive smile. "To take down that monster... you really do stand at the apex of mortals."

"Thanks," Jake muttered, looking around. Instinctively, he wanted to check out the stands to check in on some of the people he knew, which is when he noticed... he couldn't see them. More accurately, he couldn't feel them through his sphere at all. The sphere was still there, but everything it saw was murky.

He could feel through the sphere the stands were there, but it was so hazy he couldn't even tell where people sat, much less differentiate the spectators from one another.

Rubbing his temples, Jake looked at the Battlemaster. "So, what happens now? And please speak up when you answer. You're way too quiet."

The man looked at him and shook his head as he practically yelled. "That's up to you if you feel any need to stay when you have already proven yourself the strongest."

Right as he got said, Jake got a system message.

Congratulations! You have successfully defeated the Grand Champion and become the sole Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals. 5,000,000 Colosseum Points gained. No more opponents stand in your way, as no worthy foe remains. As the sole Grand Champion, no greater honor can be earned in the Colosseum of Mortals.

Even if everything else seemed blurry and his head still hurt, at least the system messages were still as clear as ever, so he happily focused on them as he began going over the one in front of him. It just acknowledged his win, and, damn, that was a lot of Colosseum Points. Five million nearly doubled his points, though honestly, Jake didn't care much about that part. Colosseum Points only mattered now insofar as to affect the final calculation of rewards. The rest of it was pretty much just a summary.

As soon as Jake was done reading and considering the first system message, a second one popped up.

Do you wish to exit the Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon?

If you remain, you can choose to participate in weekly Show Matches, earning you additional Colosseum Points.

Choosing to exit will give you all currently earned rewards.

Jake read the message, and for a few seconds, he considered staying around for a bit. Not for the Show Matches – those were just a damn waste of time, and honestly, Jake didn't feel like he was in any kind of fighting condition – but to talk to some of the people in there. Specifically Artemis, Polly, and Owen. But... he had already said goodbye to them, having fully expected him to just be thrown out of the Challenge Dungeon that day. Beating Valdemar had been a long shot, after all, and he even guessed that it was possible that the dungeon would just toss him out no matter if he won or lost.

With that in mind, he truly saw no reason to remain as he threw the Battlemaster a final look and smiled before accepting the prompt. Another major reason he just wanted to get out of there was for the system to heal him. Sure, he had healed himself when he ended his power up, and physically, he was fine, but he knew his soul wasn't in optimal condition. Hopefully, the system could fix that.

Jake's vision went black right as he accepted leaving, and half a second later, he appeared in a familiar place. It was the same white void he was thrown to every time he had died and had to choose a time to go back to, but this time, there was no prompt for him to choose when to revive. No, instead, he was there for those sweet, sweet rewards. The first of which was something Jake had predicted would be a thing and was happy to have confirmed: a Grand Achievement.

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Colosseum of Champions while defeating the reigning Grand Champion. Colosseum Points converted: 113.821 Nevermore Points earned. Due to

completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 25% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

The number of Nevermore Points gained didn't exactly seem impressive, and there appeared to be a 1-100 conversion from his Colosseum Points, but one had to remember that Jake only had 744,673 Nevermore Points currently that he had gained over thirty years. To get more than a hundred thousand within two years was honestly insanely good.

Not to mention the massive 25% multiplier, which was at the same level as what beating Minaga had given them. Jake would argue that defeating Valdemar had been way fucking harder, but he wasn't going to say no to the extra multiplier. With it and the others, he was now up to a 60% bonus to the final calculation. Moreover, he still had four Challenge Dungeons left that could potentially give him similar rewards.

Jake only now truly understood what people meant when they said that the true winners of the Leaderboards would be found in the Challenge Dungeons. If one did well in all of them, they could get a more than doubling of Nevermore Points at the final calculation, putting them well ahead even of the groups who cleared far more floors.

Besides the Grand Achievement, Jake had also gotten something he honestly hadn't expected to see but was more than happy to get:

A title.

Reward gained: Colosseum of Mortals: True Grand Champion title.

Without hesitation, Jake opened up his status menu and checked the effects of the title.

Colosseum of Mortals: True Grand Champion – You have proven yourself the one true Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, defeating beings that stand at the apex of the multiverse and exited the Colosseum of Mortals with more than 10,000,000 Colosseum Points. Even a Primordial was slain on your path, making you truly worthy of the title. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +200 to all stats.

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Reading it over, Jake was seriously happy he hadn't spent more of his Colosseum Points within the Challenge Dungeon, as he might have missed out on this title if he had done so. He also finally noticed that he hadn't gotten a refund on any of the equipment he had bought, which made him even happier he hadn't decided to splurge.

Jake then saw the final part of the description that said only one title can be held, so he made the obvious educated guess that should he gain a better title than this one from any of the four other Challenge Dungeons, this one would simply be replaced. He seriously doubted he would be able to do that, though. At most, he would gain equal titles as he didn't think there were ones of a higher tier than this, which would probably mean he would just keep the first one he got.

As for the title itself, Jake was a bit surprised at what it gave. It was just pure stats. There was no percentage increase, but just +200 to all stats. Mind you, Jake wasn't really complaining. In fact, this was probably better for him than if he gained more percentage titles.

Jake already had a lot of percentage titles, along with the percentage boost from his Bloodline, so to gain one that just gave pure stats was honestly huge. It did kind of suck it was to all stats and not just focused on the ones he used the most, but Jake at least did use all of them at times. Still, he would have

preferred to just get them in Agility, Strength, and Perception mostly. Or, well, he wouldn't have complained if he had just gained +1800 Perception outright, but you can't always have what you want.

Even with just this title and the achievement, Jake would say It had been a very productive Challenge Dungeon, and honestly, he would have been happy with what he had already gotten, but there was one final message, and after seeing what he had gotten, Jake honestly wasn't sure how he felt.

Reward gained: [Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)]

A Mythical item... that had to be great, right? Well, it was a bit more complicated than that.

[Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)] – An emblem infused with the powers and concepts of the Colosseum of Mortals, given only to those deemed worthy. This Emblem can create a replica of the Colosseum of Mortals arena within a virtual space for individuals to duel one another. Allows the user to choose two targets who must consent to take part in a duel within the virtual space. Those entering will leave their true bodies defenseless during the duel period. All levels and stats of those entering will be normalized. Most skills and abilities will also be restricted. Dying within the virtual space will have no negative consequences. As the owner, you can always observe the inside of the Emblem of the Grand Champion. Cooldown period: 1 hour.

Requirements: Soulbound

Now, who could ever be disappointed at getting a mythical item? It turns out Jake could. Though it was more the opportunity cost of getting this rather than a weapon or something. Jake didn't have a single piece of equipment that was mythical, and the only thing he owned with the rarity was the Soulflame Cradle from Minaga, so to see his second item also be some auxiliary item like this was a bit of a downer.



After overcoming his initial disappointment, Jake finally looked at the Emblem in earnest, and at least it seemed to have earned its rarity. It was an item that allowed two people to duel safely while even normalizing their stats. The restrictions on skills were also something Jake wasn't even sure how worked... but seeing as the description mentioned that the true bodies of the ones who entered the arena would be defenseless made it pretty obvious people only actually entered with their souls.

That one couldn't die was also pretty huge and allowed people to experiment within and fight without feeling any fear of death. So, while Jake wasn't overly keen on gaining this kind of item as a reward, he understood why it was good from a more objective standpoint.

Anyway, that was the end of the rewards for the Colosseum of Mortals, and overall, Jake had to say it was a pretty good haul. He had also experienced growth in many areas of combat, and Jake was excited to see what would happen once he got his real level back.

As a last thing, Jake checked his Nevermore Points, which had grown nicely from the Grand Achievement.

Nevermore Points: 858,494

As he prepared to leave the void, Jake thought about what Challenge Dungeon to do next... or if he could even do one properly in his current state. Even in the void, he still felt incredibly wrong and like his senses didn't work right, but hopefully, it would all be fixed once he was out of the Challenge Dungeon proper... right?

After Minagas's outburst, the room with the two Primordials and the Unique Lifeform remained silent as they all simply stared at the battle happening within the arena. The entire final arc of the battle only took a few seconds, but it left an impression on all of them as they saw a scene none of them had expected.

They saw Valdemar die, his heart destroyed, and his body broken to a level where he couldn't sustain himself any longer. A Primordial slain, even if he was only a level 0 image.

So many things had happened during these few seconds, leaving them all with more than a few questions.

"What the hell happened? What did he do there?" Minaga asked as he looked at the Wyrmgod.

The Primordial looked on for a while as he frowned. "I don't know."

"Huh?" Minaga exclaimed, confused. "What do you mean you don't know? It's your damn dungeon, you know everything that's going on."

"When the Chosen of the Malefic used... what he used, I lost authority of the domain in and surrounding the arena," the Wyrmgod responded after a brief pause. "I could only see what you saw. The system cut me off."

"You lost authority?" Minaga questioned even more now. "You mean that..."

“Yes,” the Wyrmgod nodded. “Transcendent Authority was established temporarily.”

Minaga nodded slowly in understanding. “So, in summary, he some-fucking-how used his Bloodline to take control of a massive domain with enough authority to push you out? Did he do it to hide something, maybe? How whatever he did truly works?”

“I believe it was more a side effect of what he did than the actual purpose,” the Primordial shook his head.

Vilastromoz remained silent as he heard them talk. Partly because he wanted to hear what the Wyrmgod figured out and partly because he didn’t really know what to add. Eventually, the two other gods in the room turned toward him for answers, but the Viper just shook his head.

“The secrets of my Chosen are not mine to share.”

“Oh, come on!” Minaga complained. “Just a few hints? Pretty please?”

The Viper shook his head again, shutting down the notion. He had purposefully chosen to skirt around the subject and avoid answering... as he didn’t have any answers. The other two gods believed he understood, but in reality, he, too, was stumped.

Vilastromoz had believed he had a pretty good grasp of Jake’s Bloodline, but what had happened in that arena wasn’t something he could have ever expected. Even now, he wasn’t entirely certain how Jake had done what he did, even if he could partly understand what he had done.

By far, the most impressive from an outside perspective was how he had blocked the initial strike that was meant to finish him. Jake had absorbed the blow by creating a hole of sorts... a single point in space where space ceased to be, not allowing Valdemar's strike to have medium to travel through.

If it had been the true Valdemar, he could have simply powered through, but no mortal, not even someone like him, could overpower a complete erasure of space. He needed space for his fighting aura to move through.

However, in the same vein as how not even Valdemar could forcefully attack through nothingness... no level 0 should ever be able to create a point of nothingness either. In fact, it was something the Viper had seen few beings ever do, period. What's more, it was hard to say Jake had even done it. He caused it, yes, but he didn't "create" the point of nothingness through sheer power as one usually had to. It was more like space, time, and reality itself just decided to cease to exist in that very spot for a few moments.

The second most impressive feat was that final absorption that had fully healed his body in seconds. Even now, the Viper wasn't entirely sure how that had worked... the same as how he wasn't sure how he had effectively used the energy he had gained, somehow turning the sand into pure energy. To turn matter into energy wasn't super difficult and quite normal in alchemy, but to then directly absorb and use it? It was borderline unheard of. Plus, it took more energy to convert matter into energy in the first place, never making it worth it, even if you had the ridiculous control to pull it off.

Jake had pulled off many things that were impossible. These were things only Bloodlines or Transcendent skills could do. Which did make the Viper worry... because no matter what, these had a cost. So the ultimate question now was, what price did Jake have to pay to pull off something impossible?

Chapter 784: Nevermore: Backlash

Hope was such a powerful feeling, but it was very much a double-edged sword... because the disappointment and sadness when hope was squashed truly sucked.

And for Jake, things very much sucked right now. He had still held onto hope that he would be healed after leaving the Challenge Dungeon, but that had turned out not to be the case. In fact, it was nearly the opposite. Getting his C-grade status back had instead resulted in Jake feeling far fucking worse than before.

At least he had his equipment back now, so he could cover his face and head with his cloak as he stumbled through the city floor while trying to go somewhere he could sit down and relax. When he appeared outside the Challenge Dungeon, he found himself surrounded by people, and he instantly felt an assault of murky auras, while every sound reminded him of nails on a chalkboard. Not to mention the lights. The lights were the damn worst, as they all appeared either blinding or far too dark.

After stumbling into an abandoned residence in the city, Jake went inside and headed straight for the basement. If in the arena, his senses had been far too muted, now they just seemed inconsistent. Some sounds were deafening, while others were entirely silent as if the spectrum of sound he could pick up was entirely out of whack.

However... the worst of all was the smell. People stank, period. Jake himself stank, too. Everything was just horrible. So, with all that in mind, Jake decided that the best course of action would be to find a quiet little cellar to relax in as he tried to get a full understanding of what had happened.

Well, okay, he knew what had happened. Jake was currently experiencing backlash from unleashing far more power than he was capable of. He had more or less used an aspect of his Bloodline he wasn't capable of handling, which had left damage on his soul and body alike. Damage that the system didn't heal.

What he had to figure out was the extent of the backlash. He knew his usual senses were all off, but nothing seemed entirely gone. Even the sphere was there, and in an act of recklessness, he even

released a Pulse of Perception. Let's just say that the average Van Gogh painting was way more discernible than the utter mess Jake got back.

But it worked. Next, Jake checked something else he really hoped wasn't messed with. Something he had a feeling still worked as it should, which was a good start. Reaching into his spatial storage, he pulled out a small metal coin and tried to flip it.

Heads.

Catching it, he saw it landed on heads. Of course, one result didn't really say anything as he tried again.

Heads. Heads.

He continued this and did about ten more throws, predicting all of them right. He then even tried to do it with three at once and predicted all three accurately, too.

Okay, so my intuition seems fine, Jake thought with relief. If that had also been screwed, Jake wouldn't even have been able to trust his own gut, which would be a serious problem. That it worked also meant that Jake's feeling this backlash wasn't permanent and would heal with time was likely true. Then again, even without his Bloodline-empowered intuition, he would likely have been able to know it. The Sword Saint at least said that he had an uncanny understanding of the backlash he suffered upon using his Transcendent skill. So, there was a good chance that even if the system didn't help heal these kinds of injuries, it did at least allow the one suffering to understand their situation.

As for how long it would take to fully recover, Jake quite frankly had no idea. What he did know was that it wouldn't just be a day or two. However, even just sitting there in the cellar for a bit, Jake began to

slowly adapt to his messed up senses, making everything slightly less overwhelming. Fighting was still not on the table, but at least he should be able to function within a reasonable timeframe.

While sitting there and just relaxing his head, Jake felt a mental nudge. One he hadn't felt in quite a while as he faintly smiled and allowed it.

"Well, hello there, slayer of Primordials," Jake heard the voice of Villy after he accepted the divine message. "So, who's next on your list? Eversmile? Oh, maybe Stormild! Or wait... is it me? Sorry, you will have to get in the queue for that one; you have a Yip of Yore ahead of you in the line."

"Damn. Well, seeing as I am already in Nevermore, I guess taking down the Wyrmgod would be the easiest,"

Jake responded jokingly, relieved that at least telepathic messages seemed fine. Also... it felt damn good to communicate with a real person who would actually retain their memories. The Colosseum of Mortals just hadn't been the same, even if Jake did treat all the people there as real. "Speaking of the Wyrmgod, did he allow you to cheat by talking to me again?"

"You can phrase it like that, sure," the Viper simply answered. "In reality, he wants me to get some clues as to what you did there in the arena, including any backlash you are currently suffering. Of course, you shouldn't give any answers. At least not for free."

"Pretty easy to answer the first one, though. I went ham in there," Jake sent telepathically with a smile. "As for the backlash... actually, who else is listening in right now?"

"Just me, no worries," the Viper assured him. "No way I would give them a free sneak peek into our conversations. You are way too damn heretical for that."

“Aight, fair enough,” Jake surrendered as a thought struck him. “Say, would any of-“

“None of your party members are available right now, as they are all currently taking part in Challenge Dungeons,” Villy cut him off.

“Oh...” Jake sent back in a mutter. That sucked. He kinda hoped to catch up with them or at least hear what they had been up to. That would at least have helped him burn some time while recovering. “Are they also all done with their first Challenge Dungeons?”

“Some are, some aren’t. Maybe. I guess you’ll find out at some point, but for now, focus on yourself, alright?”

“Okay, fine. I guess I can’t have you tell me how any of them are doing while also giving me a scoop on the performance of some of the people I know also participating in Nevermore currently?” Jake shot his shot.

“No. Now, for the real reason I contacted you, besides just catching up with my favorite Chosen. The Wyrmgod has an offer. Answer just three relatively non-intrusive questions from him, and he will give you a tip on what Challenge Dungeon should do next, including a tip for performing well there, probably packaged as advice that somehow doesn’t directly count as cheating,”

Villy proposed. “I will, of course, make sure to not even relay any questions you really shouldn’t answer.”

Jake considered the proposal for a moment before ultimately accepting. However, he did have one concern. “Not sure how good my answers will be, though. I am not exactly clear on everything either.”



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“See, that’s one of the reasons I am fine with you even trying to answer these questions. The Wyrmgod will know if you are lying, but if the genuine truth is that you don’t know how you did something, that still counts as a spent question answered genuinely, right?” the Viper said in a devilish voice.

Shaking his head, Jake leaned back and leaned his head against the wall of the abandoned house.  
“Alright. Let’s hear these questions.”

“Let’s jump right into it. First question. What you did was reliant on your Bloodline and not any other skills or abilities you have, correct?”

“As far as I am aware, no other skills were involved, no,” Jake answered. He couldn’t exactly say it was all Bloodline, as it also used his arcane affinity as well as his own skills in archery and whatnot. Sure, his affinity also relied on his Bloodline, but he couldn’t say everything he did was all his Bloodline.

“Second question. Do you personally judge that the backlash you are currently experiencing from doing what you did in the arena includes any permanent negative effects?”

Jake had to take a second as the question had gotten quite specific with its phrasing. For the Wyrmgod to ask how he judged the backlash was a good idea, as Jake could have easily answered: “I don’t know, too early to tell,” if he asked for a definite answer. Instead, this question pretty much asked him what his own intuition told him.

“I don’t think it will have any negative consequences, no. But I am also unsure as to how long it will take to recover,” Jake once more answered truthfully.

“Alright, onto the third and last question. Is what you did replicable by you in the future?”

“Yes.”

That one was easy enough to answer, as Jake was absolutely certain he could if he was once more put in a life-and-death situation where he had no other way to survive.

Nearly a full minute of silence followed before the Viper returned.

“Alright, the Wyrmgod is satisfied, so here comes the reward, starting with what Challenge Dungeon to do. Based on your weakened state, there is only really one option. The Neverending Journey, House of the Architect, and Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth all require you to be at your best, leaving only the Test of Character one. Luckily for you, no matter how weak you are in that one, it doesn’t matter for shit. At least your level of power doesn’t matter,” Villy explained.

Honestly, many people could probably have guessed the Test of Character one was the best option, but having it confirmed was nice.

“Now for the Wyrmgod’s tip, which is predictably a little vague: As individuals differ, all judgment remains unreserved. So, yeah, take that as you will.”

Jake slowly nodded, kind of understanding what the Wyrmgod was getting at despite the deliberate vagueness. "Thanks for the tip... now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna force myself to meditate and distract myself as I hopefully recover enough to survive the walk to the Challenge Dungeon entrance."

"Good luck with that... and honestly, you got that dungeon. It shouldn't be too hard on you as long as you just stay true to yourself. Now, considering I have a Primordial staring daggers at me, I should probably end things here. See ya!"

Nodding once more, Jake said a final goodbye as the connection slowly faded. Being alone with his thoughts once more, his senses began to annoy him again, making him enter meditation that luckily had the "side effect" of cutting off all his senses.

He just hoped it wouldn't take too long as he seriously didn't want to be that one guy in a group project who lagged behind, delaying everyone else in his party.

A difficult decision had to be made if he wanted to gain the title of Grand Champion. He had taken two deaths at the Necromancer, one to the Lord of the Hunt and one to the Phoenix Queen, while he had beaten three Champions without any serious issues. All of the special challenges during his ascent through the ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals had also not proved fatal. Still, each battle had been hard-fought and a valuable experience, and he believed his chances were good... until he encountered the final fight before he would become a Grand Champion: the Mistress of Shadows.

The Sword Saint was aware that her true name was Umbra, and he had gone in fully expecting her to be the toughest opponent. However, even so, he had underestimated her. The Necromancer had also been incredibly difficult and ultimately required him to use more than one Glimpse of Spring to win. In fact, he had to admit most of these Champions opponents had required him to use Glimpse to pull out a victory.

His problem, he realized, was that even if he could beat his opponents in a battle of skill, he simply fell too far behind in pure raw stats, and he also came to discover that for big finish blows, he relied far too much only on his skills, while his freeform energy manipulation lagged severely behind. Stats-wise, he also lacked many of the percentage titles that would truly help him, forcing him to rely more on technique and high-level concepts rather than raw power. So, if he met someone with concepts or skills that countered him, he would find himself struggling. In fact, he found it very lucky the Phoenix Queen used fire magic. If she had used some other school of magic, he could have seen that fight be his stumbling block.

Miyamoto also discovered that, sadly, not even death and revival would heal the backlash of using more than one Glimpse of Spring in a row. As a Transcendent skill, the system simply didn't heal the aspect of him when it reset his body after death.

That's why he knew that he would only have one chance when it came to winning the final fight. He had just hoped that the final fight would be against this other Grand Champion, but fate had other plans.

The Mistress of Shadows was a nightmare for the Sword Saint to face. She was far faster than he was, and while he believed he would win a direct confrontation, he never got the chance. Using her speed, she managed to get in light blows from blind angles that accumulated until she could land a lethal blow and end the fight. Her trump card was especially difficult for the Sword Saint to deal with, as he didn't have any good abilities to detect others, so he would just find himself stumbling in the dark.

Against the Mistress of Shadows, the closest he got to victory was one fight where he managed to cut off one of her arms using Glimpse of Spring, but he had died right after. Using his remaining lives, he attempted all he could, but ultimately, reality became clear.

When he reached his final life, he decided to fully gamble and, at the very least, become a Grand Champion. Using his Transcendent skill within the Colosseum of Mortals was naturally far weaker than before, but Glimpses were still far more powerful than any other attacks he could use as they still relied on incredibly potent concepts. Concepts that originated from when he fully used his Transcendence.

Thus, on his final life, the Sword Saint entered the arena and welcomed springtime once more. With its advent, the Mistress of Shadows fell shortly after, unable to defeat the vastly more powerful swordsman. After his win, the backlash hit, and while he was happy to see it was far less severe than the first time he fully used the skill while fighting Jake, he knew he would have to pay for having used it once he got out of the Challenge Dungeon.

As the newly promoted Grand Champion, there was only one thing left to do. Even if he was weakened and knew he stood no chance, he at least wanted to see the Grand Champion. Partly to see what he missed out on and partly to see if his actions invited regret as he couldn't have a proper fight. Regret that he couldn't have beaten the Mistress of Shadows without using his Transcendence fully, which would have allowed him to then use Springtime Advent against the Grand Champion.

Luckily for him, there was no need for regret. Because upon facing the Grand Champion, Valdemar, Miyamoto realized that this would have been the end of the road no matter what... for Transcendence or not, he had absolutely no confidence in ever defeating such a monstrous existence. Especially not if he only had a single attempt.

Alas, at least he had other Challenge Dungeons to aim for instead... he just hoped there was one that he could do even while severely weakened. In retrospect, perhaps it was unwise to have weakened himself as such just to get one more win in the Colosseum of Mortals. However, he didn't regret his actions. Also, at least he got both an interesting Grand Achievement and a title for it.

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Colosseum of Mortals while becoming a Grand Champion. Colosseum Points converted: 53.599 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

Reward gained: Colosseum of Mortals: Grand Champion title.

Colosseum of Mortals: Grand Champion – You have proven yourself a Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, defeating all other Champions before exiting the Colosseum of Mortals with more than 5,000,000 Colosseum Points. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +100 to all stats.

Chapter 785: Nevermore: Package Deliveries

“If it had been a Transcendent skill, it would be far less concerning, but the fact it is a Bloodline is... hm,” the Wyrmgod muttered mostly to himself.

“I already told you, Jake is a little monster with an utterly broken Bloodline, and thinking too much about how stupid it is will only cause you pain. Trust me. Been there, done that. I am just waiting for the day the system decides to delete him outright,” Minaga shrugged.

Vilastromoz just listened in as the two of them kept talking and discussing. After Jake had answered those three questions, the Wyrmgod was even more deep in thought, and the Viper understood why. There were a lot of implications to what Jake had done. What his Bloodline had done.

Transcendent skills pretty much always came with positive effects, as why wouldn't they? They were created, after all, and even if it was often through enlightenment or even half on accident, they were always tied to the desires of their creator. It always aligned with them, so unless their Path called for them to do self-harm, the chances of seeing a Transcendent skill that was just downright detrimental wasn't going to happen.

The same thing couldn't be said about Bloodlines. Bloodlines were more like freak mutations that just occurred randomly throughout the multiverse and could take many forms. Some of them were strong, some were weak, and some were downright curses. Some would even kill the ones with it without offering any benefit. This meant that it wasn't necessarily cause for celebration when someone was born with a Bloodline. Of course, if they were positive Bloodlines, they were a huge boon, but it was very much a toss-up. Also... Bloodlines often came with some ticks and quirks.

This was an aspect of Bloodlines that was not often discussed enough. Because the impact on the person with the Bloodline was massive, and not just when using it actively. As Vilastromoz had said to Jake a little bit ago, if you had a Bloodline, it became central to your being. You are your Bloodline, and your Bloodline is you. But... in this relationship, one has to consider that the Bloodline came first.

You do not shape your Bloodline; the Bloodline shapes you.

That's one of the reasons why Jake's Bloodline was so puzzling. He had managed to do something Vilastromoz had never heard of before... he had suppressed it. Shaped it. Suppressed it to a level where even the system didn't instantly recognize it when he was integrated into the system.

But, perhaps this ability to suppress the Bloodline was, in actuality, a necessary aspect of it. One that was required for it even to properly exist. Jake had, in prior talks, discussed how he suppressed some elements, such as his spatial perception. How he could manipulate the Bloodline's effects, far more than the Viper had seen anyone with Bloodlines do before.

In some ways, Jake and his Bloodline were able to remain somewhat separate. They seemed to exist like two sides of the same coin, always connected, yet with a thin layer separating them at all times. Based on Vilastromoz's best guess, what Jake had done in the arena to beat Valdemar was to temporarily remove this layer and fully unleash his Bloodline and all its effects. At least, that had to be a major part of it. The Viper also had a feeling Jake's Origin Energy, as they called it, was also involved somehow.

And if that was true... then the backlash Jake was suffering from now was just the result of him actually using his Bloodline fully. The implications of that were quite frankly terrifying, as that meant Jake's Bloodline in its full form was powerful enough for the system to judge that simply existing required a severe backlash.

So the Bloodline had adapted... Jake had adapted to suppress the Bloodline, just enough for him to not face constant backlash. Just enough for his own body to handle it.

Of course, this was just his own theory and not one he would share with the Wyrmgod, but he had a pretty high level of confidence in his assessment. Jake also said that the percentage boost to Perception increased every time he evolved, which meant the Bloodline evolved with him. It slowly became more and more unleashed the higher grade he reached, which begged the question... when would Jake turn himself into a vessel truly capable of always having his Bloodline fully unleashed?

If all the Viper's theories were true, he definitely looked forward to seeing that one day.

"By the way, have you sent out the recordings yet?" Minaga questioned the Wyrmgod as he changed the topic entirely, also catching the Viper's attention. "I am pretty sure Gudrun made sure that Valdemar would be informed immediately if anyone managed to kill his image."

The Wyrmgod nodded. "I have."

"How about Artemis? I know there weren't any criteria set up beforehand, but..."

"It has been made clear by her image that her true self is also to be informed immediately. I have already sent both packages."



Hearing this, the Viper could only sigh internally. While having a Chosen who could create an uproar was incredibly entertaining, and he genuinely liked the chaos Jake created... he had a feeling Jake didn't quite enjoy it as much.

And Valdemar and Artemis? Based on what he had seen, both of those could definitely create some chaos.

But... he did hope that the two of them didn't decide to pay Nevermore a visit out of curiosity, as that would just make things unnecessarily rowdy. Hopefully, they had something more important to do or didn't find it worth sending one of their avatars, much less their true body.

One could only hope.

The giant beast wandered across the verdant plains with steps that created massive pits the size of cities. It had two thick legs and huge arms that it used while walking, with eight spider-like eyes on its face. Leathery skin covered half its body, while long, thick hair covered the rest. If Jake had seen this scene, he would have pointed out how the beast looked vaguely like a huge gorilla, though of a size larger than any beasts he had ever encountered. Its power was also incomparable as it gave off the aura of a divine being.

On top of its head sat a single woman with her legs crossed as she tinkered with her bow. The string seemed to almost be alive and moved in odd patterns as she tried to tame and communicate with it, her struggles mainly in vain. She suppressed her annoyance at the silly plant lifeform as she slowly coaxed it into working with her.

Looking up, she gazed toward her target. Five humongous trees towered into space in the distance, their heights incredibly impressive even for divine trees found on a Great Planet. She was on her way to inspect them and see how well they had grown since her last visit. The last time she had been by was a

few hundred years ago only, and Nature's Attendant, who had helped her plant them, assured her they would do fine even if she didn't protect them. An assurance she had not heeded, as she had promptly ordered the divine beast she was currently riding to defend it.

However, before she could get there, a figure appeared within her range of perception. A minute or so later, this figure entered her line of sight and flew toward her with rapid speed, riding atop a giant falcon-looking beast. The second she was above her, the newcomer, who looked like a beastkin, teleported and appeared right in front of the elven god.

"Mistress, I come bearing a message from the Wyrmgod of Nevermore," the newly ascended beastkin god spoke as she kneeled and offered her a sealed black cube. "Your eyes only. The Primordial insisted."

"Nevermore?" she frowned.

Artemis, who had been the elven archer riding the giant beast, took the cube and wondered what it was all about. Usually, the ones like her who had provided images for the Challenge Dungeon only be given these information packages at set schedules for them to look through. For the Wyrmgod to send a special delivery like this was both concerning and exciting. She didn't quite remember even setting any criteria for getting contacted, which made the entire matter even more puzzling.

Seeing no need to delay, she infused some of her energy to unlock the package and inspected its contents. It contained a message and a vast number of recordings. The message was from the Wyrmgod and was just an explanation that he had made the decision to send it despite there being no set criteria, as he judged it necessary and because her own image had requested it. Along with a final mention that the content within would speak for itself as to why it had to be sent immediately.

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Curious, she opened up the first recording. It was a match between her image and a human that she vaguely recalled having seen before. It took her a bit as she recalled where he was from. The Chosen of the Malefic One? What was his name again...

Watching the battle, she could admit it was impressive. He was good. His archery had much to be desired, but his overall movements and judgment mid-battle were top-notch. Moreover, his ability to dodge was uncanny, and from the looks of it, he had an extremely high Perception stat. Of course, within the Challenge Dungeon, it was severely reduced, but he definitely still had more than her image.

From the looks of it, he also had a danger sense. The same as Artemis herself. One that was quite honed and didn't rely on any skills, which was nearly impossible to find these days. Most just relied on the minor danger sense a high Perception stat provided and never actively trained the sense, but clearly, he had. In fact, his danger sense and overall ability to detect his surroundings were definitely superior to her image. Also, seeing him fight, she did have an amusing thought.

For the Chosen of the Malefic One to be a human hunter. How intriguing.

She would definitely have expected the Malefic Viper to choose a monster of some kind as his Chosen. Probably a dragon or a snake. Of course, she understood why he had chosen this particular mortal. Based on everything Artemis had heard, he had quite an impressive Bloodline, and there had been talks in the Pantheon of Life to try and get their hands on some of the unique opportunities he could provide.

As she continued to look at the recording, it eventually reached its end, and she saw her image be defeated. If everything the Wyrmgod wanted to send her had ended there, Artemis honestly wouldn't have complained. It had been a highly entertaining battle, and she liked the demeanor and fighting style of the human. If he wasn't already the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, she would definitely have wanted to recruit him, even without considering his special abilities to manipulate Origins.

With the battle done, she wondered what the rest of the recordings were about. Because the fight was only a minor snippet. The first thought that struck her was that he had potentially used several lives before winning, but she quickly dismissed that thought. In the fight, he clearly gave off the feeling of it being their first battle. This just left her with the second thought: her image had chosen to interact with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper after getting all its memories back.

It didn't really surprise Artemis. She could totally see herself wanting to know more about this mysterious human hunter with such an interesting vibe. It was a shame she couldn't feel the presence of the human, as she got the feeling he was quite impressive based on how her image had reacted throughout the fight.

Yet despite this... she hadn't expected what happened next. When she saw her image invite him to her place after the fight to "recuperate," she was already surprised. When her other self then led him into the restoration pool, she had to do a double-take, and when she went even further than that...

Artemis had an odd feeling at that moment, especially after skipping through the many other recordings. Some of them included the two of them intimately together, while others were just of them training in the forest or talking.

It was just the two of them spending time together. Nothing exciting happened in most of the recordings, but Artemis still couldn't help herself from watching it all. Finally, toward the end, she saw a recording of just herself sitting in a chair and staring directly back at her as she began speaking.

"Jake went to fight Valdemar today to become the one true Grand Champion, which means my time here is up at any moment. With that in mind, I have a request for you, Wyrmgod. I know you are watching. I want you to send recordings of everything that has happened between this version of me and Jake to my real self outside, and make sure to include this message. This next part is entirely addressed to my real self outside:

In the recording, Artemis saw her image slightly lean forward as she continued.

“Hi, me. I hope I’m doing well out there, not being stuck as a level 0 image in a Challenge Dungeon that will soon cease to exist. Now, I know how much I hate to beat around the bush, so let’s just get straight to it. Jake Thayne, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, is worth pursuing further. I am not saying you, my true self, should replicate my actions... but at least consider it when you judge the time is right and he becomes capable of standing tall before you. I honestly cannot give you any concrete reasons why I did as I did, but I do believe you will understand if you ever meet him. You won’t be disappointed; I can promise you that. Oh yeah, on a final note, he also has an absolutely monstrous Bloodline, so that is also worth investigating further.”

Artemis’ other self said the last sentence with a teasing smile and a wink as the recording ended, leaving Artemis just standing there silently for over a dozen seconds.

“Mistress?” the beastkin god asked with concern.

Artemis snapped out of her spell as she threw the bow she had been working on into her storage and took out a long-range teleportation token. “I’m heading to Nevermore. Now.”

“What?” the other god exclaimed, confused. “What’s happened? What about the divine tree proj-“

The words didn’t even finish as Artemis disappeared, going straight toward Nevermore without delay.

“It’s gonna be bad,” the dwarf muttered.

“It can’t be worse than the last one, can it?” a large, bulky human woman questioned.

“Never underestimate him; that’s how you end up like Marcus.”

All six people at the table cringed at the mention of Marcus as a few muttered a silent prayer for their fellow god.

They were all sitting at a bar as they waited for today’s main character to arrive. All six of them had been chosen for this great honor, though most of them would have preferred to just head to one of the deadly zones of a World Wonder instead.

Soon enough, he appeared. A man wearing only a simple leather tunic, carrying a large barrel, walked through the door, a massive grin on his face. They all bowed their heads slightly as they welcomed the god of war and leader of Valhal, Valdemar.

“Glad you six could join me today!” he said, still smiling as he put down the big barrel. While hiding their fear, the six gods stared at the barrel as the Primordial introduced what they would be drinking that day.

“My all-new creation! I call this one the Starry Explosion!” Valdemar said as he slapped the side of the barrel proudly.

“What’s it made of?” one of the braver gods asked.

“Alcohol.”

Alright, that one made sense, even if it could be a bit dangerous based on its potency.

“A mix of berries.”

Again, totally fair. Hopefully, at least half of them were edible.

“And a bit of star.”

...

They all sat there silently until the dwarf raised a hand. “What do you mean when you say a bit of star?”

“Well, I wanted to add something to spiff it up, and last time, someone said it could be hotter, so I added some star!” Valdemar responded proudly.

“I think what that person meant when they said hotter, they meant as in more spicy?” the dwarf muttered as the rest silently applauded him for his bravery.

“Hm?” Valdemar exclaimed. “Oh! Yeah, that could be the case. Anyway, give it a shot; I think it’s pretty good! Plus, it took a long time to cut the star into useable pieces, so not even giving it a shot would be a waste!”

Valdemar took out metal mugs and poured them all a drink from the barrel. The bubbling liquid gave off heat enough to kill weaker gods if they ingested it, and the sheer aura of the alcoholic beverage was suffocating. Just the fact Valdemar brought out the special mugs he had commissioned from the Starseizing Titan was proof this one was not to be trifled with.

“Say, what kind of star did you use?” the large human woman questioned.

“Well, I wanted one of the yellow ones as that would add some nice color to the drink, but they didn’t seem good enough and way too weak, so I went and chopped up one of those small white ones. Took a while to get all of the star into the barrel, but I think it turned out great!” Valdemar said with a big smile.

Six souls stared at the barrel and their drinks for a moment, reconsidering how they ended up there. It wasn’t just the damn star mass that was the problem, but the other ingredients.

The problem with the Primordial’s alcohol was very straightforward: he had made it and done all the taste-testing. This meant it was alcohol he himself could enjoy, making it far more potent than something any average god could handle.

At least Valdemar did have the sensibility to create mortal versions of his successful creations, so he didn’t accidentally kill anyone who consumed even a drop, but gods were not offered the same courtesy. In fact, gods were the ones who helped find the successful creations.



The six gods who sat around the table all exchanged telepathic messages until, finally, one of them took the fall. The dwarf lifted the mug and, with determination, downed it as Valdemar stared expectedly.

There was deafening silence for nearly a full second before the brave soul suddenly opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Hey, It’s actually not that ba-“

The dwarf’s eyes suddenly rolled to the back of his head before he fell out of his chair and hit the floor, completely and utterly unresponsive. A second later, his clothes caught on fire.

“Hah! It’s strong, eh!?” Valdemar said with a huge belly laugh as he took out a bucket of water and dumped it on the burning dwarf. Seemingly having fully expected this outcome.

The other five gods stared at their own mugs with fear as Valdemar looked expectedly at them. They all exchanged glances to see who would take the fall next... but suddenly, their savior arrived.

A Valkyrie goddess, sent by Gudrun herself, arrived with a package from the Wyrmgod of Nevermore. At first, Valdemar wanted to continue testing his new drink, but the Valkyrie insisted.

Valdemar took the recording and checked it out. The six of them looked on as he slowly began nodding, then he smiled before frowning, back to looking happy again. Then there was a pang of sadness until his

eyes suddenly opened wide, and he wouldn't stop grinning from ear to ear for several seconds until the recording stopped.

Looking up, Valdemar looked slightly apologetic as he still smiled with a hint of excitement in his eyes.

“Sorry mates, gotta postpone this one; Imma go visit my mate in Nevermore!”

That day, Jake unknowingly earned the deepfelt gratitude of five gods from Valhal.

Chapter 786: Nevermore: The Test of Character Begins

It took Jake a good week of sitting in meditation before he got the feeling he could handle the world around him again. Upon reflection on his current state, Jake would liken his injuries to as if he had strained some mental or soul muscle far more than he should have. As if he had torn something metaphysical that wouldn't simply heal in a few days. Luckily, though, it was healing. In just a week, Jake had gone from feeling either wholly overwhelmed by his surroundings or having all stimuli nearly completely suppressed. In fact, he felt confident enough to walk all the way to where one entered the Challenge Dungeons now.

However, Jake still had one thing that seriously bothered him. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't recall how he felt during the moment he unleashed his Bloodline, and he honestly didn't quite understand what exactly he had done. He remembered everything he had done, but the methods as to how he had done things eluded him. He had tried to replicate aspects to no avail, as he realized that during his full unleashing of his Bloodline, he had somehow embodied concepts he simply had no way to touch upon now.

While this was annoying, Jake wasn't that demotivated. Because he knew that it was something he could replicate in the future. Perhaps one day, that state of clarity would just be how he felt all the time, and he couldn't wait for that day to arrive. A man can dream.

Oh, Jake did also discover one more thing that did genuinely suck. During these thirty years of doing Nevermore, Jake had built up quite a lot of Jake Juice – or Origin Energy, as boring people called it – but that was now pretty much all gone. It had functioned as the fuel to allow him to do what he had done, and without it, the backlash would probably have been way fucking worse. Of course, that energy would also come back in due time, but it was the one true “loss” he suffered.

Either way, during this one week of healing, he tried to keep himself distracted by focusing on things that could keep his mind occupied, which luckily included messing with some of his items. His energy also moved normally, so he used what he had to infuse into the Soulflame Cradle. Sadly, the Puzzle Box wasn't really useable, though, as that required him to use his senses.

The Cradle had been out of his possession for more than a year and a half, yet when he checked it out, the inside looked just like it had when he entered the Challenge Dungeon. He guessed that time inside had been frozen by the system during his absence, which was probably for the best. Jake could already imagine someone like Dina, who walked around with a garden in a spatial storage, entering the dungeon only to see her garden entirely ruined the second she got out due to lack of maintenance.

Inside of the Cradle, his arcane affinity was gaining more and more ground. A few small areas now consistently birthed – and instantly killed – elemental-like creatures made of his affinity. By now, it was only a matter of time before an Arcane Soulflame would appear... Jake just hoped it would be a high-grade one. If not, well, he wasn't in a hurry and could wait for some better to come along. Working on the Cradle was a nice distraction, for sure.

Another place Jake felt all fine was within his own Soulspace. There, all his senses worked as they should without any problems, making it a place he could seek out if he needed reprieve. Unfortunately, him immersing his consciousness in his soul seemed to slow down, if not entirely halt his recuperation, so he only checked out his Soulspace sparingly.

He still took the time to make sure his curse energy was fine. Having all his equipment back was great, too. Especially Eternal Hunger had been dearly missed. The Sin weapon luckily also hadn't starved during his time in the Challenge Dungeon but had been frozen in time the same way as the Cradle.

Anyway, after this week of just healing, Jake believed it was time to stop stalling and get a move on. He didn't want to be that one guy on a group project who dragged everyone else down by being late with an assignment, so he had to get his ass moving if he wanted to avoid being the last person to finish all his Challenge Dungeon.

He just hoped this Test of Character dungeon would indeed be one he could do even in his messed-up state while hopefully even finding the space to heal in there. Also, he seriously hoped it wouldn't be as hard, but it shouldn't be, right?

Jake wasn't all that confident he would do super well, though... he had always sucked when taking tests. Well, besides multiple-answer tests where he could pretty much cheat by just getting a feel for the correct place to set a cross or fill in the circle. He doubted this test would just be him having to pick between a few choices on a sheet of paper, though.

No matter what, he didn't really have any other choice as he made his way to the entrance of the Challenge Dungeons and began his second Challenge Dungeon out of five: Test of Character.

And boy, was the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon an odd one. Jake immediately recognized that.

From the name alone, it gave plenty of clues, but Jake honestly hadn't expected it to just test the character of the person who did it, despite the name. How would that even work? What were the criteria for judging a person? What type of character was "best" and deserving of a better evaluation?

Also, how would the Wyrmgod and system even test someone's character? By having them take some silly personality test? Maybe it would use his horoscope and star sign or throw some tarot cards in the mix? In either case, Jake found the notion of a dungeon judging someone's character kind of dumb, so he couldn't really see it being that simple.

Turns out it wasn't simple indeed.

Upon entering the dungeon, after a brief moment of nothingness, Jake found himself lying in a large, comfy bed. He was momentarily confused as he couldn't quite move his body, but with a little push, he raised an arm.

His senses were still off, but he felt like his stats were all normal. As he was thinking this, he lost concentration, and his arm dropped down again, as he lost control of his own body. Jake was perplexed and taken aback as a system message appeared before him.

Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!

You have entered the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. This dungeon is composed of an anthology of events and scenarios for you to experience and live through as you influence the stories while embodying characters within these stories.

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As a character, you are both the controller of the outcome of this story and a silent passenger. You are free to choose between controlling the current character you inhabit or letting the original story play out as a simple bystander. Taking control allows you to change the course of the story to create an outcome you find ideal based entirely on your own judgment.

During this Challenge Dungeon, you are fully capable of using your full stats, though some skills may be limited. All current items and equipment have been confiscated and shall be returned upon exiting the Challenge Dungeon. Each story has a final choice you will be presented with that will also mark the beginning of the end of the current story and allow you to move on to the next. Stories can be ended before the final choice is presented should certain actions be taken. Be warned that should the character you are inhabiting die, the story will immediately end, and you will move on to the next. The death of the character you are inhabiting will have no negative effects on you but may influence your evaluation during the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon.

Objective: See the anthology through to its end.

Current objective: Experience the first story.

Reading the entire message, Jake was more certain than ever. This dungeon was weird as hell. So weird that Jake, in all honesty, had no idea what he was actually supposed to do.

An anthology? Stories? Taking the place of characters? This all seemed incredibly weird, especially considering he was clearly in his own body right now... wait, was he in his own body? He felt like he was, but upon focusing really hard on his sphere, he saw that something was different. He was a human, yes, but this wasn't him.

Forcing himself to take control of the body, Jake moved to touch his own face, only to feel his body instantly morph. The second he had taken control, the character he was currently inhabiting had morphed into Jake's body fully.

Letting go of his control, it instantly morphed back. Jake let it be as he tried to understand the dungeon a bit more as a minute or so passed. Then, without warning, his body began moving on its own as the character he was currently inhabiting appeared to wake up.

Sitting up, he stretched and yawned before getting out of the bed. Jake watched everything out of his own eyes, truly feeling like a passenger going along for the ride. His character soon walked in front of a mirror as Jake saw who he was supposed to be. In the mirror, a man who looked in his mid-thirties stared back as he stroked his beard a bit, seemingly considering if it had gotten a bit too long.

From there on, the guy just began his day. During this period, Jake realized that even if he saw everything the body did, he didn't know the character's actual thoughts or motives, forcing him to interpret any actions by himself. Perhaps this was part of the test of character? Again, what the hell was he supposed to do right now?

Time moved on as the man soon finished up at home and left his house. Jake still had his murky shitty sphere, but at least his eyesight and other "normal" senses were good enough for now. He couldn't see even close to as far as before, but he could manage. Moreover, from the looks of it, this entire scenario he found himself in was filled with only weak people. His ability to sense presences was also still intact, and so far, not a single being above E-grade had appeared, with most even in F-grade. The body he was currently in seemed to be in late E-grade, if barely.

Jake felt like he was watching a weird and very boring POV movie as the character went through his very mundane day. After leaving home, he went and got some breakfast at a local café before heading to work as a guardsman for the city. He guarded the walls, checked the documents of traders and travelers who wanted to enter the city, and shot the shit with his fellow guards. Only once did any action happen that day as a single late E-grade beast got too close to the city, and a few mage guardsmen quickly killed it.

After getting home, the guard went into a small woodworking shop at the back of the house, where he worked on a full dining set. Once he was done for the day, the sun had long gone down, and the guard went and relaxed a bit in his small living room, reading a book for an hour or so before he headed to bed and went asleep.

Jake sadly didn't have the ability to sleep as he just lay there in darkness. At any moment, he could take charge of the body, but he didn't. He hadn't done anything throughout the entire day either but had just followed along.

During this time, Jake contemplated the Challenge Dungeon introduction and noticed that one option he did have was to skip any current story by simply killing himself. Or, well, killing the character he was currently inhabiting. It said that would end the story prematurely, along with there being no negative consequences for death. Not that he planned on doing that... but it was an option.

Six hours later, the guard woke up, and another boring day went by. It was far from stimulating, but Jake didn't feel rushed to do anything. Sure, it did feel like he was wasting time, but hey, he was slowly healing up and improving. Plus, he had plenty of time to work on his Bloodline-related senses while he was on cruise control.

On the fourth day of this "story," something finally happened. A group of traders had come, and one of them said that they passed an area nearby that was usually peaceful, but it seemed like there had recently been a lot of activity from beasts. It wasn't much, but it was something. That something being incredibly obvious foreshadowing.

The next day, there was more action than any other as a lot of scaled horse-like creatures got close to the city and had to be put down. On the sixth day, it got even worse, and there were even reports of travelers being killed on the road. Rumors began to be whispered around the city that a Beast King had emerged and united the nearby monsters, causing much concern. The bar that the guard Jake was riding



along with sometimes visited was buzzing with activity that night, and Jake's character actively tried to calm everyone down.

Yet Jake knew he himself wasn't confident things were fine, not based on how he couldn't focus while at work and his constant nervous ticks. He obviously hoped it was just a false alarm.

Well, on the seventh day, it became clear this was no time to be calm. A scout had arrived and confirmed that a Beast King had indeed emerged, and based on context clues, Jake was pretty sure this so-called "calamitous monster" was just some D-grade. However, to these people, such a beast would be dangerous, even if it had just evolved. From the sounds of it, Jake also doubted it was even a strong variant.

On the eighth day, it became clear the city was in trouble. The Beast King was on the move and headed toward the city, likely to grow the power of its army by killing all the inhabitants of the city off for experience points. Human cities were the best kind of farming ground for beasts if they could get away from it, and clearly, this Beast King knew it.

A large meeting was called with the governor, officials, and many of the guards, including the guard captain, who was close to a peak E-grade. The meeting proceeded as several ideas were thrown out, including evacuation, fighting back while making use of the city walls, laying traps, having only a select few leave, or maybe trying to somehow make the Beast King not attack, with some even proposing that perhaps they could negotiate. Offer tribute to the Beast King to leave them be.

As everyone came up with ideas, Jake's character didn't say anything, but suddenly, as there was a moment of silence, the guard captain suddenly addressed him.

"You have worked as a guard here as long as me... do you have any suggestions?" the guard captain asked as he looked straight at Jake. Well, Jake's character.

As he did this, time slowed down significantly as a message appeared before him, but at the same time, he knew he had to make a decision relatively quickly.

Make your final choice. With the Beast King coming, choose how you will influence the city's response to the crisis.

Jake felt like he was put on the spot and doing a damn quick-time event... except he didn't just have to press a button really fast.

What's worse... Jake still had no idea what in the bloody hell the purpose of this place even was... so he just stopped trying to figure it out as he took control for the first time and spoke:

"Let's just hunt it down before it attacks?"

Chapter 787: Nevermore: Confusing Stories

The people in the room stared at Jake, who inhabited the body of the guard, seemingly wanting him to elaborate. Something he gladly did.

Whenever Jake took control and spoke, his body morphed into his own, but nobody around seemed to notice at all. That made things much easier as he shared his thoughts on the matter, with everyone thinking it was the guard talking.

Jake began to explain his plan of attacking the Beast King with a squad of elites before it could get the chance to attack the city to not allow it to build up power.

Based on everything Jake had heard, this Beast King was just a newly evolved D-grade. Sure, it was stronger than everyone in the city individually... but it was just one D-grade. The gap between E-grades and D-grades was pretty big but far from as prominent as, say, the difference between a D and a C-grade.

The true danger lay in a Beast King's ability to unite other beasts under its banner. As a being of a higher grade, other monsters would instinctually want to follow it and be submissive, allowing a single D-grade to create an army that could easily take the Beast King down several times over if they turned on it.

So, with that in mind, if this Beast King was allowed to gather an army, the city would truly be in trouble. Moreover, if they attacked the beast within its own domain, there was a good chance they wouldn't even have to battle the army at all. It was the same concept as how armies of beasts would not interfere if two Beast Kings battled to become the new leader; as a general rule, they just often didn't interfere if the Beast King was fighting. Its death would only mean a stronger alpha would take the position of leader, after all. At least, this non-interference of the army was what Jake gambled on.

Finally, if they managed to defeat the beast, there was a chance someone like the guard captain could finally overcome his limits and become a D-grade himself. If that happened, the city would be a lot safer in the future.

This was all sound logic that Jake shared with the room.

There was a lot of opposition, but Jake pointed out how shitty all the other plans were. Evacuation would result in most dying anyway, as why wouldn't this army just chase them down? Moreover, the majority of the beast army was of horse-like beasts who could move far faster than a bunch of humans trying to run away. Defending meant facing the entire army, so that was definitely out of the question. What was also dumb was evacuating the elite, as that was just the strategy of a bunch of cowards and something Jake could never get behind.

In the end, the group relented. Jake did think everything went a bit too smoothly when it came to getting approval, but he chalked that up to the Challenge Dungeon mechanics helping him out. It reminded him a bit of how, for some reason, the opinion of the main character in a game would always dictate the plot. With everyone in agreement, plans were quickly made.

The operation included fourteen late E-grades between levels 70 and 95, one guard captain at level 99, and finally, the personal bodyguard of the governor, who was also level 99. Moreover, they made many preparations and prepared tools to make the fight easier. Casters got catalysts that would help amplify the power of their spells, and the best equipment was given out to everyone in the group.

With conviction, they moved out to strike down the threat before it had a chance to destroy their home.

The sixteen humans successfully snuck into its domain using magic to hide them before they got close enough. The D-grade beast in question looked like a large, nearly five-meter-long, six-legged horse with scales covering many parts of its body. Jake quickly confirmed it was indeed a pretty weak variant, and it didn't even look like it was level 110 yet. Moreover, there were no other beasts close to it, as the beast lay resting on the ground, fully exposed.

Going along with their plan, the bodyguard and guard captain would make the first move. Both of them attacked simultaneously, startling the Beast King. The rest of the group followed up rapidly after a solid blow was landed by the two of them as they joined the fight, and... well...

Everyone kind of died?

While it was true the D-grade was a shitty variant, the humans were also just shit. Even the two “strongest” humans in the group sucked ass, and not just stat and skill-wise. Their movements were also beyond horrible, and Jake was pretty damn sure he could have killed the two of them together when he was only level 60 or something.

But it wasn't all bad. Sure, the guard captain was trampled, but he managed to cut off a leg in the process, and while it was true the horse bit off the bodyguard's head, he managed to blow up the inside of the Beast King's mouth right before he died.

Jake's character was the final person to die as he was trampled too, but he managed to penetrate his spear deep into the Beast King's body before death. As the final human died, it was also clear the Beast King would die, and as predicted, it soon succumbed to its wounds.

So... the city was saved in the end at great cost. After Jake's character died, he had expected the story to end immediately, but instead, he saw what reminded him of an epilogue that displayed a scout who had seen the battle from afar run back to report to the city. At the same time, all the beasts that had gathered in the area slowly spread out again, no longer having a Beast King to gather around.

There had still been guards left in the city who managed to pick up the slack, and a grand funeral was held for the fallen. As time fast-forwarded, the city thrived for a while before it was eventually abandoned as an unknown faction invaded the land, and everyone chose to relocate.

With that, the first story came to an end... and Jake honestly wasn't sure what to think or what to conclude based on how everything had gone.

Could Jake just have taken control of the body and killed the D-grade by just looking at it? Sure, but what would the point of that be? This wasn't his fight anyway. During these nine days of “living” in this story, Jake came to the conclusion that the way he wanted to guide these stories was to influence his

character to do what he would have done if he were in their situation. If he genuinely didn't know what to do, he would just let the characters decide themselves. It was a simple approach, but honestly, considering he had no fucking idea what he was supposed to do in this dungeon, it had to be good enough.

With the story over, his vision turned dark as he still wondered how his "character" was assessed based on this first story, just as a system prompt appeared before him.

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You have completed the first story.

Second story initiating.

In the second story, Jake took the form of an advisor to a local warlord who controlled a massive area with several cities. Okay, Jake called it massive, but in actuality, it was only considered massive by E-grade standards. The Warlord himself was an early D-grade, with Jake's body, in this case, a peak E-grade.

The central conflict in this story revolved around deciding the allocation of resources to different craftsman guilds. All of them had sent their representatives to speak their case, and Jake, as the advisor, was brought along to each guild to see how much they contributed to the budding kingdom.

While it was kind of interesting learning about a bunch of different crafters, Jake spent most of his time in this six-day-long story just focusing on his recovery as his senses still improved by the day. By the end

of the tour of the different guilds, and when the Warlord called Jake in to give his advice on which guild to support the most... Jake did nothing.

What the fuck did he know about managing a city or allocating funds? He had purposefully offloaded everything to Miranda in his own city, and he honestly believed his opinion didn't matter for shit in this situation. That is why he let the character he was inhabiting decide entirely on his own.

After the final choice, where a masonry guild had been selected based on Jake's character's decision, an epilogue played that seemed as neutral as could get. The masonry guild was happy and began a lot more construction with their new resources, even erecting a large statue in honor of the Warlord, making the advisor even more well-liked. As for any wider impact, Jake never really saw anything special happen as things just seemed to proceed as normal as the story came to an uneventful end.

You have completed the second story.

Third story initiating.

In this story, Jake took the form of a young man who was to be "married" to some old duke or something. The duke apparently liked younger men and women, and while Jake's character's family felt terrible about the whole ordeal as they knew they were throwing their family member to the wolves, they also knew opposing the duke would be to oppose the royal family, which would cause severe problems for the entire family.

Jake never even got to the final choice on this one, as he ended up ripping off the head of the duke after a particularly nasty scene was about to play out. From there, Jake was forced to take some actions of his own and ended up just acting like his character had actually been temporarily possessed by a divine being and was now an apostle or some shit. Jake was winging it hard and fully improvising at that point.

Seeing as the strongest people in the kingdom were early D-grades, a mid-tier C-grade with Jake's Bloodline-empowered presence was more than enough to convince them.

The third story ended with Jake's character being recognized as a semi-divine being and his entire family uplifted by the royal family, who ended up purging the duke-faction entirely, using the young man's emergence as an excuse to wipe out political opponents. In the final part of the epilogue it showed the young man going on a journey to explore the world, with the words that even now, he felt the presence of the god who had used his vessel.

So, yeah, in this story, Jake learned that the actions he took molded the personality of the character he was inhabiting, even after he relented control. The young man truly believed he had been possessed by a god. Though remembering the first story, the guard had also fully tried to carry out Jake's plan, even after he gave up control, so it probably shouldn't have come as news. Just confirmation.

You have completed the third story.

Fourth story initiating.

In the fourth story, Jake was a squad captain on an ongoing battlefield, leading a group of around a dozen soldiers. This one ended with their side winning through Jake doing nothing but giving some advice on how to attack to increase the chance of victory for their squad, which ultimately resulted in them successfully sneaking around the enemy rear and killing the enemy army's tactician, throwing them into a state of panic.

The fifth one revolved around solving an internal conflict in the character's family. Jake's character had suddenly gained a lot of money through securing rights to a new trade route, and now everyone was scrambling to get a piece of the pie. In this story, the final choice was Jake – taking the form of the old Patriarch who would soon retire – choosing who would take over the budding business empire. Jake had



no idea who to pick but did contribute by having the people who tried to assassinate his character killed, even if they were family. Whether the killed people were better or worse at running the company didn't really matter to Jake; he just didn't like people trying to kill him in such cowardly ways, such as trying to poison him. Based on the epilogue, the non-killed guy Jake's character ended up picking didn't do all that badly, though, so it was probably fine.

The sixth and seventh stories were both kind of boring, with Jake having no real input in either. He only took control once in each during the final choices portion and shared his thoughts, and that was it. As a general rule, he still just didn't see any need to decide the lives of others, especially not strangers. Something all these people ultimately still were, even if he did inhabit a character.

Well, he said that, but then there was the next story.

In the eighth story, Jake's character was a slaver and had to decide to whom he would sell his merchandise. There were a bunch of options. One wanted to use them as soldiers, one wanted them as human experiments, one simply wanted more workers, and there was even someone who wanted to buy them to free them all.

Anyway, Jake freed all the slaves and killed himself, as well as all the other slavers who had come to buy them. Well, besides the one who wanted to free them, he seemed decent enough. The epilogue showed the slaves all escaping and running wherever, with some finding true freedom, some getting recaptured, and some dying, unaware of how to live, though the majority were picked up and saved by the guy who wanted to free them all to begin with.

In the eighth story, Jake had thrown his non-interference stance to the wind and done as he wanted, having control pretty much all the time. If that had been the right choice or not for this "test," he wasn't sure, but honestly, who knew at this point?

The more stories passed, the more confused Jake got as to what the hell he was actually doing. Why was he doing this Challenge Dungeon? What the hell was it measuring? He was just making decisions for random people. The dungeon or system gave no feedback at all. No scores, no comments, no nothing. He was just doing story after story with no feedback.

He did take note of how the dungeon liked for him to spend some time in the story before presenting him with the final choice. Even in the war story, Jake's character had spent a few days bonding with the soldiers he was leading. Perhaps it wanted him to have time to get emotionally invested in them as people? Or maybe it just wanted to give him more data to base his final choice on?

Ultimately, Jake decided to just not think too much about it. He just went with his guts and stuck to his own, albeit flimsy, personal beliefs. He had never really cared if people called him a hypocrite or not when he decided to get involved in some matters while taking a stance of non-interference in others. Jake was Jake, and trying to find the "best" ending in all of these stories frankly didn't matter much to him. If this was the right approach to get a high score in the Challenge Dungeon, he seriously doubted, but if Jake had to effectively act like someone he wasn't, he didn't want to go for a high score. He would just take whatever evaluation the system and Wyrmgod gave him, and if it sucked... well, fuck em.

But, hey, this Challenge Dungeon where he had no idea what the fuck he was doing, things weren't all bad. All this time had brought one good thing with it, as after about four months inside the Test of Character dungeon, something seemed to finally click back into place.

On this day, Jake's vision cleared up, and his senses all returned to normal as his Sphere of Perception became as clear as ever.

That's right, Jake was back.

Back to doing more stories filled with E-grades where being recovered didn't matter, except for watching everything happening in the stories through his sphere was now more entertaining. Also... seeing as how he was now back in good condition, it was time to also consider working on something else:

Consolidating his gains from the Colosseum of Mortals by getting some sweet skill upgrades under his belt.

Chapter 788: Nevermore: Gaze

Jake got really lucky in story number twelve. In that one, he was so fortunate as to be a suspected mass murderer who was thrown into solitary confinement for potential crimes against humanity.

Now, Jake had to admit this story was kind of interesting. Jake had arrived after the suspected crime was done and in the middle of the arrest, not knowing what was going on. What's more, the character Jake was in didn't seem to know if he had murdered anyone either. At least he claimed that he didn't have any memories of the last week, which was one of the reasons he had just been imprisoned and not killed.

This left the mystery of whether he was guilty or not, and if he wasn't the true mass murderer, who was behind this plot? Jake knew that losing memories was very, very rarely a thing with the system, so there was also a good chance the character was just lying. But it was technically possible he didn't have any memories.

Jake would guess that a big part of this particular story was to figure out if the guy was guilty and, dependent on the answer – or your personal conclusion to the answer – how you would react to the entire judicial system.

Interesting, yes, but far less interesting than controlling the character for ninety-five percent of the time to practice his own skills while in isolation anyway. Considering Jake knew he was just waiting for some

unknown investigation going on and that he would have to be stuck in prison for at least two weeks, according to the guards, Jake decided this was prime time to get some skills upgrades in. This was definitely not how things were intended to be, as Jake guessed it was meant to be some mental training exercise or something, but that just sounded like a needless waste of time.

Plus, Jake hid by erecting a stable arcane mana barrier to seal his cell away, and he seriously doubted any of the local E and D-grades could ever see through it. The cell itself was decently large, being around five-by-five meters, so just enough space for Jake to move around and work on skill upgrades. The reason for this size was to make space for the energy-draining magic circle installed on the floor that was meant to drain the one trapped there of stamina and mana, but, well, it didn't seem like the thing worked properly on C-grades. This magic circle was part of the reason Jake was confident in controlling the character without missing anything, as with no resources, he would just have been on the floor, unable to move.

As for why he had waited with his skill upgrades, it was naturally due to the backlash. One could only upgrade skills when one intended to upgrade them or experienced a moment of sudden insight or enlightenment, so he had purposefully kept it off till he had fully recovered. Jake feared that if he upgraded his skills while all his senses were messed up, it could potentially fuck up the upgrade. It was maybe an irrational fear, but better safe than sorry, especially considering he didn't need the upgraded skills while inside the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon.

But now it was time to finally integrate what he had learned.

During the Colosseum of Mortals, Jake had primarily worked on three things: basic archery, what he called Fear Gaze, and his expertise with making quasi-Protean arrows. While he had also worked on general energy control and whatnot, the gains there were far lesser than with these three.

One also had to remember that Jake had practiced energy manipulation far more than he had ever practiced archery. Every single time he did alchemy, he practiced manipulating his mana, and when using nearly every single skill, he improved his use of stamina. On the other hand, general archery was something Jake only ever really improved when he consciously worked on doing so. In battle, he only

often used his skills, such as Arcane Powershot or Splitting Arrow, giving him little time to work on his usual archery.

However, archery was still part of all these skills. It was the foundation that all of Jake's other bow-related skills worked with. Even when Jake, say, used Arcane Powershot, the loosed arrow benefitted from his archery skill as well, even if he didn't think about it.

Having decided to start with improving his archery, Jake got to work with consolidating his gains and insights. He spent the next day or so going through his practiced archery in his small cell, no one coming to bother him at any point.

After this one day of practice, the system finally recognized his efforts to integrate what he had learned, if barely.

[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)]

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[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. As your horizons expand, you realize flaws and build upon a foundation to make that expansion everpresent. You do not shy away from mixing archery with magic and making your arrows arbiters of your will. Your arrows will cross all horizons and bend over any obstacle to pierce your target, with only your own will limiting the possibilities. Allows you to affect the trajectory of arrows already in flight. By infusing arrows with your will before shooting, the effect is significantly improved. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception. Arrow trajectory control based on Willpower.

The “upgrade” was less than exciting but still recognized by the system to be enough for a notification. The only real change was a single sentence being expanded and one more functionality added to the skill. The skill before the upgrade said:

“Allows you to apply your will to control the trajectory of arrows before releasing them.”

While now, it had turned into:

“Allows you to affect the trajectory of arrows already in flight. By infusing arrows with your will before shooting, the effect is significantly improved.”

Again, it was very minor, but at least he now had skill-assistance when controlling his arrows mid-flight, while he didn’t doubt his prior method of infusing his will before shooting was even better than before.

Sadly, it stayed as an epic rarity skill, though it was no doubt peak epic now, extremely close to ancient rarity. Overall, it didn’t appear like a big deal, but Jake knew that he had taken an important step forward in his archery journey.

Even if the skill hadn’t suddenly grown significantly or even added much new and fancy, he knew he had shored up many weaknesses in his archery. He had hammered out some bad habits, both through his own practice and through the advice and sparring with Artemis, who naturally was a far better archer than himself, even as a level 0 significantly nerfed version of herself.

She understood that Jake didn't really learn much when taught, so they just fought as he watched what she did, taking inspiration. It was a bit similar to how Jake trained against Sim-Jake, though he, of course, had far more time with his other self. Jake learned incredibly well by seeing others, likely because he had such high Perception, proving it was truly the best stat.

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Either way, Jake believed his skill was now far more primed for future upgrades.

As for how he would actually continue to upgrade the skill, well, Jake felt like one of the best ways to do that would be to expose himself to more skilled archers. He had learned so much watching melee fighters, mages, and whatnot, but people using bows were just too rare. But hey, who knows, maybe he could even get the real Artemis to give him a hand...

Eh, doubtful... I am sure a literal goddess is too busy to waste time with some random C-grade. Maybe in the future...

Jake shook his head as he refocused his attention on something else. After thinking for a while, Jake consolidated his gains in regard to Protean Arrow, but even after two days in the isolation cell, the system didn't give him any notifications.

He did feel like he improved some aspects of the skill, though. Jake could assemble the arrow faster and make the structure of the arrow even more complex, but clearly, the system didn't think it was enough to warrant even an in-rarity upgrade.

Jake was admittedly a bit annoyed at this but not that surprised. The skill was already ancient rarity, making it a lot harder to upgrade.

Taking the time, Jake also went over all his other insights, including those to his general energy control and his Arcane Powershot skill. Nothing was upgraded, nor did he get any system messages, but he hadn't expected any either. He just knew that many skills were now far closer to an upgrade than ever, especially those he hadn't upgraded in a long time... which brought him to the final thing he wanted to do. The final skill he wanted to upgrade:

Gaze of the Apex Hunter. It was naturally to be augmented by the "new" technique Jake created while inside the Colosseum of Mortals.

Fear Gaze was a weird one. The technique Jake had created when he was skillless was very similar in many aspects of his regular Gaze of the Apex Hunter, yet he also introduced some new elements. He simplified its concepts a lot and also made the skill far, far more risky. Right now, Jake would only experience a headache after using Gaze too many times and a quick sharp pain if he used it on someone too strong. He wouldn't take any actual damage to his soul, even if he tried to use the skill on a god, though it would give him a headache for sure and make the skill unavailable for a while.

With the skillless Fear Gaze, that wasn't the case. This was also the reason Jake had been reluctant to use it on Valdemar during their fight. The backlash he suffered was intense, as the skill effectively made their two souls clash, and if Jake wasn't confident about coming out on top, it would end badly for him.

Now, while Jake did have his Bloodline, which was just a straight-up cheat in a soul clash, it wasn't perfect. The quality of his soul was incredibly high, and it would allow him to come out on top against pretty much anyone of equal level, but against higher-leveled foes, it could easily become problematic. Even if Jake was the highest-quality and most powerful ant around, he would still be squashed by the lowest-quality human.



This meant he had to willingly make regular Gaze more risky to use if he wanted to integrate Fear Gaze. At least he would have to accept that should he introduce the concepts he had learned, the backlash he would suffer from misusing the skill would increase significantly. He didn't necessarily think he would die, even if he tried to use Fear Gaze on a literal god, but he would definitely knock himself out for a while.

However, with this trade, Jake would also make the skill far more powerful. One of the big differences between Gaze of the Apex Hunter and Fear Gaze was that Fear Gaze also affected all the energies of his target. His regular Gaze only froze the physical body, allowing his foe to continue controlling mana and likely even internal energy to some degree.

He often experienced foes erecting barriers even while paralyzed, with some even counterattacking using magic while frozen. Fear Gaze would stop all that. It had even been able to stop the Transcendent aura of Valdemar... though it was more accurate to say he himself had stopped it as Fear Gaze had made him hesitate for a moment.

Now, Jake knew he wanted these aspects infused into Gaze of the Apex Hunter. The question was how he was supposed to do that properly. Looking at the skill he wanted to upgrade, he realized he really hadn't looked at the description for a long time.

[Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – A hunter who has seen his gaze reflected in the eyes of the Apex Predator and now stares back with equal zeal. With a glance that penetrates into the very soul of its prey, the gaze of the Apex Hunter can immobilize or even kill any it sees. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his prey through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. Passively enhances the hunter's eyes, increasing the effect of Perception while also making weak points easier to spot. All effects of Gaze of the Apex Hunter are determined by Perception.

This was one of his first legendary skills and one he had gained right after the Tutorial. He had it since E-grade but never once upgraded it.

Jake couldn't help but smile as he saw the "making weak points easier to spot" part of the description. When had he ever used this feature? At least consciously. Finding a weak spot usually wasn't hard. In fact, weak spots were often incredibly obvious. Didn't take a genius to figure out that shooting something in the eye was a good idea. Plus, the higher grade Jake got, the fewer natural weak points every creature got. Even now, Jake's organs didn't really matter for shit. The ones he had left anyway. So if he could improve this aspect somehow, he wasn't opposed to it. In fact, he had a good idea of how to do it.

Fear Gaze was to gaze upon a soul. The soul – or at least the Soulshape – was far more informative to look at if one searched for weaknesses, and it shouldn't be too hard to expand it so he could glance at Soulshapes using Gaze.

Compared to the prior skills he wanted to upgrade, this one was naturally far harder, but in some areas, it was surprisingly more straightforward. As mentioned, this skill was one Jake had for a long time. Shit, it had even integrated Hunter's Sight, which came from one of the very first skills Jake ever got when he entered the Tutorial. Through the many levels and even grades he had the skill, minor improvements had naturally always been made. Jake had gotten better and better at using Gaze of the Apex Hunter, even using parts of it to nullify Identify-blocking skills.

His changed orange-yellow eyes from getting the skill had always been synonymous with who he was by now. It was something every person in Haven recognized and was, in many ways, truly part of his identity. In fact, during the Colosseum, it had been incredibly weird to see himself in mirrors without his changed eyes.

The thought of mirrors gave Jake an idea as he summoned a stable wall of arcane mana that he made to reflect his own image back at him. A large mirror appeared before him, and Jake met his own reflection's eyes. Opening them wide, they began to glow as the pupils turned into slits.

Jake had expected days to pass before he would see any progress, but reality turned out differently. Throughout the years, he had been assembling puzzle pieces, and now he just had to put them together into one picture. So, as he stared at his own reflection, he felt the ease of what he wanted to do, and in that moment, he fully understood. He understood why Fear Gaze – a seemingly high-level technique – had come so easy to him in the Colosseum. He understood why he felt wrong when he didn't have the skill.

Gaze had indeed become integral to him as a person. It suited Jake and aligned with him, perhaps more than any other skill he possessed. Gaze had long become part of Jake's Path, and as he felt his own heartbeat, truly part of who and what he was... now more than ever.

[Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]

[Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Mythical)] – A hunter who has embraced primal aspects of himself, his gaze more deadly than even most apex predators. With will befitting that of an apex hunter, unleash a Primal Gaze that forcibly penetrates into the soul of your foes. The Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter can immobilize or even kill any it sees, the weak crumbling before you. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his opponents through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. Due to the nature of the skill, the soul of the hunter will also be exposed to the soul of the target when using Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter, potentially causing the hunter harm. Passively enhances the hunter's eyes, increasing the effect of Perception while also allowing you to glance at your opponent's soul for weaknesses. Passively inspires fear in all that enter the hunter's eyes, whom he displays hostility toward. All effects of Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter are determined by Perception and the overall power of the hunter's soul. May your gaze inspire primal fear in all who dare impede the Path of the Primal Hunter.

Chapter 789: Nevermore: Out of Hand

Having an itch always sucked, especially when it was somewhere that was hard to reach, such as that particular spot on your back. However, Jake would argue that one of the worst places to have a serious itch was inside your damn eyeballs.

After getting the notification, Jake's eyes subtly began changing, and with that came the intense itching. It made him want to scratch his own eyes out, but he resisted the urge as seconds that felt like minutes slowly passed. He had closed his eyes the second the change began to happen as his vision completely

distorted during the restructuring. He faintly felt every part of his two eyeballs being remade, making him more sure than ever that should anyone ever manage to kill him, they would get some dope eyes as drops, ones that were potentially even at mythical rarity now.

Of course, Jake didn't have any plans of dying, but occupying his mind with weird thoughts was the best thing he could do to distract himself from clawing out his own eyes. Luckily, the process was soon complete, and Jake opened his eyes again and...

Well, he couldn't really tell anything had happened. It was not that surprising, considering he hadn't actively aimed to make his eyesight better, and as he didn't have any other people to look at, he couldn't test the ability to look at other people's souls.

With the evolution of his eyes completely done, he could also finally turn his attention to the skill upgrade itself. Jake stared at the skill for a while but didn't get longer than the name alone before he had something he bit onto. Primal Gaze. Jake hadn't expected the skill to necessarily become named "Gaze of the Primal Hunter," but he sure hadn't expected it to be Primal Gaze either. What did that even mean?

Clearly, it meant that "primal" concepts had been infused into the skill, but not to the degree of turning it into a Primal Hunter skill. It felt more like a halfway point before becoming a true Legacy skill for him, and if that was true, wasn't it still kind of awesome?

Because that would indicate that when he upgraded it to a true Primal Hunter skill, it would be one above mythical rarity.

Another possible part of the explanation why it wasn't "of the Primal Hunter" was due to the inherent Records of the "of the Apex Hunter" concept being too powerful. Jake was ultimately still only a C-grade,

and unless he did something unique to himself, it was difficult to make a skill that could truly be called part of his own budding Legacy, especially if it was built on top of a legendary skill.

Something like the Core Manipulation skill was something unique that relied on Jake's unique concepts, so it was easy to make the vast majority of the Records in the skill belong wholly to Jake. The same was true with the Moment and Eternal Shadow skills that both came to be due to his Bloodline more or less directly getting involved.

Primal Gaze, on the other hand, was a true mix. It wasn't truly something Jake had made himself but was instead only filled with Records that very closely aligned with his Bloodline and who he was. Jake did have full confidence that one day it would become a Legacy skill, but for now, he wasn't going to complain about what he had gotten.

As a final note, the skill did also at least include mentions of who he was, with the nice little sentence: "May your gaze inspire primal fear in all who dare impede the Path of the Primal Hunter." This pretty much served as confirmation that the skill was well on its way to becoming a Legacy skill.

Now, the actual upgrade to the skill was in the form of pure additions rather than any major changes. It was just Jake adding on "primal" aspects to the existing Gaze of the Apex Hunter, upgrading it without changing any of the fundamentals.

The new things added were the ability to directly clash his soul with others, the ability to see souls for weaknesses, and then an unexpected effect to inspire fear in targets he showed hostility toward? That last part of the skill definitely wasn't something he had intended to add or even expected, but something that seemed to have snuck in with all the other stuff.

These changes to the skill meant that Jake could now also freeze the energies of people. At least, he instinctively felt so. However, there was one more important aspect of this upgrade to consider:

He could still use only the old version of Gaze. The one where people could still control their energies. He didn't have to use the Fear Gaze aspect if he didn't want to, which opened quite a few doors. First of all, it would allow him to use it on targets he didn't wanna risk a direct soul clash against, and secondly, it meant he could use it strategically. What if he used regular Gaze in a fight against someone a time or two, making them adapt by keeping constant energy barriers ready, only for him to unleash a Fear Gaze for the finishing blow? Yeah, that could definitely be a thing.

Jake kept considering the potential use cases of his skill for a while longer before he continued to practice some other stuff. He really felt like he had to do a lot of catch-up after having spent so long as a level 0 in the Colosseum of Mortals, and if the dungeon hadn't taken his items, he would probably have been busy doing alchemy by now.

Days passed before something finally happened in this particular story, also reminding him he was still inside the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. Jake, with his Sphere of Perception now working properly, had early warning if anyone ever approached, and on that day, he saw someone going to the cell he was in.

Dispelling his stable barrier and lying down on the floor, Jake quickly relinquished control as his character returned to being an unconscious guy without any resources. A few guards arrived shortly after and didn't notice anything wrong as they hoisted up the unconscious guy and dragged him away.

At this point, Jake was back to just being a spectator. He had been in the isolation cell for about ten days, and during this time, no one had come by to even check on him, though the magic circle meant to keep him trapped did have the ability to detect if anyone exited it. Considering the character was meant to be unconscious for all this time, he didn't seem to have been much affected by Jake's actions either, so Jake hoped he hadn't messed up this storyline too much.

The guy was dragged to what looked like a temporary holding cell, where a healer came by and made sure he was awake and lucid. Once it was confirmed the character was awake – and very distressed – he was dragged off again toward a large building Jake quickly came to learn was a courthouse of sorts.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

From there, the trial began. Jake felt like he was in some crime show as both sides presented evidence, with Jake's character's defense being that he had no recollection of anything he was accused of and that he had potentially been mind controlled or at least messed with by some soul mage. Pretty much, they were just trying to sow doubt.

Meanwhile, the prosecution said that the guy was just lying because he had gotten caught. The evidence he had committed the crime was indisputable, so one would think they had an easy case considering there was a damn recording, but it appeared that the laws of the world in this story required them to prove a motive before he could be judged guilty. That he was some maniac who just liked killing was a legitimate claim, but the problem was that Jake's character seemed genuinely heartbroken when he heard what he had done when he – allegedly – wasn't in control of his body.

Both sides argued, and during all this time, Jake wondered if there really wasn't anyone with a truth-telling skill like Silas anywhere. Jake tended to be pretty good at discerning if people were telling the truth, but with the character he was inhabiting, he genuinely had no idea.

Anyway, both sides had a hard time winning the case, and investigations continued as Jake spent several days being dragged in and out of a courtroom that looked very much like it could have come from Earth.

As time dragged out, the investigations into whether the guy had somehow been controlled really got momentum, which was when a change happened.

That night, while Jake was in a temporary holding cell, the truth was revealed. One of the guards approached the cell, and Jake instantly knew something was off. The guard looked like the regular guard, but Jake felt like he wasn't... in fact, he reminded him of a certain someone.

Eversmile?

That's right, the character Jake inhabited was innocent, and in reality, a shapeshifter had taken his form and killed a bunch of people! What's more, the shapeshifter had done all this as a job for a powerful local bigshot to get rid of one particular person in the crowd slaughtered.

Meanwhile, Jake's character was just the fall guy and had been put in a trance of sorts at home, where he just slept for a week straight while experiencing weird dreams that made him believe he could have been the killer.

Seeing as the investigation had gone on for too long, the bigshot decided that assassinating Jake's character and making it look like a suicide due to guilt would be for the best, which was why the shapeshifter had come that day.

As for how Jake learned all this? Well, it turns out his new Primal Gaze's fear function was quite effective at making others figuratively shit their pants and spill everything once he looked at them in a mean way. After a few threats where Jake acted like he was a being that had taken over the guy's body – which technically wasn't untrue – the shapeshifter turned on the bigshot, and from there, the rest of the story went as one would have expected. The bigshot was found out to be the real culprit, Jake's character was released, and justice was served as everyone lived happily ever after.

At least that is what one would have expected, but there was more corruption and more shapeshifters around who also worked for this bigshot. Anyway, to make a long story short, Jake ended up gathering



up a crowd of around two dozen shapeshifters and kindly threatened them with very painful deaths. It was only after that things ended in a satisfactory way, though it did also include Jake dismantling several institutions in the judicial system. So, yeah, things maybe got a bit out of hand.

So, when Jake said he believed it was satisfactory, that was only according to his own beliefs, where he tended to like good endings in stories, but if it was a good conclusion to the story from the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon's point of view? Who the fuck knows!

By now, Jake had pretty much resigned himself to getting a shit evaluation for doing this Challenge Dungeon. The advice he had gotten from both Villy and the Wyrmgod didn't really help him much, as both just boiled down to being himself... but hey, maybe that actually meant he was doing super well and was on his way to the best evaluation ever? When you didn't know the criteria you were being measured by, it was pretty damn hard to tell.

Oh well, all he could do was continue as he went on to the next story... which was pretty much just a reskinned trolley problem. Yeah, he wasn't a big fan, but hey, maybe the audience watching him do these stories enjoyed the show?

This is... getting out of hand.

Vilastromoz looked around the room, which had quite a few new additions since Jake completed the first Challenge Dungeon. The first of which was naturally the most expected of the bunch: Valdemar. Within a day of getting the information package, he had popped in with a huge grin on his face as he wanted to see the one who had beaten his image in the Colosseum of Mortals.

Only a few days later, the second person the Viper had kind of expected to come did. He was naturally speaking of Artemis. However, one of the reasons he had only kind of expected it was due to who and what she was.

For someone like Valdemar to show up to Nevermore and want a personal meeting and hang out with the Wyrmgod was entirely what one could expect. However, for someone like Artemis, she simply didn't have the status to do something like that.

Moreover, Valdemar, the Viper, and the Wyrmgod were naturally all Primordials, and as a non-pinnacle god, simply being in their presence could be quite unsettling. So, she had made a wise decision and invited someone along who did have the status required: Nature's Attendant.

That is how they, less than a week after Jake completed the Challenge Dungeon, ended up doubling the number of people sitting within what was effectively a large living room, watching recordings and livestreams of different mortals currently doing Nevermore.

It had to be noted that the Wyrmgod didn't simply stream everything to everyone in the room. The only reason the Viper was allowed to see Jake was because he was his Chosen, meaning the three newcomers were not offered this privilege despite Valdemar's loud complaints. Complaints primarily aimed at Vilastromoz, who was the one that was supposed to give permission, but after a while of the Viper refusing, Valdemar just settled with watching some of the young prospects from Valhal instead.

To avoid things getting too annoying, Vilastromoz did say he would share if something exciting happened on Jake's side, but honestly, they weren't missing much with the Test of Character dungeon. Not that it wasn't fun to see Jake trying to figure out what he was supposed to do, but the Viper believed he was quite unique in his enjoyment of that.

Artemis and Nature's Attendant eventually settled on watching his granddaughter. The hunter god was quite subdued in the room, contrary to her demeanor in the Colosseum, but the Viper couldn't blame her. In fact, it was pretty odd she was even allowed to be in the room, considering the others there. Valdemar and the Viper being capable of existing in the same room without showing hostility toward

one another didn't mesh well with the official conflict between their two factions, after all, so for Artemis to be there was quite a risk.

Alas, the Wyrmgod allowed her to stay, Vilastromoz not doubting for a second that Minaga had something to do with it. At least the Unique Lifeform seemed to enjoy teasing her quite a bit as he showed her some of his own recordings from when Jake did his labyrinth.

Around a month passed like this until suddenly, two additions he had not expected arrived together. In retrospect, he probably shouldn't have been surprised, as a gathering of three Primordials and Nature's Attendant was already considered rather extraordinary, and these two had the pulse on the happenings of the multiverse and wouldn't miss a happening like this.

And that's how the Viper chilling with the Wyrmgod to see Jake's antics turned into a meeting between five Primordials, with potentially more apex beings of the multiverse yet to arrive as they noticed the continued confluence of powerful beings in one place.

Chapter 790: Nevermore: Reunion

Two beings appeared in the living room the six gods were sitting and relaxing in, the atmosphere instantly changing with their entrance. Unsurprising, considering both of them were Primordials that one rarely saw in a room together.

What a joyous occasion. When was it we gathered like this? the winged woman asked with a smile on her lips as she regarded all her fellow gods.

Your rhetorical pleasantries are as nauseating as ever, a ghostly pale elven man responded. What are the chances of you deciding to visit Nevermore at the exact same moment I did?

Considerably high, considering I decided to arrive here today due to finding out you were going, the winged god chuckled as she turned to the dragonkin in the room. It is good to see you again, old friend. Thanks for allowing my entrance and bending your rules.

Waving his hand, the Wyrmgod dismissed the Holy Mother. I would be accused of choosing sides if I only allowed one of you in, which is why I waited to bring you both together.

Inmortau, the Blightfather, sighed at this statement as he turned to the Viper and Valdemar. Skipping the pleasantries, I wonder why the two of you are here together. Were you not supposed to be in an open conflict right now?

Is that how youre gonna greet an old friend? Vilastromoz smiled at the first Risen.

Please, I know it has been a while, but dont tell me you have lost your curt attitude. the Blightfather said, shaking his head.

Oh, Ive totally turned into a softie, the Viper shrugged. And yeah, me and Valdemar are in a huge conflict for sure. I even think he wants to fight me or something.

A fight you will give me, Valdemar huffed as he looked at one of the livestreams displayed in the room, not overly interested in the ongoing conversation.

In due time, in due time, the Viper waved him off as he returned his attention to the Blightfather. Also, should you really be spreading miasma when you yourself live in a garden? Last time I checked, the Risen are still at war with the Holy Church with more ongoing battlefields than I bother to figure out the exact number of.

Bah, an endless conflict by design, Inmortau said unbothered. A way to cull the weak and nurture the strong while occasionally proving slightly entertaining when divine beings get involved.

What a crude way to put it, the Holy Mother shook her head disapprovingly. Conflict is sadly just a necessity for growth and a great way to motivate and give meaning to many. A necessary evil, if you may.

Vilastromoz just chuckled at their conversation. The war between the Risen and the Holy Church truly was an endless war by design. As the two gods said, it was a way to make a constant training ground in the form of a battlefield. It was to the level where the battles were curated into grades and even tiers within some grades. Billions would join them, with sometimes only thousands leaving, but those who survived would be beings who had a chance to reach for true power.

It was very different from the war between the Endless Empire and the Automata Legion. That war was one where both sides genuinely wanted to wipe out the other and where the battlefields could easily have powerful beings sweep in and kill millions on a bad day. There was still some structure, but as there was no planning between the two genuinely warring factions, what structure there was occurred naturally and was just accepted mutually by both without communication.

War is war. Stop trying to make it sound like more than it is, Valdemar scoffed at the Blightfather and the Holy Mother. Also, your little skirmish cannot be called a true war.

Call it what you may, it serves a purpose, and it is well-known she and I never clash directly and sometimes even enter negotiations and temporary truces. Your alliance with Yip of Yore, on the other hand, is one made with the express purpose of him slaying the Malefic Viper, Inmortau said as he looked at the Viper and Valdemar carefully. And I cannot figure out why you would do something like that moreover, with Eversmile seemingly involved

Clearly, Vilastromoz is planning something, the Holy Mother said in a calm tone. So let us just wait and see the result. Show some trust.

Last time we did that no, never mind, the Blightfather began but stopped himself. I will assume you know what you are doing.

Who knows? I may just be a true gambling man, the Viper smirked mischievously in return as he turned to the Holy Mother. Now, I do wonder why you also chose to come here, Anora. Giving the children in your Pantheon a break?

Am I not allowed to reunite with old friends? she smiled. You have been back for a while, and we simply never had the chance to meet like this. Seeing as Valdemar was already here and Inmortau was making his way over, I decided to join them for a little reunion.

I guess thats the best answer Ill get, the Viper just muttered as he turned his attention toward Jakes livestream that he was the only one that could see. Besides Minaga and the Wyrmgod, of course.

I, for one, am flattered you wanted to come all this way to see me, Minaga said in a cheerful tone as he gave the Holy Mother a thumbs up. When was the last time we met?

Less than a thousand years ago, when you infiltrated a dunge-

Ah, happy memories, Minaga cut her off. In my defense, the design of that dungeon was super interesting, and I did it purely for research purposes, which should give me a pass, right?

I believe you promised to offer compensation when caught? the winged god said with a raised eyebrow.

Oh? No, that wasnt me then, or if it was me, it was another me that isnt the me right here, Minaga said with a confident nod. But no worries, if I ever see that me, Ill be sure to give myself a stern talking to about sticking to promises!

The Viper held back a smile as the Holy Mother just kept her usual calm demeanor. Despite ruling the biggest and potentially most powerful faction in the entire multiverse, she knew the futility of trying to deal with Minaga. There was simply nothing to gain from needlessly antagonizing him, while you had too much to lose by making him an enemy.

Usually, gods tried to not antagonize one another too much, as it tended to be futile. In most cases, even if a fight broke out, neither party would even get anything out of it. Also, it wasnt like any of them there were at any risk, even if everyone else turned against them.

In fact, pretty much none of the gods present had shown up in their real bodies, not even the Wyrmgod. His true body was somewhere deep within Nevermore, hidden away with his power used to control the massive World Wonder. Alright, one could argue Minaga was truly there, as his body was technically real, but the rest were avatars. Of course, they were primary avatars, with most of each gods focus on it.

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Even Valdemar was in an avatar of sorts, though it wasn't a real one. Unsurprisingly, the simple god never properly managed to master the art of making avatars but usually just showed up everywhere with his real body. It was only after he met Gudrun that he began to use these quasi-avatars, which were pretty much just homunculi, that he infused his power into and could control for a limited time. This limited time still tended to be around a century as long as the quasi-avatar didn't fight, but compared to the real thing, it was far worse.

The reason why Gudrun had insisted that even the potentially strongest god in the multiverse had to use an avatar when going to a place like Nevermore was due to pure safety. In fact, gods, in general, rarely left their divine realms. Some extremely powerful gods did go around places with their real bodies unbothered, but they never used them to enter godly territories, much less the divine realms of other gods.

Because even someone like Valdemar would find himself on the losing end if he decided to fight someone like the Wyrmgod while within his domain. The territorial advantage was simply too significant to be overcome, which was why Gudrun had been so insistent on him using this quasi-avatar. Even if all of the gods had been there in their real bodies and worked together, they still wouldn't stand a chance against the Wyrmgod, though they potentially could have escaped. Well, everyone could have besides the one god there that truly felt out of place - something the Blightfather absolutely had to point out.

Since we are talking about how great this reunion is why is she here? Inmortau asked as he clearly looked at Artemis, who was sitting beside Natures Attendant, clearly nervous. Again, couldn't blame her. With three Primordials, she always felt pressured, and now that there were five, it was impressive she was even staying.

Someone who was allowed to be here, same as you, Natures Attendant answered in a soft tone. Besides, I question why you even need to ask. Why are you here anyway? Because we came here to observe the happenings inside of Nevermore, not to participate in some impromptu reunion, so our presence should be of no interest or bother.



Now you just raise my curiosity. Let me guess, you here for the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? the Blightfather asked with a raised eyebrow, the look on their faces serving as confirmation. I will admit he is a curiosity. Both the Endless Empire and Automata Legion are pretty up in arms about his appearance, and I do see why. Origin manipulation to such a degree is not something we've seen before outside of certain unique system-granted items.

If you understand, then let us simply enjoy our shared curiosity, shall we not? Nature's Attendant asked, the Blightfather conceding.

The Viper was just observing the interaction as he smiled a bit to himself. It was kind of comforting to see that despite so much time passing, nothing much had changed. His fellow Primordials were still the same as they were so many eras ago.

Inmortau was very much still an ass, but the Malefic Viper also understood he had to be that way. He had to be the strong and uncompromising leader, for if he compromised, the entire Risen race would likely have been wiped out by now, and his faction crumbled a long time ago.

As an undead faction, the Risen had spent a long time before reaching a point where they weren't outright hated by the entire multiverse. However, even now, the most common approach was to just tolerate their existence. Neutral was the most gentle term most would use when asked about their relationship with the Risen, which did leave much to be desired. It also meant that for the longest time, if a faction could take advantage of the Risen, they would gladly do so, as they knew the chance of backlash was low. What would the Risen do? Attack them? That sounded like a great way to make the Risen look like the evil faction many already suspected them of being.

Inmortau's solution to this was to be a faction with a soft but strong approach to politics. They preferred soft politics where they made friends and proved themselves valuable allies, but should the other party try and take too much advantage, they would show they were not to be pushed around. Using his status as a Primordial, the Blightfather could squash most unfounded rumors easily and often even justify when he mobilized his armies to wipe out those who went too far.

Of course, some factions remained adamant the Risen was an evil faction, the Holy Church included. The reality was that concepts such as good and evil didn't particularly matter to Primordials, as such things were simply too feeble. Sentiment changed with time, and what was considered evil in one place and time could be considered a necessity in another.

This meant that the thing that mattered the most to gods were their own Path, their own personal rules, and the relationships they forged with their peers. And the relationship between the twelve Primordials could honestly only be described as one big dysfunctional family that spent more time arguing than actually getting along. However, when needed, they would still come together. They did so in the past, and ancient accords still persisted even to that day, forcing such a balance to be sustained.

Back on Earth, Miranda kept herself busy as the work never stopped, though it had gotten better. At least things had gotten into a pretty good routine by now, and most things had calmed down. The influx of slaves had stopped, and toward the end of the influx, it had gotten a lot easier to deal with. Many of the prior groups of freed slaves took the jobs of integrating new ones, easing the transition significantly.

The construction projects were also all going according to schedule. Hank, who had now fully transitioned to just being an overseer of sorts, had even evolved to C-grade despite having been stuck at peak D-grade for a bit.

What's more, the gift the Golden Road Emporium had given Jake during his Chosen ceremony had truly come through. Having projections of high-grade experts teach Earthlings was a brilliant way to get lacking know-how and experience that was otherwise impossible to obtain for a newly integrated universe. From the conversations Miranda had with these experts, they were also surprised at the rate at which the Earthlings and even the new slaves who had arrived there learned and improved.

All in all, things were going great, which was something she hadn't expected to say. This even left her more time to focus on her class, as she, for too long, had only focused on her profession. While she did

still practice her class a bit while sleeping due to her Verdant Dream skill, it wasn't like she slept much anymore, and the time she spent in the Verdant Dream didn't really give her any levels; she just practiced to more easily go out hunting later. So, in conclusion, it was definitely great that things had finally calmed down and were running smoothly.

However, there was one thing that saddened her a bit. Many of the people from Haven who were originally their backbone were beginning to meet their limits. As an example, Neils party, the formerly strongest five-person group in Haven, was no longer working together due to the disparity of their members. Eleanor, the archer, Levi, the magic swordsman, and Christen, their tank, had all gotten stuck in D-grade and seemed to have hit a wall. They also had simply lost their motivation to keep going and had settled down for calmer lives, most of them just focusing on their professions now.

It was a fate many shared. When the hectic barrage of constant action and more than one system event every single year stopped, many stopped with these things. When the world didn't push them forward, and the external pressure was gone, they simply didn't have the internal motivation to keep going. For many, the only reason they had even progressed and gotten powerful was to stay alive and protect those they cared about, and when the immediate danger was over, they finally had time to stop and reevaluate their lives, ultimately deciding they had done enough.

But luckily, there were many to step up and take their places, too, and some of the old talents did still grow. Especially now that the Nevermore Tokens had gotten more abundant than ever, and thousands had already traveled to the World Wonder to participate. Most didn't participate on the Leaderboards or even met the requirements to do so, being too high level, but to spend a few decades there was still a massive gain and a great way to get some more levels. Even high-level C-grade beasts had gone.

Miranda herself honestly hadn't planned on really going, but she began to feel like she had to. As a witch, Nevermore wasn't particularly suited for her, but the Verdant Witches recently began to teach her great methods for dungeon diving, the implications of their actions obvious.

And considering things were calming down on Earth, she soon didnt have any excuse to not go besides, it wasnt like she couldnt just leave and go back there again as she didnt qualify for the Leaderboards, right?

Yeah, it wasnt like she actually wanted to go and test out some of her new and improved skills in a proper environment. Not at all.