

Hunter 831

Chapter 831: Nevermore: To Be A Package Delivery Worker

Delivery jobs were definitely one of the most vital functions of modern society. Before the system, who could even live without getting stuff delivered to their house within a day of ordering it online? It was truly an impossibility, and the hard-working delivery workers were the ones who made that a reality.

Jake had spent a while in university working as a delivery driver to make some money and lets just say he didnt particularly enjoy the job. True, there was something zen and relaxing about having a route and a set number of packages every day to deliver, being entirely on his own throughout. At least it was zen until the quotas just got more and more unrealistic to the point it began to interfere with Jakes studies, making him quit.

All of this is to say that Jake entered the Neverending Journey with a clear advantage over most other Nevermore Attendees as he had experience in the field. Surely, working as a package delivery driver for less than a year over a century ago would have led to translateable skills in a Challenge Dungeon within a World Wonder, right?

Jakes thoughts on the description of the Challenge Dungeon were also pretty simple. The entire thing seemed straightforward from an initial assessment, but he got the feeling it wasnt as so. Why did the Wyrmgod feel the need to warn so many times about people trying to take advantage of him? Especially the note about trusting no one set a kind of ominous tone of what was to come. One things for sure: this wasnt just going to be about going fast from A to B. Definitely still a part of it, but far from everything.

Still standing outside of the city, watching the crowd enter, he tried to get a better feeling for the people he would be dealing with. A few quick uses of Identify showed that the guards at the checkpoint were all around high to peak D-grade, with a single C-grade captain of sorts sitting inside of the guard building, reading something.

Seeing this, and considering he was meant to be a Courier, Jake didnt sneak in but got in the queue to enter. He even went as far as to remove his mask, pull down his hood, and lowered his level to just over 200 using Shroud of the Primordial. At this early juncture, he saw no need to attract unnecessary attention.

After about ten minutes of queuing, it was Jakes turn. He went up to the small booth with a bored-looking elven guard sitting on a stool within. Name, level, and occupation.

Jake, level 212, no formal work, but looking to become a Courier.

The guard looked up and quickly gave Jake a scan. New around these parts? Where do you hail from?

Never been in this area before, no, Jake answered, not answering the last part on purpose.

Noticing this, the guard narrowed his eyes. I asked you where youre from?

Nowhere, Jake answered kind of truthfully. Im a hunter. I just went wherever I wanted and always traveled before this.

Hmph, the man let out a sound as he shook his head. Using some device that looked a bit like a typewriter, he wrote a few things before printing out a small credit card-looking thing and handing it to Jake.

Here, hold onto that. Its an identification card. If you are looking for Courier Jobs, check out the local Guild Hall, he said after handing the card over. Oh yeah, and dont cause any trouble.

Thank you. Ill be on my best behavior, Jake smiled and nodded as he headed into the city. Checking out the small card on the way, he quickly read what was on it. It was as basic as could be; just saying he was an early-tier level 212 C-grade, had set occupation as blank, and name as Jake. Besides that, there was a small magical seal down in the corner, probably functioning the same as a pre-system chip or watermark.

He had arrived during the day, and the city was positively buzzing. The streets were filled, and Jake guessed this place alone housed a few hundred thousand. Race-wise, he saw a lot of humans, but there were also plenty of other enlightened races. He even saw his fair share of beasts both in and out of humanoid form. Among them, the highest leveled one he saw was level 234, so still a bit low, but a good start considering he was currently in the easiest part of the Challenge Dungeon.

Walking down the well-paved streets with actual streetlights lining it, Jake didnt at all feel like he was in a dungeon. The people there also werent merely window-dressing but acted entirely normal, so that was a good thing.

With his Pulse, he quickly managed to locate the Guild that the guard had mentioned. It was a massive building toward the center of the city, about six stories tall. It was also filled with people, with dozens exiting and entering every minute some from the doors and some flying off the roof.

On that note, this city had sky-lanes. Marked areas in the air for people to fly, much akin to usual roads, just in the third dimension. It wasn't something Jake hadn't seen before, but in this city, it seemed especially well-managed, with colored beams of light directing people.

Entering the guild building, Jake quickly took in the atmosphere. It reminded him a bit of an old bar mixed with a bank, if that made sense. It didn't quite give off the Adventure Guild vibe, but it seemed a lot more professionally organized. You even had to take a number while waiting your turn to talk to the employees.

Something Jake promptly did as he found an empty seat to wait. As he was sitting there, he began to scan the room more, including the people in it. There were very few present not in C-grade, with most organized into parties of sizes ranging between three and ten. What did genuinely surprise him was to see what made up these teams.

It was a mix of all races, even more extreme than on the streets. These parties included beasts and other kinds of monsters, many of which weren't even in humanoid form, and no one batted an eye. Jake wasn't really the one to talk, considering he was often seen with Sylphie, but he still thought it was weird to see a large wolf sitting at a table, eating from a plate with excellent table manners.

After waiting for a good ten minutes, Jake was called to one of the tills where a dwarf with a massive beard sat. So, how can I help you today? Oh, and can I have your identification card, please.

Looking for work, Jake said as he also handed the dwarf the card.

The dwarf quickly took the card and scanned it under the desk before handing it back. After seeing the result, it was Jake's turn to get a scan, and he felt the use of Identify on him as the dwarf nodded. You're new around here, aren't you? No affiliations? You give off that kind of vibe.

Right, Jake confirmed, pretty damn sure this was scripted by the Wyrmgod. Heard you may be looking for a Courier?

Jake hadn't actually heard that; he just felt like this was how the conversation was going to go. This entire scenario reminded him a bit of that damn Test of Character at the moment as Jake had to play a role but at least he could make that role entirely his own.

Couldn't be more right, the dwarf gave him a big smile. Got a few jobs available. Check them out.

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Just like that, three floating system messages appeared between Jake and the dwarf.

Courier Job 1 (Easy): Deliver a letter to the Merchants Union within the city.

Courier Job 1 (Medium): Transport a small shipment of ores to the Firesteel Blacksmith within the city.

Courier Job 1 (Hard): Deliver a Darkeye Diamond to Polsted in Polsted's Jewelry Shop within the city.

Quickly skimming the three options, they all just seemed too damn easy. What's more, they were all within the city. If he had to guess, this was just some kind of tutorial job.

Can I accept all of them at once? Jake tried to ask.

Hah, only one at a time; it isn't sure the client wants to keep waiting forever for you to finish other deliveries before getting to theirs, the dwarf waved him off.

I'll take the job to deliver the Darkeye Diamond, then, Jake said, naturally choosing the hard option.

Good, had trouble finding anyone to deliver that for the entire day, the dwarf said with a smile as he quickly reached below the desk and took out a token before handing it to Jake. As you said you were looking for work, I assume you don't have a Courier Medallion yet?

And you would be right, Jake nodded.

Take this, then, the dwarf said as he handed a small metal token that looked like a big coin to Jake. Infuse some energy into it and bind it to you.

Jake looked at the Courier Medallion for a bit as he used Identify, seeing its properties.

[Courier Medallion (Inferior)] the lowest rarity of Courier Medallion for a novice in the field. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

Seeing no reason not to do as asked and feeling pretty sure getting this Medallion was mandatory anyway - Jake infused some energy into the item, making it his own. As he did, the dwarf took out a piece of paper that turned into energy and flew into the token.

Courier Job accepted.

Right, everything should be in the Medallion now, the dwarf said with a courteous smile. Just two seconds while I go grab the diamond.

Jake nodded as the dwarf left to a back room where he unlocked what looked like a magical safe. He did some magic stuff as a small jewelry box appeared in his hand, wrapped in some kind of cloth with runes on it. Likely a protective measure.

Returning to Jake, he carried the box carefully with both hands but stopped right before he put it down on the table.

Just to make sure, you do have a spatial storage item yourself, right? Or will you need to borrow one? the dwarf asked.

I got my own, Jake confirmed.

Excellent! the dwarf said as he put down the box. Jake instantly put it in his necklace, keeping it away from prying eyes.

Also before you go, just a bit of a warning, the dwarf suddenly turned serious after Jake took the item. This diamond is quite valuable, and I heard there might be others out to get it themselves. So be careful, alright? Only give it to old Polsted personally. When the job is done, we will know, but still come back here if you need more work after.

I'll be careful and definitely come back later, Jake said, matching the same solemn energy of the dwarf.

You know, I am getting a good feeling about you. With some good jobs under your belt, your Courier Medallion should upgrade quickly, and I can see you becoming a real known name in the game, he said encouragingly.

I bet you say that to every new Courier, Jake said with a wink as he turned to leave. He wasn't joking either; he was pretty sure the dwarf did indeed say that to everyone who entered this Challenge Dungeon. At least everyone who didn't somehow fuck up this early introductory part.

The dwarf just shook his head behind Jake as he walked out of the Guild. He still had the Courier Medallion in his hand and quickly infused some energy according to the faint instinctive knowledge he got when first binding it. As he did, what looked like a compass appeared on its face, pointing toward what he assumed was his destination.

With a direction set, Jake made his way over there. The city was pretty big, yes, but it wasn't that big, and with a brisk pace and maybe a few One Steps thrown in there, Jake reached the street where the jeweler was placed within minutes. Using the Medallion, he quickly confirmed which shop was this Polsted's not that the massive sign above the entrance didn't also help.

Going toward the store, Jake saw that it looked closed. However, there was someone standing behind a desk inside, so Jake decided to knock on the door. The man behind the desk was a young-looking guy, and when he saw Jake knock, he quickly ran over and opened the door ajar.

Yes, how can I help you? he asked carefully. On his way over to the door, Jake noticed quite a few curious gazes from behind, primarily from two beastfolk across the street.

Courier here. I am meant to deliver a package to Polsted, Jake said, ignoring the onlookers.

Ah, the diamond arrived! the man said happily as he opened the door fully. Please come in right away.

Jake entered the jewelry shop after the young man as they walked toward the large display case. It was filled with expensive-looking jewelry, most of it enchanted but with what Jake would consider pretty low quality enchantments. It was also all made for D-grades, with the properties all being shit. It was probably to not incentivise those doing the Challenge Dungeon to try and rob the store or something.

Now, can I confirm the goods? I assume you have it with you, the young man said as he stood behind the counter with a big smile on his lips.

Giving him a look, Jake raised an eyebrow. Supposed to deliver it to the owner of this shop, a guy called Polsted.

Its fine. Polsted isnt in today; thats why were closed, the young man smoothly explained.

Oh, how come? Jake asked. It wasnt like sick days were a thing after the system arrived.

He is working hard on a project at home, and Im honestly not sure when he will be back, the young man sighed.

Guess Ill have to stop by his place and deliver it then, Jake shrugged.

Polsteds gonna be pissed if you disturb him, the young man said with a slight hint of panic but quickly gathered himself. Please, man, dont make this hard for me. The boss is gonna be up my ass if I let you go interrupt him, and even more pissed if he comes back and the Darkeye Diamond still isnt here.

Sorry, got my orders, Jake said. Now, where does Polsted live?

The young man seemed to realize Jake wasn't going to give up the goods and threw a look over Jake's shoulder to someone outside. He clearly tried to do it subtly, but with Jake's Perception, how could he possibly hide anything?

Look, how about I send someone to try and get him? the young man asked.

Jake didn't answer right away as he sighed internally. Behind him, the two beastfolk he had seen looking curiously at him earlier entered the store, clearly both trying to be stealthy, considering the fact they both had stealth skills active.

I think we both know that isn't going to happen, Jake sighed.

The young man's animated smile faded as he sneered. Right as he did so, one of the beastfolk appeared right behind Jake and raised a spear before holding it to Jake's throat.

How about you're just a good little Courier and leave the damn diamond here and fuck off? the young man said in a pretty threatening tone.

Jake identified the beastfolk with the spear holding the spear, and, honestly, the level impressed him a bit. Level 243 was pretty high compared to most others around, that was for sure.

Well, isn't this fun, Jake commented out loud, ignoring the spear. How about doing this instead: you tell me where to find Polsted, and I don't kill your two friends here? Alternatively, you can tell me after I kill them.

The young man looked at Jake as if he was an idiot, and, fair enough, he did look like a level 212 human who had just threatened two people over level 240. So, to make his threat look less dumb, he unleashed some of his aura from his true level.

He did so with the intent to intimidate, but it got an instant reaction from the beastskin threatening him. The spear instantly went for Jake's throat, making him react as a small layer of scales appeared and blocked the tip of the spear, the weapon utterly failing to penetrate.

Bad move, Jake said as he turned his head and looked at the spear wielder, his eyes glowing for a second as Primal Gaze activated. The man collapsed without a sound as Jake turned back to the young man behind the counter, trying to rob him. At least he tried to as the other beastfolk tried to attack Jake full of bloodlust, also earning him a quick look with Gaze as he also fell down like a marionette with its strings cut.

Now, where were we? Oh yeah, wheres Polsted at? Jake asked with a smile.

You theyre dead how

Chop chop, Jake hurried him along. Polsted. Location. Now.

Al alright, just please dont the young man stuttered before quickly gathering himself and giving Jake some actual directions.

See, that wasnt so hard? Now clean up this place so poor old Polsted doesnt get into work with two corpses in his store. Cant be good for business, now can it? Jake said in a casual tone as he turned and left the store.

As he left the store and headed toward Polsteds place, Jake couldnt help but think how this whole Courier thing was indeed incredibly similar to the job he had in university. Except this time around, he had a way better way to handle scammers.

Chapter 832: Nevermore: Odd Jobs Galore

It turned out that poor old Polsted had been held up at home by a fourth accomplice of the people trying to rob his store. Everything had been part of some big conspiracy where the young man had been a new employee who was just there to scope out the place, and after learning where the jeweler lived, they followed him home one day and held him at swordpoint. From there, they would spend the next day robbing the store, and the reason the young man had been the only one in the store was to inspect the magical seals on the display cases and eventually dismantle them.

The Darkeye Diamond hadnt even been part of the expected haul. It was pure coincidence Jake had come by that day, and the thieves had assumed they could just rob the stupid Courier along with the rest of the store. That, or Jakes insistence on seeking out Polsted had put a target on his head.

Of course, Jake knew there weren't actually any coincidences going on, but a carefully crafted scenario that tested the Courier and kind of set the stage from the get-go for how these jobs would work. Jake wouldn't be surprised if the easy option had been to just deliver a letter in a mailbox, with the medium option being something in between that and what Jake had to do.

Jake's takeaway from the first job was that he had to be careful while delivering stuff, as it was pretty damn easy to mess it up and fail the delivery. It also made a lot more sense he wouldn't lose one of the three lives if he did mess up, as it would have been so easy. In fact, Jake would guess quite a few would just have given the package to the young man who appeared to be working in the jewelry store. The only reason Jake had been suspicious was because of the very minor clues the young man had given off and the fact he remembered the dwarf calling the one he had to deliver to old man Polsted.

Unless calling him an old man was some weird inside joke between the dwarf and Polsted, Jake had a strong feeling something shady was going on.

After being done with the job of delivering the diamond to Polsted and teaching another robber the literal definition of the phrase if looks could kill, Jake headed back toward the Guild for another job. On the way, he also took the time to reflect a bit on the newly upgraded mythical rarity Primal Gaze. He hadn't really had a good opportunity to test it since the upgrade, and he had to admit it had gotten a lot stronger than before, especially when it came to the soul-killing part.

In truth, he hadn't thought it would actually work. He had just hoped to either do some serious damage or knock them out, but the skill turned out to do a bit more than that. True, he had used it with the intent to kill, so it wasn't like he felt bad about the outcome. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Killing someone around twenty levels below him with a single look was damn good. Before, killing any C-grade outright wasn't easy, but now it had worked effortlessly, and he got the feeling it would still have been lethal even if they had been a few levels higher. They were pretty weak for their levels, yes, but they were also enlightened and tended to have a bit stronger souls than the average monster.

Then again, it wasn't like killing them without Gaze would have been hard. A single well-landed stab with Eternal Hunger on each would have gotten the job done just as well. An arrow from a few dozen kilometers away would definitely have, too. But Primal Gaze was definitely the best way to kill them for a few reasons, one more important than the other.

First of all, it was as fast as a kill could be, making it by far the most efficient. Secondly, killing someone with a look had a damn great intimidation factor, and convincing the young man to not only tell him where Polsted was but even turn himself in for his crimes to the guards had been easy as pie after seeing his two friends die from a glance each. It also helped that Jake very much implied the young man could share the same fate as his friends if he didn't go to the guards.

Third, and most importantly, with the way Primal Gaze worked, Jake would effectively pit his own soul against someone else's when using the skill. This was actually pretty good exposure training for his own soul to potentially experience a bit of growth simply due to the practice, though he wasn't sure how much it would help, especially when the targets were so weak.

Oh and finally, one incredibly vital reason: killing with weapons was messy, and Jake was a good Courier who didn't also leave the client with an extra unnecessary clean-up fee.

As Jake was still deep in thought, he arrived back at the Guild. It had only been a few hours since he left the first time around, with the only reason it took so long because he had to deal with guards who came to Polsted's place for a statement after everything was done.

Entering, he went to get a number as the same dwarf he had talked with the first time called him over.

Hey, new Courier, over here! he yelled.

Jake didn't need to be told twice that he could cut the line as he hurried over. Surprisingly, nobody gave him any nasty stares. The dwarf seemed to notice Jake's surprise and explained as he arrived in front of the desk.

People give some extra respect for Couriers; it's a dangerous job, after all, and few want to walk down that road but prefer to just do other odd jobs, the dwarf explained. Something I am sure I don't need to tell you after that last job of yours. Things got nasty, eh?

Definitely did, Jake confirmed. Say, can you tell me a bit more about this odd treatment of Couriers? I also noticed how the guards seemed weirdly I almost wanna say hands-off with me and just told me that you guys at the Guild would handle it.

Because they are hands-off, the dwarf said. For someone who entered the Courier industry, you sure know little about it. Oh well, you are promising, so let me give you a quick rundown. Couriers are neutral, unaffiliated individuals who do not answer to or work for any specific faction outside of the Guild. This means you have some levels of diplomatic immunity dependent on the rank of your Medallion, and the Guild is in charge of taking care of any potential trouble you get into. Of course, there are limits, so do control yourself, but in a case like this, you acted in the interest of your client and didn't go overboard, so things are fine. Just know that if you do go too far, the Guild itself may send an enforcer you don't want the Guild to send an enforcer.

Unauthorized duplication: this tale has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

I'll be careful but I've also been wondering, what exactly is the Guild? Jake also asked, knowing full well that if he was a native to this world, he would have just outed himself as either a complete moron who had lived under a rock his entire life. Or maybe it would have outed him as a transdimensional traveler. Well, or, you know, someone just doing a Challenge Dungeon inside of a World Wonder.

Luckily for him, the dwarf didn't at all comment on Jake's lack of any common knowledge but just answered:

The Guild is a massive organization that operates on every single continent, has affiliates in every major city, and has managed to remain entirely neutral despite the political turmoil. Not to say there aren't internal problems, but those aren't for you to deal with. Suffice to say, the Guild has enough power to rival any faction and we are quite respected.

This is a bit cheeky of a question, but who is the strongest in the Guild? Jake asked for fun, wondering if he could take them.

The Founder, the dwarf said with a sense of respect. An absolutely legendary adventurer. Rose to power about forty thousand years ago after he managed to single-handedly beat back the dragon tribes, even slaying the the Dragon King in the process. He made the Guild after retiring and still rules it today and is one of only five known S-grades in the world.

Jake was nodding along mentally to the explanation until he got to the end. There were fucking S-grades in this world. That meant there were also plenty of A-grades and B-grades around. All of this is to say that fucking around could quickly lead to finding out if he somehow managed to piss off the wrong people. This was definitely good to know.

It also left him with one other important question.

Any gods?

Gods? the dwarf asked. Well, some people do refer to the Founder as a godlike entity, but I am not sure if calling him a god is right despite his overwhelming power.

I see, Jake nodded as he conducted a minor test. Purposefully, he began to let out a bit of aura from his Shroud of the Primordial. It was the part that signified his Blessing as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. The aura with divine quality slowly seeped out, but the dwarf didnt at all react as he just looked at Jake, who stood there quietly.

So any more questions? I also got some more clients waiting if you wanna take another job, or do you perhaps want to take a rest first? he asked after Jake hadnt said anything for several seconds.

Jake fully retracted his aura and smiled. Yeah, let me look at the jobs available.

His small test had naturally been regarding Blessings. He wanted to see if others could feel his Blessing, as that could potentially have allowed him to use it to mess with people at some point. However, it seemed not a single soul could detect it, making Jake believe the Wyrmgod had cut off using divine auras from being a thing. This restriction was probably for the best. It would be an absolutely massive advantage for those with Blessings as they could use the aura to intimidate practically everyone, especially in a world with no actual gods. Jake could only begin to imagine the ways one could exploit Blessings and he wasnt even that crafty compared to others who could have no doubt found far more ways to take advantage.

Here ya go, three more jobs available, the dwarf said as he took out three papers. Right as he did so, three system messages also popped up in front of Jakes eyes.

Courier Job 2 (Easy): Deliver five letters to their respective destinations within the city.

Courier Job 2 (Medium): Deliver the shipment of Minor Vitae Ruby to the Merchants Union within the city.

Courier Job 2 (Hard): Go to the Firesteel Blacksmith and pick up the Governor Blade. Then, deliver the Governor Blade to the Governors office. Both locations are within the city.

After skimming them all, still working on getting a better idea of how this entire Challenge Dungeon worked, he naturally picked the hard option again. The only new revelation here was that old jobs would disappear if he didnt pick them and that a Courier Job could be chained. That is to say, have multiple steps and not just a point A to point B delivery.

The dwarf once more infused Jakes Medallion before the newly appointed Courier got to work. The second job turned out to kind of be easier than the first one, with the only added difficulty coming from Jake having to enter the Governors Office which was well-defended. The defenses were at least a lot better than elsewhere, with guards around level 250, and they gave off decently strong vibes for their levels. The magical formation protecting the office was even better, likely laid down by a high-tier C-grade.

This job took a bit of socializing, but not enough to put Jake off. If he had to guess, this entire mission was to hammer home the concept that Couriers had a unique political position in this world. Just flashing the Medallion was enough for the suspicion of most to fall away, and while Jake didnt get to meet the Governor directly, he was attended by a direct aide and seen immediatly.

With another job done, Jake saw no reason to stop as he headed back to the Guild again and accepted a third hard job that required him to deliver items to three different people across the city. That seemed easy enough except this one was on a timer as it was an urgent job.

Alright, it was still easy as hell, Jake not having to rush at all. This Courier Job did teach Jake that Couriers were allowed to fly freely, even within cities. So that was a nice snippet of information to get as Jake completed the rush delivery to all three clients.

Like this, the Courier Jobs continued for several days as Jake stayed within the first starting city for all of them. Every new job introduced minor new elements or twists to add to the difficulty or teach him new job concepts. One of the Courier Jobs was even to deliver a person. No, not some fucked up slavery shit, but an escort mission as someone had to enter the slums and didnt feel safe going there. Mind you, there wasnt anything in the slums that was actually dangerous. The client was just a posh lady who acted entitled throughout, with the biggest difficulty during this job coming from resisting just punching her in the face and leaving.

Besides that, it was a lot of small interesting twists. In one, he had to find the client he had to deliver the item to himself as he had gone into hiding. In another job, he had to deliver a letter without being seen by any of the neighbors of the client, but Jakes favorite one was a job where he was attacked by a dog in a yard.

That one sure brought back memories from his old delivery job days, and the same solution he used back before the system also worked wonders here. Needless to say, Jake couldnt and wouldnt hurt a dog that was just protecting its territory as it was supposed to, so he always just made dogs back down by staring them down.

Sure, Jake did know staring into the eyes of a strangers dog was heavily advised against, but in Jakes case, it had always been a great way to make the dog go away. His Bloodline was truly versatile even back then.

By now, Jake had completed nineteen jobs already, and he was honestly beginning to feel more than a little bored despite the new elements introduced. It honestly just felt like a normal job, which even made him suspect that the initial Courier Jobs being this mind-numbing was also part of the experience somehow.

However, when he returned to job number twenty, something finally changed.

Back again, I see, the dwarf said with a big smile. You are definitely the most hard-working Courier Ive seen in a good while! Listen, the third job this time around is a bit different from those prior it will require you to leave the city for a while.

Thats right, Jake was finally allowed to not just act as a small-time in-city delivery man, but had graduated to become a not in-city delivery man? Jake wasnt sure there was a term for it, but damn, did it feel good to finally be let outside.

Chapter 833: Nevermore: Special Delivery

Actual traveling.

Who would have thought that the job as a Courier would include traveling? Sure had Jake fooled after he only ran around a city for several days. Sure, it hadnt been the worst, and there was plenty of diversity thrown in there to make it entertaining.

Nevertheless, Jake was glad that phase of the Challenge Dungeon was over as he proceeded with Courier Job 20. It wasn't like he had to go far, but it did feel good to finally be out in the open. He had traveled around a bit in the House of the Architect while in the worlds there, but he didn't go full speed most of the time as he had to actively scout out the environment and couldn't just focus on speed.

Now, speed was the only thing that mattered. Jake used One Step repeatedly as the city had long turned into just a blip on the horizon. Every single step passed around a kilometer of distance, having improved quite a lot during all his time in Nevermore. He was still quite a bit from passing a thousand miles like the name indicated it technically could, but with the sheer speed he could trigger the skill, that wasn't really a problem.

Jake had experimented a bit with actually trying to increase the distance a lot, and it was possible. His record was about a hundred and thirty kilometers or eighty miles or so with a single step. However, that step had taken him well over a minute to perform and had been done under perfect circumstances with nothing in between him and his target destination. This is to say that if Jake just wanted to travel quickly, smaller but faster steps were far more effective. Also a lot more efficient, as a One Step taking him a hundred and thirty kilometers consumed way more than a hundred and thirty times more stamina than those taking him only a single kilometer.

With his speed, Jake was the fastest in his Nevermore party when it came to purely traveling, though Sylphie beat him thoroughly in shorter distances. His relatively high stamina pool and constant supply of potions also meant he wouldn't really ever run out of energy as long as he didn't push himself too hard.

For his very first job outside of the city, the Challenge Dungeon had even picked something super exciting, too. Jake had been tasked with wait for it - delivering a tax form for a local small mayor to fill out. He even had to bring it back again once it had been filled, making it twice as exciting!

Alright, yeah, the Courier Job sucked ass, and it was clear the entire intent of this was for Jake to travel a longer distance than usual. Jake wouldn't really call it long-distance travel, though, as it only took him a bit over five hours to reach the small town in question. It would probably have taken longer if any of the wildlife in the way dared get in his way, but luckily, they were all on their best behavior, as blasting his aura pretty much worked like a max repel.

Reaching the small town in question, Jake saw that there were two guards at the entrance, both barely in C-grade. They looked tired with slightly damaged armor, and observing the area, it looked like they had been struggling quite a bit with monster attacks recently.

I can almost smell it

Entering the town by flashing his Medallion, Jake headed to the mayors office straight away without any problems and delivered the tax form to a secretary there. Right as he did so, the mayor himself exited his office and saw Jake, and it looked almost as if a wave of relief washed over him.

Ah, youre the Courier, am I right? the man said with a bright smile. Thank you for the delivery. Tax papers, right? I will get to it immediately so you can bring it back, but

Here it comes

we have recently been dealing with excessive monster attacks from a nearby monster nest, which have put a strain on the guards. Seeing as you made it all the way here safely, you look like you can handle yourself, so would it be possible to look into it while I do the form?

A side quest!

Right as he thought this, a system prompt appeared before his eyes.

Courier Side Job: Eliminate the nearby monster nest.

Objective: Monster nest eliminated (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

Jake had no reason to refuse as he nodded. Ill take a look at it in the meantime. Do you know where this nest is located?

Courier Side Job Accepted.

Thank you! the mayor said, relieved. I believe the guards mentioned all the attacks usually come from the north, so I reckon it is in that direction. As for any details, I couldn't possibly tell you the exact situation; we simply haven't had the resources to send out a scouting party.

It's all good; I'll find it, Jake said reassuringly. Just have those forms ready by the time I return!

Most certainly, the mayor said with a small bow as Jake headed out of the office again. On the way, he released a Pulse of Perception and about a hundred and fifty kilometers to the northeast, he saw a big collection of monsters gathered around a few small hills and rock formations. The monsters all looked to be of the insect type, but with their small number, they definitely weren't of the eusocial type. If they were, Jake also doubted the town would still be around.

It definitely looked like a monster nest, and Jake decided to make this an express delivery of death to the monsters.

Jumping, Jake summoned his wings as he shot into the air and flew up a few dozen kilometers. Once he reached a good height, Jake slowed down and pulled out his bow. He could see the monsters quite well from this high up, and using a few quick Identifies, he saw they were all in the 210-220 range. This made Jake feel like one wasn't necessarily meant to fight the robbers in the first Courier Job if this was supposed to be the first job with semi-mandatory combat.

Not that it mattered to Jake either way. Nocking an arrow, he took aim and let loose, firing a quickly-charged Arcane Powershot. Right as the arrow was released, Jake nocked another, which he charged ever-so-slightly longer before letting go of the string.

He did this with five more arrows before he felt like it was good enough. Jake didn't see a need to wait as he began flying downwards, and as he did, the first arrow arrived and split into dozens right before it hit the monster nest. Due to the difference in charge between each Powershot, the next arrow arrived nearly at the same time, followed by the remaining five.

If you encounter this narrative on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

A few seconds later, as Jake was flying downward, he got a system notification along with all the other kills messages.

Objective: Nest eliminated (1/1)

With a smile, Jake quickly made it down to the ground again and reentered the mayors building, having only been gone for a handful of minutes. He did so fully expecting the mayor to still be busy filling out paperwork, but to his surprise met the man in front of his office, the signed form in hand.

Thank you so much for the assistance! the mayor said with a bright smile. Here is the form, all filled out! Once again, I cannot express the depth of my and the towns gratitude for your help, and I wish you luck on your way back. Of course, should you wish to rest after dealing with the nest, you are more than free to stay at the local inn.

Side Job Completed!

Side Jobs Completed: 1

Jake stared at the guy and notification a bit before just nodding. I only did as I should, and thanks for the offer, but I will head back immediately.

Of course, of course, the mayor said with a sense of admiration. Truly a man of duty! Even after a grueling fight, he does not delay a job.

Yeah, sure, Jake said as he said his goodbyes and headed out, successfully suppressing a laugh from the comments on Jakes harrowing battle with the local monsters. Right as Jake exited the office, a few local townsfolk thanked him, and even the guards at the gate gave him words of gratitude as he began heading back to the city.

Jake had so many questions, even if he knew the true answer to all of them was probably dungeon-fuckery.

How the hell had the mayor known the nest was eliminated minutes after it had happened? How had he filled out the form so fast? How did everyone else in town also instantly know? What were these Side Jobs actually for? What did they give? Actually, to extrapolate on that point what did any of these jobs give?

Jake had carried out twenty Courier Jobs now and had yet to earn a dime. No one had even mentioned any payment. Was he doing charity work or something without knowing? How the hell did the Courier industry even work? Wait maybe he was meant to be an independent contractor who had to send his own invoices?

Of course, the ultimate answer was just that none of this mattered. Side Jobs and Courier Jobs most certainly just gave more Nevermore Points and a better achievement at the end of the Challenge Dungeon. Simple as that. But Jake did still like to imagine the utter lunacy of a world like this existing where society was only held together by unpaid Couriers.

Making it back to the city again took a bit less time than the way to the town as Jake hurried back. Turning in the tax records to the dwarf, Jake picked up another quest to go visit a town, and from there, it continued as Jake became the dedicated Courier for the local area, visiting most of the cities one by one.

By the time he had done thirty jobs, even the easy-difficulty Courier Jobs required him to leave the city. The difficulty also went up a tiny bit as he went to more and more dangerous territories monster-wise. There were also a few cases of trickery here and there, such as someone whom Jake was supposed to collect money from upon delivery claiming he had already sent the payment prior and thus didnt need to write a check right then and there. This was despite Jakes job making it pretty clear he had to return with the aforementioned check.

Instances like these were honestly pretty normal, and in most cases, it didnt end in violence. Just a bit of pressure was enough to make most people crack in this early part of the Challenge Dungeon, and the slightest mention of the guards would have the merchants suddenly talk about everything being a misunderstanding.

In regards to Side Jobs, Jake didnt always get one, but they were becoming more numerous. From what he gathered, these Side Jobs were jobs not directly related to delivery but were auxiliary tasks. Many could even be completed during the Courier Job, such as one time Jake was asked to kill a certain number of monsters on his way to a town, or another where it was requested if he could check out a certain area to see if a new powerful beast had made the place its home. All while running to a town anyway, making them pretty much free.

Nothing was difficult for Jake at all so far. Even the timed missions were just a joke. Giving Jake three days to get somewhere he could reach in three hours was honestly just sad. Alas, he was in the easy part of the Challenge Dungeon right now, and hopefully, the difficulty would step up soon.

A bit less than two weeks after arriving in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake had completed Courier Job number 35 and returned to the same Guild as always to speak to the dwarf he had gotten pretty damn friendly with by now.

Walking in, Jake gave the man a smile as he didnt even bother taking a number.

Jobs done, Jake said.

I saw, the dwarf gave Jake a big smile. Here, let me have your Medallion.

Huh, why? Jake asked as he nevertheless placed it on the table. The dwarf didnt even try to pick up but just pointed at the item.

Now take a look at it.

Jake instantly realized what the dwarf was getting at, and a quick Identify confirmed it.

[Courier Medallion (Common)] the second-lowest rarity of Courier Medallion for a relative newcomer to the field who has begun to get some experience under his belt. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

Finally, Jake was no longer running around with an inferior rarity Medallion! Alright, it wasnt that big an achievement, but Jake was happy it happened. It also only took 35 Courier Jobs. This made Jake wonder if he would have had to do more easy jobs to upgrade it maybe 50 easy Courier Jobs and 40-something medium jobs? It didnt really matter, but Jake liked to tell himself he had saved time.

Congratulations are in order, the dwarf said, clearly happy for Jake. Less than two weeks, and youre already beginning to no longer be a complete novice. If you keep this up, you may just become a real top-tier Courier who can take on the truly dangerous and rewarding jobs!

Jake wasn't sure about the rewarding part, considering he was an unpaid worker, but he still smiled in response. Thanks, mate. Now, just because I went up in rank doesn't mean I'll stop my momentum. So hit me with the next round of jobs!

Yeah about that, the dwarf said, his mood fading a bit. I have good news and bad news. What do you want first?

Alright hit me with the bad news, I guess.

After getting promoted, you can go to one of the small-sized cities to do jobs rather than here, which is rated as a smallest-sized one. Usually, you would do this through the teleportation gateway but there was an accident, the dwarf explained with a big sigh. So now it is no longer operational as the space-locator or something has been broken.

yeah, this is one hundred percent a scripted event, Jake very quickly concluded, as he already knew where this was going.

And the good news?

In order to get the teleportation gateway up and running again, we need to do either one of two things. Either we can call a space mage to come to fix it here, which will take about a month or someone has to bring the currently broken space locator thing to the mages in the small-sized city, and they can fix it remotely from there to get the network up and running again, the dwarf explained as he looked at Jake. I don't think I have to tell you who this someone would be?

Not sure how this is considered the good news, Jake questioned.

It's a Special Courier Job, the dwarf said in a serious tone. The trip there will be a lot more dangerous and take a lot longer than the jobs you have done so far, but if you succeed, you will already be well on your way to upgrading your Medallion again. I also need to warn you that as your Medallion upgraded, I can't give you any properly challenging jobs if you stay in this city, which may delay your next upgrade, but the choice is naturally yours.

As the dwarf finished his sentence, a system prompt expectedly popped up.

Choose your next action:

Accept Special Courier Job 1: Transport the Space Magic Locator to the small-sized city.

Or

Continue doing regular Courier Jobs in the smallest-sized city for 1 month (30 days).

Needless to say, Jake was going on a cross-country road trip because there was no fucking way he would stay back and do regular boring Courier Jobs for another full month.

Chapter 834: Nevermore: To Make Work Interesting

The Courier Dungeon, as Jake had dubbed it, had an extremely simplified and straightforward societal structure. Everything was split into tiers, it seemed, with even the cities being very distinctly separated. The first city Jake arrived in was a smallest-sized city, which meant it had below a certain population threshold. Half a million based on what Jake gathered.

In the hierarchy of cities just ranked above the smallest-sized cities, one found the small-sized ones, which had between half a million and five million. Up from there, mid-sized cities with between five and twenty-five million, then large-sized with twenty-five million to a hundred million. Cities above a hundred million were pretty rare and were classified as giant-sized cities. There was no upper limit to these, and the only giant-sized cities Jake quickly became aware of were the capital cities of some of the many different factions.

Below cities were towns and villages. Anything below fifty thousand was a town, and below five thousand a village. Towns and villages did not have any teleportation circles in them and weren't connected to the network. Jake found it incredibly dumb they weren't considering the relatively low investment it would be to connect them and how it would make life for everyone so much easier, but the in-world reason was that it was for safety, as anything that wasn't a city couldn't protect the teleportation circle adequately.

It was a pretty dumb reason, as they could just have the circle self-destruct or something if they ever got invaded. Then again, if the infrastructure had been that immaculate, Couriers would have way less work and could just teleport everywhere, so it made sense for the theme of the place.

Back on topic, these towns and villages were all tied to the nearest city, which held governance over them and responsibilities such as tax collection and whatnot.

Now, having this kind of structure within a single faction kind of made sense. If it was something organized from the top down and enforced, Jake could see it appear even outside of Nevermore by someone with a management fetish.

However, it made no bloody sense every single faction in the entire Challenge Dungeon world had decided on the exact same structure. Shit, even if it was just the enlightened factions, Jake could get it, but even the monster-focused factions had the exact same city-town-village structure, even down to the numbers.

On that note, yes, Jake did come to learn there were far more factions than he first expected. Jake had appeared in the human-focused enlightened faction, while several more existed, all in conflict with one another. Other factions were the dwarves, elves, Risen, scalekin, demons, one more with a mix of enlightened ones, and finally, three different monster-focused ones. If there was a common race in the multiverse, Jake was pretty damn certain it could be found in this Challenge Dungeon within one of the ten factions.

Jake also had a theory that other Nevermore Attendees would appear elsewhere based on their race. Someone like Sylphie would likely appear in one of the monster-focused factions, while someone like Irin doing the dungeon would appear in the demon faction. Now, where the Fallen King and someone like Dina would appear was a bit of mystery as neither of them had a race with a faction directly related to them, but Jake reckoned it didn't really matter either way. As a Courier, race no longer mattered, and from what Jake saw, despite these factions being race-based primarily, there was plenty of diversity everywhere with no discrimination going on.

All of these things Jake had learned shortly after he completed the first Special Courier Job and arrived at the small-sized city with the Space Locator. The trip to the city had taken Jake just a bit over a day and a half, and honestly, it was as uneventful as could be. A few times, Jake encountered what he believed to be pre-scripted ambushes and whatnot, but in every instance, the monsters abandoned their attack the second they detected Jake's aura. Ah, but he was attacked by bandits once, who all ran away after he killed their leader.

In the small-sized city, Jake had gone to the next Guild and met an elven woman who became his next go-to attendant. He quickly began taking on new jobs, one of which required Jake to collect a number of books and return them to a library. The twist with this job was that just like in the real world people sucked ass at returning books. The worst was that one of the people who had to return it was a guy who had accidentally placed it in his own personal library and needed Jake to help look for the damn thing. Sphere helped a bit, but sadly, as he could only see the shape of the book and not read the cover with just spatial perception, he had to actually look at the books himself.

When Jake had returned all the books, he stayed with the librarian for a while and learned some world history and about how the Challenge Dungeon worked. That is where he learned about the cities, got some tidbits about every faction, and was told that as a Courier, he wouldn't need to worry about anything as he would be welcomed with open arms wherever he went dependent on the job that is. If he was transporting something for an enemy faction, he could very easily have a target on his back.

After his talk with the librarian, Jake had gone back to the Guild for another job, which he promptly accepted. Even the hard jobs sometimes took place within the far larger, small-sized city. Yes, the name was a bit dumb to call it small, considering it in Jake's mind was pretty damn big, but in-world, it probably made sense considering the city was several times larger than the smallest-sized one. Many of the jobs naturally also required him to head outside of it to the towns and villages, and these tended to take longer simply due to the travel time.

The small-sized city turned out to not be that much different from the smallest-sized one. The difficulty still wasn't really there. The social challenges he faced were also easy enough for someone like Jake to handle. Even if Jake wasn't the most socially adept person, in a multiversal context, he was actually pretty damn good. He wasn't overly naive and trusting, which would definitely be a huge weakness in this Challenge Dungeon. Not being very precise when listening to the language of jobs could also get you in trouble, and a lack of patience with shitty clients was pretty much a death sentence for an aspiring Courier.

For this reason, Jake could easily see many so-called geniuses struggling. An ultra-talented fighter, groomed and trained from an early age by experts, always viewed and recognized as someone with high status and a genius, definitely wasn't trained in dealing with a guy arguing that making half of the metal in a shipment of a wrong kind shouldn't be a problem as they were pretty much the same anyway.

Yep, Jake could definitely see a few of them lose their cool here and there. This was definitely part of the Challenge Dungeon test, too, and truthfully, the most overpowered thing one could have in this dungeon was to have worked a retail or other customer-facing low-wage job at some point.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the young geniuses never really had to deal with stuff like this and would find themselves completely out of their comfort zone. They didn't ever have to deal with being an employee but were always the ones giving commands. One would think that Jake also wasn't very good at dealing with entitled and arrogant assholes, but surprisingly enough he found it kind of fun.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

In Jake's opinion, the worst part about work before the system was the monotony of it all. It was its sheer predictability and lack of challenge in everyday tasks as he got used to them. It was the lack of anything truly interesting happening to shake up the monotony the lack of anything memorable on a given day.

However, despite work sucking most of the time, there were also good days. The days with something exciting happening. It didn't even always have to be something major, but just something exciting to shake up the usual monotony.

Jake fondly remembered a day when the sprinklers in the office had gone off unexpectedly, and Casper had been asked if he could figure out how to turn them off temporarily until the company responsible for maintenance got there. Jake had been dragged along, and together, they had been completely drenched before finally finding a way to turn off everything. The office had, of course, already been turned into an utter mess at that point, and the rest of the day was spent cleaning up, figuring out which electronics had been saved in time, and listening to Jacobs frustrated call with the maintenance company that claimed the fact they had missed three consecutive inspections definitely couldn't have been a factor in the malfunction.

That day had been so unpredictable. It had been one twist after another, and even so many years later, Jake remembered the day so clearly. Especially the end, with Casper and Jake sitting on the rooftop drinking soda while claiming they were trying to dry and save some keyboards. It had been a good and memorable day.

In some ways, this entire Challenge Dungeon reminded Jake of that day. Being a Courier was like work, yes, but rather than monotonous tasks, it was more like a job where no task was ever straightforward. It wasn't just delivering a box and leaving for the next house again, day in and day out. Instead, it was more like those special delivery jobs you only had once in a blue moon, but every single time.

It was that one memorable work day, over and over again. Jake didn't doubt that the unpredictability of what you would face at every job was frustrating to many, but for Jake, it just made it more engaging and kept him interested. Definitely far more interested than the Test of Character, where Jake was just a passive observer most of the time. At least here, Jake could work on his movement skills while traveling and meet a bunch of insane and interesting characters when talking to the people there.

Finally compared to all his prior jobs, there was one core difference in this world. Here, you were allowed to bitch-slap the people trying to scam you. It was the most cathartic experience for anyone who had ever had to deal with customers like that, and based on what Jake saw, it had no negative influence on his performance. Which kind of made sense. What could they even do about it? Stop hiring free Couriers? Yeah, fat chance.

All of this is to say that Jake quite enjoyed this Challenge Dungeon, and that was reflected in his speed of doing jobs. He felt excited to get to the point where the jobs weren't only interesting but also offered a genuine challenge when he had to fight stuff, so while he didn't recklessly rush through the jobs, he did very much speedrun them.

Only three weeks after arriving at the small-sized city, Jake completed job number sixty-five, which surprisingly enough was enough to earn him yet another upgrade. Standing within the even larger Guild in the small-sized city, the elven attendant flashed him a huge smile as she congratulated him.

I read your file right as you first came here, and in truth, I believed your evaluation was highly exaggerated, but seeing your work ethic, I believe it was just the opposite, the elf said with a bow. It was definitely a conservative estimation, that's for sure! I cannot remember having ever worked with a Courier who has been promoted this fast ever before.

That's right, Jake's Medallion had rapidly gone up yet another rank.

[Courier Medallion (Uncommon)] A Courier Medallion of a respectable rarity for a relatively experienced Courier. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

The description change was slight, but it was there. And, hey, it was nice to be recognized as a relatively experienced Courier after only about a month on the job. It was definitely a faster promotion rate than any prior job Jake had ever had, and if he kept working hard, he was sure he could earn a senior position within a year.

So, what happens now? Jake asked. Got more jobs for me, or?

As predicted, the elfs mood shifted a bit as she took out a piece of paper from below the desk. For some reason, this paper had a golden outline and wasnt anything Jake had seen before. She looked almost a bit nervous as she handled it and looked to both sides before speaking.

Listen we got a Special Courier Job in just today. It isnt anything you have to do, and its a pretty risky one so before I even present it to you, I need to know if you are interested? she asked with a low voice.

Jake mimicked her serious mood as he leaned in slightly. "What are the details of the job?

Ill take that as you showing interest. Alright, so about five years ago, the Infernal Baron a powerful B-grade - created a bounty reward for anyone who could capture a certain kind of elemental he needed. I didnt think something like that would ever become relevant here, but just a few hours ago, a band of adventurers returned with the exact elemental he had requested. Now we need someone to deliver it to him in the closest medium-sized city.

Alright, pretty straightforward so far, Jake nodded. But I guess there is a twist.

The elf nodded. Three problems. First of all, the elemental is right now sealed within a containment device, but as it is still very much alive, and due to the nature of the containment device, it cannot be put into any spatial storage. This brings us to the next problem: it needs to be delivered covertly because his enemies cannot know he obtained the elemental, and as the teleportation gateway scans any living being that passes through, it will need to be delivered directly without the use of gates.

Alright, so I would have to travel there on my own. Whats the final problem?

The adventurers who captured the elemental well, they werent the best. The containment device they used was poorly made, and the seals on it are less than stellar, so by our experts evaluation, it wont last

more than a week. So it needs to be delivered directly within a week while making sure no one finds out what is being transported, the elf finished explaining. I know it is a lot to ask of someone who just got promoted, but your progress so far and the fact you could make your way to this city by yourself that quickly makes me believe you are up to the task and have the required travel speed.

As she finished, a system message popped up in front of Jake.

Accept Special Courier Job 2: Transport the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron in the mid-sized city without your cargo being discovered. Time limit: 7 days.

Or

Use the Teleportation Gateway to travel to the mid-sized city and forfeit the Special Courier Job.

Cant keep the Baron waiting for long, now can we? Jake promptly answered with a smile. I naturally accept the job.

Great! the elf said with relief as she took out a table-tennis-sized metal ball and placed it in front of Jake. He used Identify on it quickly before taking it and hiding it away.

[Sealed Elemental (Unique)] A sealed elemental of the fire affinity can be found within. Due to the shoddy work of the ones who sealed it, this item is slowly deteriorating and will reach critical failure in a week (7 days). Any attempt to interfere with this item may result in the seal breaking prematurely.

Remember, be careful, the elf insisted. Even if we have hidden the fact we obtained the elemental well, I am not sure the adventurers were as good at keeping their mouths shut, so it may have spread, and enemies of the Baron may attempt to impede you in your travels. While they will not know what exactly you are transporting, as even the adventurers have no idea as to its value, they will be more than keen to find out, and I doubt their methods to do so will be peaceful.

Ill be wary, Jake nodded seriously as he turned to leave. Id better get going. Thanks for everything so far.

It has been my pleasure, she smiled and bowed once more as Jake exited the Guild and instantly felt a few hidden gazes on him.

Yep, this job is definitely not gonna be a peaceful one.

Chapter 835: Nevermore: Package Police

Jake felt like perhaps this would be the first real job. It gave him a different feeling compared to all the ones he had done prior, and after accepting it, he was more sure than ever these Special Courier Jobs were a bit like those special fights in the Colosseum. In more ways than one.

Based on the words of the Guild attendant, Jake suspected that all of these Special Courier Jobs were linked. A part of a longer quest chain of sorts. He believed he had only been offered this job because he had made the run with that Space Locator, and it was even probable his speed at having done so factored in. In fact, Jake wouldn't be surprised at all if these jobs changed based on how a person performed beforehand, and Jake would have gotten an entirely different or maybe just slightly easier job if he hadn't been as fast as he was.

If all of this was true, it made sense the difficulty had a big spike with this job where he even had to potentially interact with a B-grade. Of course, Jake didn't believe for a single second he would have to fight one, as that would just be insanity, but he could see himself being thrown into a situation where he had to not make the wrong dialogue choice.

Returning to the job at hand, Jake found himself standing outside the Guild, four sets of eyes on him. That in itself wasn't out of the ordinary, but the fact two of them followed him even after he walked away from the Guild proved they weren't just the usual observers who kept track of all the adventurers and Couriers coming and going.

Not wanting to have a few tails, Jake sped up and quickly weaved in between the many buildings and streets. Within only a few minutes, he felt that no one was keeping track of him anymore, making him duck into the upper floor of a house with an open window no one was currently in. Yes, this was most definitely trespassing, but if someone broke into your house and trespassed, but you never noticed anyone had ever been there, did it really happen?

Inside the house, Jake started out by making his mask visible, hiding his face. So far, he hadn't worn it a single time throughout the entire Challenge Dungeon. It tended to have a negative effect when making conversation, so he had purposefully gone without. However, things were a bit different now, and he

was totally fine with coming off as intimidating as he doubted anyone who would want to talk to him during this trip did so with kind intentions.

Next up, he changed it so Shroud of the Primordial once more hid his level and didnt just tell everyone he was 211. As a final touch, he infused a bit of mana into his cloak, making the shadowy thing almost seem alive as it began to ripple a bit, like a flickering shadow. He also considered using his stealth skill but decided against it. It may sound weird, but he wanted people to know he was leaving.

With all his preparations done, Jake checked himself over and confirmed everything was as it should be.

Definitely looking a lot less approachable now, he thought happily as he exited the house he had trespassed into once more, making sure to remove any traces he had ever been there.

Checking the compass on the Medallion, Jake saw the direction to the mid-sized city and got going. He wasnt going to relax at all with this job as he, quite frankly, didnt have the leeway to do so. When he was checking out the library, he also studied the local geography and memorized a few maps, which made him know the distance to the mid-sized city was a bit over twice what he traveled to the small-sized one. With the first trip taking him one and a half days, this one would take at least three.

This was another reason Jake felt confident this Special Courier Job was the first mission with some real difficulty because he seriously doubted someone like the Fallen King could even make the trip within the required seven days. He simply wasnt fast enough. The Sword Saint would also struggle, but Jake believed he would be able to make it quite comfortable if he wasnt disturbed too much on the way, while whether Dina could do it or not was a total toss-up. Sylphie would naturally be able to easily, being the fast little bird she was assuming she didnt get scammed by someone.

Flying through the air, Jake quickly exited the city limits, feeling a few new curious eyes on him during the flight. Those who were just curious about the hooded figure flying around werent what bothered him, as gawking was a pretty normal reacting, but a few lingered for a bit too long. He even felt that two skills reminiscent of his own Hunters Mark were attempted to be placed on him, but Jake rebuffed both. One of them tried again, but Jake once more defended as he sped up and seemingly got out of range.

This was definitely the most attention that had been placed on Jake for any job thus far. Far behind him, using his Pulse, he even saw the two who had tried to mark him fly into the air and look after him, both holding some devices in their hands likely for communication.

That about confirms it this flight is gonna have some turbulence.

Alas, there wasn't much Jake could do about it right now. As he flew, he took out the Sealed Elemental from beneath his clothes and observed it a bit more closely. As mentioned, it was about the size of a table tennis ball and pretty smooth. Inspecting the magic circles on it, Jake confirmed what the Guild attendant had said. He had no way to extend the duration of the seal. In fact, the entire structure of it was almost as if it was made to collapse. If it was on purpose or not, Jake didn't know, but he wouldn't rule it out though the ones he suspected of being behind this faulty seal weren't necessarily any bad actors, but could just as likely be the Wyrmgod who designed the job.

Jake considered for a moment where best to hide the item if a fight did break out and decided that the safest place would be somewhere it couldn't ever fall out and had a way smaller chance of accidentally getting hit. Using his arcane mana, he covered it on a thin but firm layer of protection before popping it into his mouth and swallowing hard. Inside muscles inside his body that weren't really something normal humans had access to, Jake stopped it before it even fully entered his stomach, where it could sit nicely for the duration of his travels.

Sure, eating it was a risk, and he even considered using *Palate* on it, but he didn't wanna risk it due to the stomach being a bit too close to a spatial storage. Besides, he was busy nurturing one of the ten legendary rarity *Blightroots* in there. A natural treasure filled with death affinity energy he had gotten as a present from the Risen during his Chosen Ceremony. It had been in there ever since the stomach healed from the whole Dark Witch debacle and had been a great help when making all his necrotic poison. He still didn't feel confident working with the root, but there was definitely much to be gained from it especially as it seemed to contain traces of the *Blight* affinity created by the Vipers fellow Primordial, the *Blightfather*.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

Back on topic, Jake had eaten the Sealed Elemental for a few reasons despite the risk. Having it inside of him would shield it from most detection and divination magic capable of specifically searching for it, and if someone was nearby, they would always have a way harder time sensing it. There was also just that it made Jake feel safer knowing where it was and that he didn't have to think about it falling out while fighting. Yep, he definitely ate it solely for logical reasons and no, he didn't want to think about what would happen if the seal broke while he had the thing inside him.

With the Sealed Elemental in his stomach, Jake continued his journey as he summoned his wings and used *One Step* in between wing flaps. This was his fastest method of movement and allowed him to

truly build up momentum as he flew and teleported through the air while flaring his aura to keep any monsters who got too curious at bay.

After about half a day of travel, Jake spotted something in the distance. It was a village from the looks of it, and for a moment, Jake considered making a pit stop there as he doubted its placement right in the path to the mid-sized city was an accident but decided against it. Besides, as he got closer, he got the feeling he wouldn't even have to go greet the village. In fact, it looked like the village would be more than happy to fly out to greet him! With quite a few people, too, for a wonderful unwanted welcome party to a village, Jake didn't even plan on visiting. How nice of them.

For a second, he thought about flying around and avoiding them but stopped himself and just continued flying toward them. He wasn't sure what they had up their sleeve, but he got a feeling he would regret it if he didn't go to them directly.

As he got closer, the group that consisted of about thirty people fanned out, clearly to block his path. Getting the message, Jake stopped as a human man with a large beard wearing full, heavy armor flew slightly forward to greet him. Using Identify, he saw the man wasn't dangerous in the slightest, though he was one of the higher-level individuals in the group.

[Human lvl 249]

Hello there! the man said with a reassuring smile as he projected his voice to Jake while still keeping over a hundred meters distance between them. Real sorry to bother you, but we have had reports that smugglers carrying illegal substances have recently been through this area and have been tasked with putting a stop to it. Due to the crackdown, they have even begun to use Couriers you wouldn't happen to be a Courier recently out of Hillspring City, would you?

Drugs, really? Damn, that sucks. Luckily for me, I am not carrying any drugs, so no reason to bother me, Jake said with a smile as he felt the use of a skill on him. It didn't work, but Jake recognized it as similar to the one Silas from Neils party had that was capable of detecting lies.

Ah, you must have missed me asking but I need to confirm if you are a Courier or not, the man insisted.

This was probably a crucial moment where one could attempt trickery but Jake didn't feel the need to. Yep, Courier here straight out of Hillspring less than a day ago.

The plate-wearing man likely expected some kind of information from the person detecting lies, but even if he didn't get told anything, he didn't miss a beat. Is that so? I am really sorry to bother you, but were you tasked by the Guild to deliver an item to the Infernal Baron? That is the cover currently used by the smugglers to trick Couriers, and the Baron himself isn't involved at all. They are even sophisticated enough to change item descriptions and make the delivery look like something it isn't.

Jake, acting shocked, gasped in an exaggerated way. Shit, really? I am transporting something to that Baron!

A big smile crept onto the man's lips. Good thing we caught you then, or you could have gotten in real trouble once you arrived at Infernal City with your delivery! The Baron would have had your head, even if you are a Courier! Tell you what, I do know this seems fishy, but let me share this the crackdown on this particular substance to the level where every gateway scans for it. That's also the reason you were forced to make the trip by yourself and not just take the gate. What's more, due to the nature of the substance, I even heard it cannot enter spatial storage.

You're describing exactly what I was asked to transport, Jake confirmed enthusiastically.

What Jake was doing right now could seem risky as the Special Courier Job required the cargo to not be discovered but Jake felt very confident discovery wasn't just them knowing he had cargo for the Baron or even what it was. They clearly already knew. No, it was to ensure no one could identify exactly what he was transporting. Shit, he even felt confident that should someone discover it and die before they could report it to anyone, he still wouldn't fail the job. In conclusion it was probably only these enemies of the Baron that couldn't discover the Sealed Elemental.

I see, the plated man said with a sigh. Jake wondered what his next response would be as the man smiled. I know this is a lot to ask, but could you show me the goods in question? I would hate for this to be a false positive and to have made false accusations. Of course, if it is as we suspect, we would more than gladly take the illicit goods off your hands. Naturally, we will make sure the Guild is properly notified of everything, too, and we have the express permission of the Infernal Baron to produce a letter of annulment for the Courier Job.

Honestly, the more the guy spoke, the more believable he sounded. Not even necessarily because of what he said but because of the powerful mental manipulation skill he was applying. This was likely why he had been the one to walk forward and speak.

That all sounds great, mister package police! Jake answered with a big smile behind his mask. Sadly, I got my orders, and even if everything you said is correct, I got a reputation for being reliable, you know? Besides, everything you just said is total bullshit, so it isn't like there is much to consider.

The man's smile faded instantly when he heard Jake's response. Yet he didn't outright attack. Look, this is a far more complicated matter than you want to get involved in there are people you do not want to make your enemies. So just hand over whatever you need to deliver to the Infernal Baron and be on your way or things could get tricky for you.

As he said this, an aura erupted from down in the village as a figure flew up. Jake had noticed this person long ago, throwing them a glance and identifying as they joined their mates.

[Scalekin lvl 311]

Jake smiled, now finally knowing why he got the feeling he would regret not clashing with this group directly.

Seeing the lack of a response, the bearded man seemed to assume that Jake was shocked or something as he spoke again. We have nothing against you and would prefer to settle this without unnecessary bloodshed. Yes, this is very much a threat, but we are under orders, same as you. So just make the easiest choice for everyone involved and live to see another day.

Thank you, Jake said, entirely ignoring the man as he looked at the scalekin in the back. You know, it feels like it's been so long probably because it has.

What the hell are you going on about? the bearded guy continued as Jake also continued to ignore him, and he instead held out his hand as a bow appeared in it. Between the many Challenge Dungeons he had done, he had truly missed something like this... especially after having just done the House of the Architect.

Can I ask you to do me a favor too? Jake asked the scalekin directly.

As a response to Jakes words, and probably also the fact he had pulled out a bow, the scalekin released their aura as a wand appeared in one of their hands. Jake felt the aura and grinned even more than before. Not weak not weak at all.

I was gonna ask you to put up a proper fight as its been so long since I had a proper one but it looks like thats freely included already.

Chapter 836: Nevermore: "Pretty Good Fight."

Jake didnt relax for even a moment as he immediately activated Arcane Awakening at its stable 30%. A level 311 humanoid was simply not anyone he could take lightly, and if he let his guard down, things could quickly get hairy.

In response, the bearded man and all of the lower-leveled people did something surprising. Rather than attack, they all turned on their tails and backed away at impressive speeds as the scalekin was the only one who slowly floated toward Jake.

At least they have a proper sense of when fighting is a bad idea.

Looking at the scalekin, Jake tilted his head. You gonna remain silent and mysterious?

As an answer, the scalekin pointed their wand at Jake as magic began to gather. Jake also quickly nocked an arrow and prepared to shoot as a white flash erupted from the wand. It wasnt an attempt to blind him, but instead, just the air around the scalekin mage getting bathed in mana as what looked like fragments of silvery metal began floating around them.

With Sense of the Malefic Viper, he quickly identified the affinity. Some kind of metal affinity with oh fu-

Jake released the string of his bow right in time before he had to dodge to the side. A loud explosive sound rocked the airspace as a silvery bolt of lightning flew past him. Before Jake had time to try and nock another arrow, a second thundershock sounded as another bolt was released.

Dodging this one, too, Jake kept flying upwards to get some distance. The range of the lightning was limited, and Jake believed he had an advantage at longer range. As he began flying upwards, the arrow

he had loosed during their initial exchange also arrived, but the mage summoned a large tower shield and blocked it, only getting pushed back slightly when the arrow exploded.

However, the blast did do something. It made the hood of the scalekin fly back, revealing what looked like an albino lizard of some kind, with what Jake recognized as clear male traits of this particular species. Did it matter that Jake figured out if it was a male or female scalekin? No, not at all.

Continuing his upwards flight, the mage below made another move. The air around him shimmered as the metal fragments began collecting into dozens of spears, and, at the same time, a magic circle of some kind appeared below him. A few of the metal spears were shot toward Jake, but he dodged all of them as they flew past him and into the clouds above, the attacks thrown haphazardly as the scalekin focused his attention on the magic circle.

Jake didn't want to see what the scalekin was cooking up if he could avoid it and began to pelt his opponent with arrows. Likely because he knew he had a low chance of hitting Jake, the scalekin decided that rather than use all the metal spears to attack, the scalekin could use them as counters to Jake's arrows to buy him some time. At least he tried to.

Shooting a series of arrows in quick succession, Jake controlled each of them as their flight patterns became unpredictable. The scalekin seemed surprised and blocked one side with a shield and used the spears on the other. Sadly for him, Jake wasn't playing around, as right before the arrows hit, they split into dozens each, exploding before they even hit him or the shield. The resulting explosion sent the scalekin staggering back as the magic circle began to flicker as its caster lost focus.

Taking advantage, Jake released a Powershot he had begun charging when he shot the Splitting Arrows before. With the scalekin not entirely focused, he failed to react fast enough as the arrow hit him and blasted him down through his own magic circle, breaking it apart in the process.

Nocking another arrow, Jake was prepared to follow up but suddenly, his danger sense warned him. Turning around, Jake summoned a barrier of stable arcane mana as a white bolt of lightning struck him from within one of the clouds. With his sphere, he saw the spears he had dodged earlier had all stopped in mid-air behind him, and one by one, they began to transform into pure energy as another spear turned into a bolt of lightning.

Below him, the mage had also gathered himself, and it seemed like he was done playing around. The robe covering his body was already mostly ruined due to Jake's attacks, and through the mage's own power began to slowly disintegrate as pristine silvery armor revealed itself beneath, covering everything

besides the scalekins face. At least it was for a brief moment before a helmet began to grow out of the armor, covering his face and leaving no obvious openings.

Dealing with the final lightning bolt from above, Jake turned to look at the mage. He looked like a full-plate warrior tank, and Jake didnt doubt he was one tough bastard, considering the armor hadnt taken any noticeable damage yet. To make matters more annoying, the mage had overcome one of the usual weaknesses of heavy armor low speed - by firing incredibly fast lightning bolts.

Spreading out his arms, the scalekin summoned even more mana as what looked like metal blades appeared. Jakes reponse was to nock another arrow as he decided to also take things up a notch. Arcane Awakening intensified as he activated the offensive fifty percent, aiming to dodge every blow and focus on dealing damage for now.

Shooting an Arcane Powershot, the mage responded as he held up an open palm, and from it, a speartip appeared before getting blasted out. It hit Jakes arrow, and both exploded mid-air. As a follow-up from the mage, dozens of blades were also shot toward Jake, all crackling with lightning energy.

They met a barrage of arcane arrows in their path as the air filled with explosions of arcane energy and lightning. The mage kept summoning blades, and Jake kept shooting arrows as neither refused to back down, while both controlling their attacks to hit the others, when they didnt try to have an arrow or blade sneak by. Occasionally, an attack on either side would make it through, but Jake easily dodged those while the mage blocked.

The attack speed on both sides slowly began picking up as Jake shot faster and faster, and he felt the strain. He also got the feeling this status quo was not good for him as he was burning through resources faster than he was comfortable with. One also had to remember that his foe was more than fifty levels above Jake, resulting in him likely having a deeper mana pool, especially seeing as he was a dedicated mage and not a hybrid like Jake.

Not all was bad, though, as Jake was also cooking something up. However, rather than do it with an obvious magic circle, Jake had a Protean Arrow getting slow-cooked within his quiver. Still, Jake would prefer to change things up, so he did just that.

Rather than continue their duel of blades versus arrows, Jake stopped shooting and instead began charging an Arcane Powershot. Without anything to impede their path, the blades reached him in less than a second, ready to slice him apart, but Jake was ready with his best counter to every attack.

With light movements, Jake dodged and swayed as the many blades flew by him. Some of them left lightning trails that tried to singe him, but his cloak and armor took the brunt of whatever went through, allowing Jake to keep charging.

He had gambled that the mage had stopped controlling every blade manually but was just firing them in his direction, and he had been right. The scalekin mage quickly realized his strategy wasn't working but didn't seem particularly bothered as he stopped summoning them.

Jake was ready for some other form of attack, but the scalekin just stood there as Jake charged his attack. Even if Jake was confused about why the scalekin was doing that, he wouldn't abandon his attack but kept charging the Powershot to its full potential before releasing the string.

A shockwave of energy erupted as what little lightning energy clung to Jake was pushed away, and the arrow descended, surrounded by a dense wave of pure destructive arcane energy. As it went downwards, Jake saw the scalekin merely raise a hand as the silvery metal mana began to gather into a shield, which was when Jake realized why the mage had stopped attacking.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

The arrogant asshole was confident he could just block whatever attack I was charging yeah, fuck that.

As the silvery mana had nearly formed a solid shield to block the arrow, all the mana suddenly stopped moving. Up above, Jake stared down as two glowing eyes were visible through his mask, unleashing a Primal Gaze, freezing not only the body but the energy of the scalekin.

The freeze only lasted for a fraction of a second, but it had entirely thrown off the scalekin's timing. The unfinished shield shattered instantly when the arrow hit it, and even if the scalekin became able to move again, there simply wasn't enough time to react.

Jake blinked rapidly to remove the blood dripping from his eyes after using Primal Gaze on a far higher-leveled foe and saw the scalekin get blasted downward at impressive speed as the arrow hit him. From his Hunters Mark and Sense of the Malefic Viper, he felt that the attack had done some damage. Not

wanting to miss his advantage, he nocked another arrow and released an Arrow Rain as the sky filled with arrows.

The rain of destructive arcane arrows hit the ground soon after as everything exploded. Jake was happy they were pretty far away from the village because if not, there wouldn't be much left of it as he stared down at the hundreds of craters below.

Despite the devastation, Jake clearly saw the silvery figure below stand back up, now sporting a nice hole in his otherwise pristine armor. He looked more annoyed than anything as he took to the air. Seeing no reason to let the scalekin do so in a relaxed manner, Jake decided to give him a few arrows along the way, but the scalekin still had his shield and managed to deflect them as he tried to get closer to Jake.

Jake felt the energy within his opponent begin to build up as the air around him quivered. Audible cracks could be heard as small sparks of lightning began to appear just as the mage pointed toward Jake and released a barrage of exploding metal fragments. Jake retreated as he saw the mage raise his shield toward the air with one hand and the wand with the other.

Not wanting to let him do his weird mage stuff, Jake chose to take a few scratches from metal fragments and shoot a quickly charged Arcane Powershot. He did this fully expecting the scalekin to dodge, but his opponent didn't move at all. The arrow hit the same hole in the armor as last time, piercing the scalekin square in his chest and making him flinch but he also managed to finish casting his spell.

Jake's follow-up arrow was blasted to pieces as the mage shot a humongous lightning bolt into the air. An absolute pillar of pure power burned into the sky and even the ground below as Jake felt like something happened within it which turned out to be kind of true.

When the light faded, what appeared wasn't the mage but a massive pillar of pure metal in his place. It pierced kilometers into the sky and even deep into the ground, and Jake wondered what the hell was happening until the entire thing started moving slightly.

Parts of it began to turn into cubes and fall off, but mid-fall, they started to warp even more, forming spikes or other sharp metal objects. Soon, the entire pillar began to crumble as metal weapons rained down and covered the ground below, with the mage's form soon being revealed, now sporting an entire cube of pure metal that surrounded and shielded him.

Well, isnt this guy one tough nut to crack, Jake thought with a smile.

On the ground below, the many metal weapons began to stir as faint crackles of electricity surrounded them. Jake looked down and then at the mage in the cube as he sighed a bit. He had a plan, but it would take a bit to modify a certain arrow, so for now, he really only had one choice.

The very next second, weapons shot into the air, flying straight for Jake. Thousands of swords, axes, spears, arrows, and all sorts of other spiky things either went straight for Jake or formed a maelstrom of metal around him, sealing his movements.

Knowing there was no room to hold back, Jake went all-out as Arcane Awakening finally fully activated. The weapons came from all sides, but Jake was ready as he entered super-dodging mode. It reminded him a bit of some of Minagas trap rooms as attacks came from everywhere, but with a few well-placed barriers, arcane explosions, and two katars to deflect blows, he found the openings he needed as he remained relatively unharmed even as the attacks intensified.

Lightning bolts began to jump between all the weapons, sometimes also shooting for Jake, forcing him to summon his scales to handle the constant attacks. However, even with his scales and passive arcane barrier from Awakening, he still took some damage, as avoiding every attack simply wasnt feasible, and the lightning bolts were pretty damn strong, especially considering how many there were.

This continued for nearly a minute as the pressure kept mounting. Jake didnt doubt this was some killer attack the scalekin mage saved for a tricky situation as he sat inside his metal cube, hiding while controlling everything. The mana cost for the assault had to be extreme, but Jake didnt bet on his opponent running out of mana. Besides, he was a Courier on a job and couldnt drag out the fight too long and by now, he was ready to finish it.

It took some extra time due to the focus he had to dedicate to not losing a limb, but soon, Jakes preparations were ready. After dodging and finding a small opening, Jake released a large blast of arcane mana to give him a moment to act. Reaching out with his hand toward the metal cube, it began to glow dark green as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated to awaken the poison within the scalekin.

His opponent had been hit by two arrows, with especially the second one delivering a good dose. Sadly, Jake hadnt had time to make any of his Heartrot Poison quite yet okay, he had kind of just forgotten to but it wasnt a problem as he would most likely have used his Sleeping Night Toxin anyway.

While the scalekin had some impressive defenses, his pure Vitality didnt strike Jake as very high, which was proven true when the poison was activated. Within the cube of metal, the scalekin coughed up blood and lost concentration as all the weapons flying around Jake stopped moving.

A large Protean Arrow appeared in Jakes hand as he began flying toward the metal cube and charging a Powershot. The scalekin within was still struggling with the poison and its explosive activation of it, but he quickly noticed Jake approaching and gathered himself as the many weapons started moving again.

His reaction was commendably quick but not quick enough. Shadowy energy surrounded Jakes body as a second version of himself flew out of him toward the metal cube. His Eternal Shadow, with katar in hand, unleashed a Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang into the metal cube. A blast of lightning was released from the cube in response, dispersing the shadow, but the attack had gone through.

The piercing effect left a hole but didnt go fully through, but it left just the opening Jake needed. Right before all the weapons reached him again, Jake released a string as the Protean Arrow flew forward and struck the same hole just made by his shadow, further amplified by Jake pouring in what little Hunting Momentum he had been able to build up.

When the Protean Arrow hit, the attack activated in two steps. Firstly, a large blast of arcane energy shot forward, blasting a hole in the cube for the rest of the arrow to pass through. The mage was partly hit by this arcane energy and moved to defend himself within as the second part the arrow itself struck him.

Within the cube, Jake saw the mage be penetrated straight through the chest as the arrow pierced him and pinned him to the back side of his own cube. After barely having to dodge a few weapons coming for him, Jake triggered the arrow with a mental command, and the entire thing exploded, with the cube serving only to amplify the power of the explosion.

It also turned out the cube was a lot weaker to getting attacked from the inside. The large arcane explosion left cracks all over the cube as it began to crumble and fall apart. Fragments began dropping to the ground, along with the many weapons and the mage himself.

Jake raised his bow and took aim again. The mage was badly injured and had even lost one of his arms in an attempt to contain the explosion, but he still tried to block Jakes arrow as he summoned his shield again. The first arrow curved slightly just before it hit, striking the shield at a weird angle and making the mage spin in the air. To throw him further off, Jake even activated the Arcane Charge from his mark, making the mages entire body flash with destructive arcane energy, making him utterly unable to

respond to the next attack. The second arrow hit the spinning mage in the back, sending him reeling even more as the third struck him square through the thin gap in the armor at his neck, piercing straight through.

Five more arrows followed as the scalekin remained in freefall, every one of them coated in poison. Jake had kind of expected the mage to have one more card to pull out, but before the scalekin even hit the ground, he felt all signs of life fade as he got a system message.

You have slain [Scalekin - lvl 311 / Aluminium Magister - lvl 334 / Luxmetal Alchemist lvl 288]

Jake read the notification quickly and was a bit disappointed at the confirmation he indeed didnt get any experience in this Challenge Dungeon either.

It wasnt all bad, though.

Pretty good fight, Jake mumbled to himself as he turned to look toward the village. Right before the bearded man had left, Jake had thrown a subtle Hunters Mark on him. He was hiding away in the village, or at least he had been, as Jake now saw him begin to be on the move, likely after seeing the result of the fight.

After quickly flying down and depositing the body of the scalekin in his storage in case it would come in handy later, he began flying toward the village, ready for a second conversation with the fake package police.

Chapter 837: Nevermore: Branching Paths

The scalekin sure hadnt been the most talkative, so Jake hoped to get some information out of the bearded man who originally greeted him. He and all his friends were trying to run away right now after the mage had died, knowing that they didnt stand a chance even if they got involved.

Power differences, especially at higher grades, werent just a simple math equation. Two people with half of Jakes stats wouldnt be equal to one Jake, and even if a few hundred of them came at him, Jake was confident in smacking them all down. There were certain conceptual gaps caused by higher stats and grades, resulting in far less damage being dealt by those who were a lot weaker.

Jake had ways to close the gap between himself and someone at a higher level, but such a thing was generally considered quite rare based on what Jake had seen. Likely because, in order to get stronger against higher-leveled opponents, you had to get used to only getting anything out of higher-leveled opponents.

All of this is to say that despite there being around thirty of them, the fact Jake could fight, let alone kill, the scalekin mage meant they wouldn't be able to even touch him. Assuming he was in a condition to fight, of course. Jake did have the minor problem that he was on a timer as he flew toward the village.

Arcane Awakening had been suppressed down to the more stable 30%, but he had to keep it going, or he would enter a period of weakness. While he could re-trigger Arcane Awakening even while in this period of weakness, it would lead to an even worse backlash afterward, so he would very much prefer to avoid that.

Chasing down the bearded man didn't end up taking long, especially with the stat boost active for some more stats. On the way, he also manipulated his cloak to entirely cover his body, and after a bit of quick cleaning up, he made sure to look like he hadn't even taken minor wounds but was entirely uninjured after the fight. That should add a bit to his intimidation factor.

The man and his companions had fled through an underground tunnel to a hideout disguised as a small hill about ten kilometers from the village. From a distance, it looked entirely normal, as the ones who crafted it had transformed an actual hill and then placed all magic formations on the inside. Quite clever and a lot harder to spot that way, and most C-grades would definitely miss it.

Reaching the hill, Jake pulled out his bow again, nocked an arrow, and drew the string as he yelled, infusing his voice with mana and Willpower. I will count down from ten. When I reach zero well, you can guess what happens. Ten, ni-

Before Jake could even say nine, the bearded man along with two others, flew out from within the hill, their bodies phasing through it seamlessly. They all had their hands up above their heads, and Jake didn't feel the slightest threat from any of them. Don't shoot!

Jake slightly relaxed the string but didn't withdraw his bow immediately. See, that wasn't so hard. Now, I believe we have some things to discuss, including why you decided that attacking a Courier who is just trying to do his damn job was a good idea.

We we got a job I am not sure about the details, so-

So youre gonna tell me everything you do know? Great! Jake said in a cheerful tone as he kept his eyes on the three of them. He also looked inside the hill, wondering if they were maybe trying to set up an ambush, but they were all just hiding potentially hoping Jake thought only the bearded man and the two who exited with him were hiding there.

Were just middlemen. Adventurers, the man hurriedly began to explain. I dont even know who the job is from! That mage was the one who brought everything and hired us for his bosses. He had a letter with instructions, part of the payment, and everything like that. We were just here to make the presence of the Silenced less suspicious.

Jake took in what he said, as that word toward the end stuck out due to the emphasis the man put on it. Silenced what? I know the scalekin wasnt a big conversationalist, and I didnt get anything out of him besides the occasional small grunt, but Im not sure making his lack of talking his defining trait is polite.

The bearded adventurer looked a bit confused at Jake for a moment as he stammered. Do do you not know what a Silenced is?

It sounded like Jake was really meant to, so he tried and failed to play it off cool. Remind me.

Someone from the Silenced Order. Slaves who have had their ability to speak or even properly communicate entirely sealed away and are primarily used by those who want them to accomplish tasks they really dont want anyone to talk about or for anything to be tracked back to them, the adventurer explained. Rare to see any C-grades of the Silenced Order, though. Mainly due to how expensive they are and their limited availability. Especially a late-tier C-grade, as after becoming Silenced, progress pretty much stops as their Paths are ruined.

The explanation almost felt too long and thorough, making Jake think he had hit some intended dialogue option. Especially the last part that struck Jake as unnecessary added information. Alas, it told him everything he needed to know.

So, in summary, someone unable to communicate came to you with a letter telling you to stop me in my path, and you did so without thinking that maybe, just maybe, the Courier wasnt just some pushover?

Not just stop you. Stop any Courier coming out of Hillspring and going this way, and yes, the fact the Silenced couldn't handle you was not part of the calculations but we were never necessarily meant to kill you! Just incapacitate and intimidate. Look, all I know is that you are transporting something someone really doesn't want the Infernal Baron to have, or at least not come in possession of, without this employer of ours knowing what it is. We didn't even necessarily have to obtain what you are transporting, but just confirm what it is and report it, the adventurer elaborated, once more saying more than Jake thought any good contractor should about a clearly confidential job. Also, for someone just meant to incapacitate, the scalekin mage sure did like to go for his vitals.

And how exactly were you supposed to contact this employer? Jake questioned, feeling this was the good dialogue tree to go down.

The Silenced knew a ritual to contact the employer the man said, afraid that Jake wouldn't like the answer as he suddenly remembered something. Ah! But we can contact the broker who put us in contact with the Silenced! He should be able to at least find a representative of the employer! I have a token to do it that should work even at this distance.

See, that sounds like a workable solution, Jake said with a smile beneath his mask as he decided to put his bow away and, with a single step, teleported down in front of the bearded man, making him flinch. Do it. Now.

Stolen story; please report.

Without missing a beat, the man did as asked, pulling out a token that looked like a metal slate of some kind. He infused some energy into it as a semi-transparent screen appeared in mid-air. Seconds passed, as the bearded adventurer looked more and more nervous, hoping the broker on the other side would pick up.

After half a minute, there finally was a response. The screen began to warp and got big enough to show an entire person as a figure appeared. The person was hooded, and when the bearded adventurer saw the person, his eyes opened wide.

Who are you!? Where is Elmin!?

The figure barely reacted to his outburst, but instead, Jake felt the figure on the other side turn and look him over.

The Courier, I presume. I see you failed. How unfortunate.

Jake couldn't discern if the voice was male or female, and the hood hid any clues as to the answer. The bearded man seemed even more agitated than before as he yelled loudly.

What the fuck did you do with-

He had served his purpose and so have you served yours.

Without any warning or even giving Jake the time to react, some energy came alive within the bearded man as he exploded like a popped balloon. The two at his side followed suit as Jake saw even the people in the hideout suffer the same fate. Within less than three seconds, all of them had died, and in the environment, Jake felt a faintly familiar concept.

Karmic magic well, fuck me.

Now, as for you, Courier the figure said, keeping their attention on Jake, who had just been standing there even as the blood splashed over him. He hadn't flinched for even a second, and he wasn't going to do so now as he stared at the figure on the other end. He didn't doubt they were, at the very least, well into B-grade, if not higher. At least he made that guess, even if he couldn't feel their actual aura.

What? Jake asked, trying to sound almost annoyed. He took this attitude very much on purpose for one simple reason they couldn't feel how powerful Jake was through the token either. Same as Jake couldn't feel their power. So he would prefer to front that he was maybe stronger than he actually was. Seeing as the token also only relayed sound and visual information, he also slowly prepared for his escape as the stealth skill slowly began to activate.

Taking an antagonistic attitude will earn you nothing, Courier. Our quarrel is not with you, and we are not your enemies.

Oh really? Tell that to the little lizard you put in my way, Jake scoffed. Seemed pretty damn antagonistic to me when he began to throw his metal sticks.

The Silenced was merely following orders and was perhaps a bit overzealous in their approach. Capture was ordered as a preferential resolution, but it seems like that was far beyond the capabilities of the Silenced, the disembodied voice answered. However, that matter has already concluded. Rather than dragging out this needless topic, let us proceed with something more productive. Business. You are delivering something we want, and we are willing to compensate you for it.

That they wanted to strike a deal with Jake instead of just issuing threats was a good start, as Jake crossed his arms. What exactly are you proposing?

Continue your journey as normal. None of our agents shall get in your way, but when you arrive, do not seek out the Infernal Baron. Instead, go to the Guild and inform them you lost the delivery on the way. We will then send someone to find you, and once the item is confirmed, post a Courier Job you are to accept. It shall be ensured that there will be no negative impact on your reputation. If you do this, there will also be a substantial reward waiting, along with new and highly valuable allies.

Hm, Jake said, looking deep in thought. I will need to think about it, so give me a few days. I planned on making a small detour on the way, so I wouldn't arrive in the city before in ten days time anyway. I assume this is all good on your end? That should also help sell the story if I do wanna go with saying I lost the delivery.

The figure had a brief pause, almost as if consulting with someone, before the voice answered. Very well. You are to take this token and use it to contact us once you have an answer. We give you five days to respond, or you will come to regret your-

You know what? I thought we were doing business, not that you suddenly decided you're my boss and can order me around. With that attitude, I guess you'll know when I arrive in the city what I want to do, Jake scoffed. I'll be in touch.

Wait, take the-

Jakes attempt to front himself as someone more powerful than he actually was had entered its final stage. He waved the figure off as he turned around and began walking away while he, at the same time, triggered two skills.

Firstly, Eternal Shadow of the Primal Hunter activated as a shadowy version of himself casually continued Jakes walk. The real Jake stopped mid-walk as he fully activated his stealth skill, and instantly, he knew it had worked. The projected figure lost sight of the real him as the shadow perfectly replaced Jake, only to disappear into cursed smoke a few steps later.

Jake stood completely still, looking at the projected figure for a few seconds. He couldnt read anything concrete from the person, but it looked like they were discussing something with someone. The figure took a final look around, and five seconds later, the projection disappeared with the token cracking down the middle. A second or so later, the entire token began to crumble entirely into dust and got scattered by the wind. The only evidence of their interaction remaining was the splatters of blood covering the ground.

Not wanting to take any chances, Jake began to fly a good distance away. There was a small forest of sorts nearby, consisting of just a few thousand trees total, but it was a nice spot for Jake to lay low for a while. After he got there, Jake found a nice hidden spot, sat down, and deactivated his boosting skill as the period of weakness washed over him. He could still have held on for a while more, but doing so would only have extended the time he would have to wait.

Entering meditation, Jake reflected on his conversation with the projected figure. Through it, he had confirmed a few things. First of all, they didnt seem like they had any information on Jake as a person at all. If they did, there should have been some surprise that someone registered as barely in C-grade had killed a late-tier C-grade. None of that had happened, making Jake pretty sure the Guild didnt have any information leaks on him, at least.

Secondly, they genuinely had no idea what he was transporting, for if they did, there is no way they would have agreed to him waiting ten days to arrive. The Sealed Elemental would get out of its seal within less than a week, and while it was a possibility this organization or whatever just didnt want the Infernal Baron to have the item, they clearly also wanted it.

Finally, this organization was powerful. Based on how the figure acted, Jake got the impression he hadnt spoken to the big boss but just a subordinate, and if a subordinate was capable of applying karmic magic to trigger some remote bombs placed inside all of the adventurers, the ones actually in charge were definitely not anyone Jake could mess with.

At least not directly. Right now, one of his big advantages was that they also didn't know how strong Jake was. With Shroud of the Primordial, he could hide everything about himself, and even if he showed himself to be in C-grade, many stronger people could hide their grades like that. The mere fact that anyone, even an S-grade, would only see ??? when trying to identify him would definitely help.

Adding on the fact they were clearly careful in regards to anything with the Guild, Jake believed he had a legit shot at bluffing them. Assuming he wanted to bluff them, that is. There was also one more thing. Jake wasn't even sure if this second path to the Special Courier Job wasn't actually a legitimate option especially not after he had gotten a system message right after talking to the projected figure.

Special Courier Job 2 updated.

Special Courier Job 2: Transport the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron in the mid-sized city without your cargo being discovered OR Transport the Sealed Elemental to the mid-sized city and instead deliver the Sealed Elemental according to the plans of [Unknown]. Time limit: 7 days.

That's right a branching quest with multiple outcomes. Actual decision-making was required.

Chapter 838: Nevermore: Infernal Baron

After recovering from using Arcane Awakening, Jake didn't continue his journey right away. Instead, he took a small break inside the miniature forest to prepare some things. During the House of the Architect, he had learned to craft both a better poison and to make acid, but after exiting, he had made neither.

Both of those would honestly have been useful in the last fight, especially the acid. If Jake had a good amount, he could have tossed it on the cube or even put some of it into the Protean Arrow he created to more efficiently destroy the scalekin mages' defenses. If he would have used the Heartrot Poison or not was a bit more of a toss-up as the Sleeping Night Toxin was still damn effective, though.

Either way, Jake wanted to at least have the option. Besides, he had improved his general crafting skills and wanted to make a new batch of Sleeping Night Toxin to ensure he had the best poison he could make to prepare for what was to come. There was no doubt in his mind this wouldn't be his only combat encounter with a powerful foe in this Challenge Dungeon.

With regard to the decision Jake had to make regarding where to make his delivery, he didn't really see it as a real choice. In Jake's mind, he had been hired to do a job, and he was going to do that job. It wasn't really about doing what was right or wrong in his head or choosing what was most beneficial to him. Jake just felt like one should stick to an agreement already made, and he wasn't the kind of person to be bought off by someone else.

That isn't to say there was nothing that could make Jake change his mind. If he arrived in this mid-sized city and found out that the Infernal Baron was some psycho who liked to roast and eat children or some other fucked up shit like that, he could totally see himself going to this other organization merely out of spite. Not that he thought the organization was much better, considering they had a propensity to kill everyone Jake had seen them working with so far. Not to mention that they also used slaves based on what Jake heard about this Silenced Order, making him less than positive toward them.

When Jake was done crafting all his poison and two full barrels of acid, he continued his journey. Jake also decided that for the rest of the trip, he would keep his stealth skill active. Due to the main cost coming from activating it, he could have it up pretty much indefinitely. Doing so should also help him appear more mysterious, as the organization wouldn't know how he had gotten to the city in case they had scouts placed on the path. Assuming none of those scouts were high-tier Perception-focused C-grades or B-grades, that is.

The entire encounter with the scalekin mage, projection, and his crafting session had put him back ten or so hours, but Jake believed it would be worth it down the line. He did hope that he wouldn't have any more interruptions for the rest of the way, and hopefully, the stealth skill would help with that.

Days passed uneventfully as Jake got in some good practice with regards to using his stealth skill while also moving quickly and using both One Step and his wings. The system assistance did most of the job for sure, but in just a few days, Jake did manage to remove some very minor clues as to his presence when using One Step. It was mainly that there were some very minor ripples due to space effectively compressing around him whenever he used the skill, but with some slight tweaks, he also hid those far better. A talented space mage would probably be able to feel them, but the average person definitely wouldn't. At least they couldn't, based on how the beasts didn't react at all despite Jake stepping down practically right next to them.

After a bit over three days of total travel, the mid-sized city appeared in the distance as a small blip. It still took him another seven hours to actually reach it one of the downsides of extremely high Perception and flying high up in the air meaning he had used a bit less than half of his allotted time when he finally arrived.

This city was a lot bigger than the small-sized Hillspring, and Jake doubted there were only a few million living there. At least not if one counted the thousands of farmsteads and buzzing villages surrounding the large city itself.

Checking his compass, Jake saw it was pointing toward the very center of the city. From a distance, Jake could see a castle atop what looked like it had once been a volcano, with buildings constructed up its cliffside. While it was a bit on the nose, it definitely looked like the kind of place someone known as the Infernal Baron would live.

However, Jake didn't go there immediately. He stopped a bit outside the city and landed close to the gate entrance so as to not fly inside. If this organization had powerful scouts waiting, flying into the city was a lot more suspicious than using the gates, as only influential and powerful figures could fly into the city according to the laws. Well, them, and of course, Couriers.

That didn't mean Jake would enter officially, though. He kept his stealth skill up as he went through the checkpoint, easily spoofing the magic circle of detection covering the entire city with Shroud of the Primordial. The guards at the gate were all around level 250, which was another decent step up, but none of them looked particularly strong. Jake did sense a far more powerful C-grade inside one of the offices close to the official entrance, though.

When inside the city, Jake considered if he should go to the Infernal Baron immediately or check out the Guild first. Both things seemed risky, though. If the organization had placed people capable of detecting him, it would definitely be at either of those places. Ultimately, he settled on going to the Baron directly.

I need to enter the Barons place without raising suspicion Jake thought to himself as he walked casually through the city streets. Just going there directly would definitely be suspicious. As it was on a mountain, he could easily watch from down on the streets how many took the winding path up to the castle gates, and so far, he had seen no one go. As for those flying to the castle, he also only saw a single beast do it.

Jake was considering for a while what to do until he got an idea. The problem wasn't anyone knowing he entered the Barons castle it was that they knew it was him entering it. As of this moment, the organization only knew a few things about Jake. They knew how he generally looked, and they knew he was a human, so Jake was thinking what if he just changed both of those things?

Shroud of the Primordial was a borderline cheat, and with it, he could easily change how he was Identified. As for his looks, while simply wearing a mask would hide any skin, Jake decided that he would be far more suspicious if he tried to fully conceal his identity. So, he had a far better plan.

Finding a building close to the path leading to the Infernal Barons castle, Jake made sure he wasn't followed as he dipped in and got to work. First, he changed his race and level to display him as a level 270 Scalekin. The level was chosen to show off he was pretty strong but probably not strong enough to have been the one to beat the mage.

As a final touch, Jake switched his clothes to something a bit more casual he shamelessly stole from whoever lived where he had broken in. Once he was fully clothed, he activated the final part of his disguise as dark green scales covered his body, courtesy of Scales of the Malefic Viper.

If you encounter this tale on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Granted, Jake still looked pretty human due to his features, but it wasn't anything egregious. There were many scalekin who just looked like humans with scales covering them, primarily those who were children of a human and a scalekin.

Finding his new looks adequate, Jake exited the building again. Before, he had told himself he wouldn't just fly to the castle as that would be far too bold if there were scouts looking for him which was exactly why that was exactly what he would be doing.

Taking to the air, Jake did not summon his wings as he just flew using regular energy manipulation. The instant he went into the air and began to make his way toward the castle, dozens of eyes were upon him. Most disappeared a few seconds later, but a good few remained. Some of them even felt pretty damn powerful, but even so, they didn't stand a chance at piercing his Shroud.

Luckily, there was no killing intent within any of them either. Soon enough, Jake also felt some attention land on him from within the castle. Jake was ready for someone to fly out and greet him, especially when he entered the range of a large magic circle covering the entire castle.

His prediction of someone flying out turned out to be slightly off as his senses warned him something was coming. The air around Jake began to slowly solidify as space itself froze, and Jake felt the presence of a powerful space mage. Choosing not to fight it, Jake stopped flying as a voice spoke in his head.

This is the Infernal Barons personal residence. State your business or turn around, the voice spoke in his head. Through the mana and the presence in the voice, Jake felt pretty darn certain he was dealing with a B-grade.

I come for an audience with the Infernal Baron, Jake answered, kind of hoping he wouldnt have to say more. While he doubted that is how it worked, the job explicitly stated Jake had to deliver the Sealed Elemental without others finding out what it was, and this could also include some mage working under the Baron. Well, it was also possible this space mage was a plant from the organization, but Jake wouldnt really bet on it.

For what purpose? the voice answered, making Jake curse internally. Saying he was a Courier could give the gig away, especially if the mage demanded to see the delivery. Ultimately, Jake decided that he would try and stay as professional and tight-lipped as possible.

A matter concerning only the Baron himself. I cannot say anything more than that, but I can swear that should you not allow me this audience, the Infernal Baron will be greatly inconvenienced, Jake tried.

This was another place where choosing his level to be 270 could come in handy. The Infernal Baron was in B-grade, and no matter what tricks the space mage believed Jake could have up his sleeve, he simply wouldnt be able to pose any danger.

A few seconds passed while Jake really hoped he would be allowed through before he finally got an answer. The Baron has agreed to meet you, with the condition that should you be wasting his time, this will be the last audience you will have with anyone.

He will not be disappointed, Jake quickly answered in the affirmative. A bit childish with the death threat if Jake was just a fanboy trying to waste the mans time, but alas. He was the client, and as the saying goes, the customer is always right. Unless when the customer is a fucking idiot, in which case they are probably rarely right about anything.

The space around Jake loosened as a portal appeared right in front of him. Jake took the cue and entered, finding himself standing in what looked a bit like the throne room soon after. There was no throne, though, but a cozy-looking set of armchairs with a small table between them. On one of these chairs sat a woman who still gave off some space mana, making him certain she had been the one to summon the portal.

On the other was a human who looked to be in his twenties, a bit younger than Jake expected. He had a thin red beard and deep red hair, and just being in the room as him, Jake felt the temperature increase. Both of them also gave off B-grade auras, and not just early B-grade either.

So, you wanted an audience? the man said, leaning back and raising an eyebrow. I sincerely hope for you this is not a waste of my time.

Jake looked at the man and woman as he answered. I believe it would be best if this matter is only discussed with the Baron.

Oh? the Baron smiled and turned to the woman. Heard that? He wants you gone.

Before the woman could even respond, Jake sent a telepathic message to the Baron, one the B-grade luckily didn't reject.

I am a Courier, and I believe I have something for you.

His facial expression didn't change in the slightest as the Baron kept looking at the space mage, who answered with a small scoff. Quite rude to come in here and begin to make demands.

But also ballsy, the Baron pointed out. Look, let's play along, eh? I will be sure to tell you all the funny details later.

The woman looked at the man a bit perplexed, but eventually nodded. As you will.

Standing up, she gave Jake a single more glance before she disappeared from the room in a ripple of space magic. The Baron waved his hand right after as a barrier encased the entire room, hiding their conversation from any curious listeners. At least, that is what the Baron probably believed it would do.

So, what do you-

There is still a third party capable of hearing us, Jake warned the man telepathically.

The Baron had stopped himself mid-sentence and stared at Jake before asking out loud. How do you know that?

At this point, Jake had to assume the man was trying to be unsubtle on purpose, as he just answered normally. I have my ways.

Narrowing his eyes, the Baron stared deeply at Jake. I know who is listening, and it is fine. However, do tell me

Without Jake reacting in the slightest, a magic circle appeared below him, as the Baron let out a bit of power and used his presence to try and partly suppress Jake. It was just intimidation, really.

Who exactly are you?

A Courier here to make a delivery, Jake answered in a calm tone.

The Baron scoffed. Are you daft? I know the information on the Courier I hired. Early-tier C-grade human male. The only one of those things you are is a guy, so do not make me repeat myself a third time who are you?

Sighing a bit internally, Jake had to confess he hadn't expected the man in front of him to be so careful. He had wanted to hide who he was from others, but hiding from the client hadn't been part of the plan.

I am exactly the one you hired, Jake responded as he took out his Courier Medallion. Look, the job is infused into this Medallion by the Guild itself. Currently, I am just in disguise as I met some trouble along the way.

To prove his point, Jake had the scales slowly recede and disappear on his face.

Staring at the Medallion, the Infernal Baron seemed to be capable of telling Jake was at least telling the truth about that.

Assuming I believe you, do you have the goods? the Baron questioned.

Before that, I believe it pertinent to know who this third-party observer is, Jake answered, not showing the slightest sense of fear despite the magic circle still beneath his feet, ready to erupt in flames that would burn him to a crisp. The job was very clear on the fact that I was not to allow anyone to know of this delivery besides the Baron.

Narrowing his eyes, the Baron waved his concerns off. I already told you its fine.

The order was clear, Jake insisted.

Do not test my patie-

Enough, a voice cut through the room, and Jake had to hide a small smile as the third person finally revealed himself, at least in part.

Between Jake and the Baron, a figure made out of pure flames appeared. He was not there in person but was using some form of projection skill. The moment he showed up, the Baron hurriedly stood up and fell to his knees, not even looking up. Jake naturally remained standing.

The man who had just appeared looked just like the Baron in front of him, except a bit older. His aura was also different, not just in power. Jake felt the mans innate authority. It stemmed from something Jake hadnt really cared a lot about or dedicated much attention to the nobility system. Something pretty rare, considering many who claimed themselves kings or nobles did not have the actual system title to back it up.

Let us not bother a man simply sticking to unparalleled professional ethics, the figure of flames said in a playful, scolding tone as he kept his eyes on Jake. Instantly, Jake knew the man in front of him was on a whole other level compared to the Baron.

A-grade close to S-grade, probably

Allow me to introduce myself, Courier. I am known as the Duke of Flames, the father of the one who hired you, and the true client of this job, the man who revealed himself to be a Duke answered as he flashed a big smile. And I believe you might just be what we've been looking for.

Chapter 839: Nevermore: Special Side Job

Jake definitely felt like he had unlocked some secret quest chain or something. Delivering to a B-grade through a Special Courier Job this early on was already a pretty big achievement, but now even an A-grade had appeared before him. Plus, because Jake did know a bit about the world he found himself in, he understood how important someone like a Duke was.

The specific country Jake found himself in had only three total dukes and one king. All the dukes and the king were A-grade, with the strongest fighting force of the entire kingdom being part of the duke factions or directly under the king. This is to say, someone with the Duke title was pretty much at the top of the Challenge Dungeon world both in power and influence.

There were also some S-grades out there, but they were few and far between. Some were hidden Lord Protectors, some were like the Founder of the Guild and did their own stuff, while others were in isolation or had left the world for the stars, with no one knowing where they were.

However, despite all this, there was still one tiny problem with the Duke showing up.

It is a pleasure to meet you, Jake said with a nod. But I still have to make my delivery first and despite you being his father and the true client, my job doesn't specify any of that. Would it be possible for you to give us a moment alone? I am certain we can discuss after.

The Duke seemed taken aback as he looked Jake up and down for a few moments. The Baron also stared daggers at Jake, and looked like he wanted to blow up the magic circle beneath Jake any second. There was definitely tension rising until the Duke let out a slight chuckle that turned into a full-on laugh.

Good! Even before me, you refuse to compromise in the slightest! Very good! I shall do as asked and give you a moment. My son here will signal me when we can return to the true discussion at hand, the Duke said as the flaming figure faded away, and a second later, Jake confirmed he was no longer peeking, actually sticking to his word.

You are lucky you weren't reduced to a mere pile of ash, the Baron said with a scoff. To dare show such disrespect toward the Duke

I showed no disrespect, merely the professionalism I was hired to display, Jake said in an as professional voice as he could. Now that it is just the two of us, let us confirm the delivery.

Waving his hand, Jake took out Eternal Hunger. Let me just retrieve it right quick.

Considering Jake had eaten the item, he also needed a way to get it out again. While forcing himself to throw it up was certainly one possibility, he felt like it was a bit too nasty to show in front of a client. Stabbing himself in the stomach and pulling out the Sealed Elemental direct was definitely more polite, right?

The Infernal Baron looked on as Jake gutted himself, frowning a bit when Jake pulled out the orb. Jake assumed he was just nervous that the item had been ruined, which was almost offensive. He was no amateur Courier who would ruin the delivery in such a reckless manner. Shit, Jake even made sure not to spill a single drop of blood on the Barons floor but kept it all inside, and what little did drop out was burned away with destructive arcane mana before it ever reached the ground.

With the item successfully extracted, Jake quickly removed the stable layer of arcane mana around the Sealed Elemental and used Identify on it just for good measure because the result definitely took him by surprise.

[Sealed Elemental (Unique)] A sealed elemental of the fire affinity can be found within. Due to the shoddy work of the ones who sealed it, this item is slowly deteriorating and will reach critical failure in less than a week (6 days). Any attempt to interfere with this item may result in the seal breaking prematurely.

The seal on the item was meant to last seven days in total. However, despite around three and a half days passing, it said the seal would still last another six days. Jake suppressed a frown as he didn't outwardly display any of his surprise. Internally, he did wonder what was going on, though.

Wait maybe it's a bit like those items the Nalkar vampires tried to preserve back in the Order? he considered after a bit, and the more he thought about it, the more right he thought he was.

Every item decayed with time. Even equipment would lose its enchantments if long enough passed, just turning into inert objects worth less than the raw materials it was made up of. It would take a long time, with equipment pretty much always outlasting the lifespan of whoever originally wore it, but it was inevitable. With maintenance, an item could be kept active for an even longer period, if not nearly indefinitely, by effectively replacing the enchantments with new identical ones, using the same framework set by the original creator. If one could get an equally skilled crafter with a similar Path to the original creator, of course.

Some items were a bit harder or complicated to maintain. In the case of the Nalkar vampires, they didn't want to re-enchant anything, as that would effectively destroy the original items as it was, while other items simply couldn't be maintained. This mainly happens with items of legendary rarity or above. Finding someone capable of re-enchanting these items was often borderline-impossible due to the Records in the item and the difficulty of finding a crafter with a similar enough Path. Luckily, they would last a long time by themselves anyway, but even they would lose their power with time. In these cases, the best way to preserve them was to simply make sure they didn't degrade as fast.

The vampires used complicated formations to make this possible, each creating a beneficial environment for every individual item, but for some, all they could do was isolate it from all outside influences which was exactly what Jake had done with the Sealed Elemental.

Jake's stable arcane affinity was really fucking good at isolating things. In all honesty, Jake hadn't expected it to work as he assumed the item was breaking down primarily due to system-fuckery, but seeing it work was a pleasant surprise nonetheless. He knew that even with total isolation, deterioration would still exist, but to see how effective his stable arcane affinity was with just a simple barrier was nice.

Let me see it, the Infernal Baron said as he waved his hand, and the ping-pong ball-sized item flew toward the B-grade. Once he had the item in his hand, he made a small hand motion as sparks flew, and a big smile appeared on his face.

Great, and it's in an even better condition than I expected, the man said, looking incredibly pleased. And now that I have the item, I presume you have no more complaints if the Duke rejoins us?

My job here is done, Jake shrugged.

Snapping his fingers, a faint pulse of mana was released, and less than a second later, the flaming figure of the Duke of Flames flared back to life. I assume all is well now?

Unauthorized usage: this tale is on Amazon without the author's consent. Report any sightings.

Yes, father, the Baron said as he held up the item. An early C-grade fire elemental variant.

The flaming figure nodded as he turned his attention back to Jake. Now for you, Courier. I remember you saying you met some challenges along your journey. Would you enlighten me as to the details?

Jake considered for a moment if he should explain everything or not and in the end, saw no good reason not to. Plus, based on the words the Duke of Flames had said about Jake being what they had been looking for, he was pretty damn sure this was the start of a major quest chain, and withholding information could potentially lead to him missing out.

Very well Jake said as he briefly explained what had happened. He included how he had met the adventurers, fought and killed the Silent scalekin mage, and the subsequent appearance of the shadowy figure that used or had someone use karmic magic to kill every witness. To finish with, he informed the Duke of Flames and the Baron of the offer they had made him to give the elemental to them instead while noting that these people did not seem to know what Jake was actually delivering.

I see things were much as we had expected, the Duke of Flames said after Jake was done talking. With a serious gaze, he looked directly at Jake. Let me ask you first, Courier are you willing to take on work that may be more risky than any you have encountered prior? Jobs that may very well prove lethal if the slightest mistake or slipup is made?

Jake was more sure than ever that he had just stumbled across a special quest chain and quickly nodded. If the job is worthwhile doing, I see no reason to reject it. Of course, I will need to know the details first.

The Baron glared at Jake again, clearly not happy he would even insinuate he wouldnt downright agree with anything his father wanted. The man in question, on the other hand, didnt seem offended in the slightest.

I expect nothing less from a Courier of your level, the man said with a smile. Do not worry. Everything I will ever ask you will naturally go through the Guild. You are a Courier, after all.

In that case, I will temporarily agree, Jake said.

Good. Now, allow me to get you up to date as to why I may need your assistance, the Duke of Flames began as Jake felt a big lore dump and quest description incoming. The elemental you have just brought us is not for me or my son, but my daughter. Our Legacy revolves around consuming elementals to progress and refine the powers of our flames, and the more powerful and higher-tiered the variant of the elemental, the better. Many do not agree with this Path, some of which you encountered on your way here.

Jake nodded along. He did know such things existed, and there were even quite a few alchemists who consumed numerous Soulflames. Actually, wasn't Jake a bit like this? Just that instead of eating elementals to progress, he could eat poisons.

This organization, as they call themselves, has been hounding my household for the last century or so. In the beginning, they were just a minor nuisance, creating some ultimately inconsequential challenges, but in the recent decade, they have grown in power at a frightening speed. Especially the last year has resulted in more trouble than ever before. I believe powerful forces have gotten involved, but I cannot prove anything or have uncovered any evidence I need someone like you to help me with just that, the Duke of Flames explained, giving Jake a good background for the upcoming quest chain. He did have one burning question, though.

I fail to understand why you would need a C-grade Courier that badly. Are there not more powerful and skilled people available already working under you? Jake questioned.

I cannot make any moves myself. As a Duke, everything I do is closely monitored. I cannot even leave my residence in peace without potentially causing a conflict with another faction, and as you come to learn more details of what I need your help with, my limited abilities to act will become even clearer. My family, for the most part, also suffers the same fate of inability to assist, as does all those officially part of the dukedom. While I do have some hidden cards, their affiliation with this kingdom is impossible to hide. You, however, I have looked into. You are related to no one and nowhere. A clean slate that even my best spymaster nor the Guild could find a single detail about before you appeared and signed up to be a Courier. That is exactly why I need someone like you.

I take it this organization causing you trouble is based in another country? Jake guessed after hearing what the Duke had to say. It made sense based on everything else the man said, especially when he mentioned his inability to act directly.

The Duke smiled. That is correct, but alas, things are not that simple. If it was just a faction from another country, I would have been able to make some moves, but the last time I tried to, I found myself blocked by an unknown power. Coupled with the recent rise in power of this organization, I can only reach one conclusion. Someone from this kingdom has gotten involved with them, and if I am right, it is one of the other dukedoms, if not the royal family themselves.

Assuming you are correct, why would they choose to ally with an organization actively trying to sabotage one of their fellow nobles, especially one from a different country? Purely internal politics?

Some politics, yes, but primarily fear. The other dukes and even the king himself have stagnated. The Lord Protector is peak A-grade but failed to evolve even after so long, and his lifespan is running out. If the Lord Protector dies, I will take the top spot as the most powerful person in the kingdom, something a lot of people don't want. My problem is that all of them are publicly supporting me, and there are even talks of naming me Grand Duke, the A-grade continued. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, I already know many of them are subtly trying to keep me in check, as I am the only one remaining who has a legitimate chance at reaching S-grade.

Listening to the story, Jake honestly thought all these other nobles were either short-sighted or just downright dumb. Sure, if they were talking about the kingdom in isolation, it was more understandable to try and keep the competition down, but if everything the Duke of Flames said was true which Jake got the feeling it was, wouldn't they just leave themselves in a vulnerable situation after the Lord Protector died if they had no one to take their place?

Jake also didn't like the entire notion of keeping others down to remain strong in comparison. In his opinion, those dukes and the king should just get their shit together and stop being wussies who had stagnated.

Stagnation was just a bad excuse for having stopped trying to progress. It was something people who had taken the easy route said when they stopped being able to pick the low-hanging fruits and didn't dare to try and climb the tree itself. Any of these A-grades could stand up right now and seek out whatever powerful beings lived in this world, or maybe just fly into the starry sky and look for the monsters roaming in space.

I am still not entirely certain what exactly you want to hire me for, Jake said after hearing everything the Duke of Flames had to say and better understanding the situation.

It is a lot to ask but I need you to get an in with this organization, and you have already been presented with a golden opportunity, the Duke of Flames answered as he threw the Infernal Baron a glance. The Baron nodded and tossed the Sealed Elemental back to Jake.

Take the delivery and give it to them, just as they asked, he explained. In truth, we don't really need this particular variant much. Getting a Courier into the organization is far more valuable, at least. Of course, we have to ensure they do not know you are doing this with my knowledge, so you need to find a way to hide it before meeting them in order to not raise any suspicion. Are you up to the task?

As the man asked this, it finally appeared. The kind of system message Jake had been waiting for.

Special Courier Side Job: Assist the Duke of Flames in delivering the Sealed Elemental to [Unknown] without letting them know you have met with the Infernal Baron yet.

Objective: Package delivered (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

With a nod to the Duke, Jake accepted the system prompt, too. Jake had many thoughts about what this Challenge Dungeon would be about, but in all honesty, he had never expected him to get a job as a double agent in a political game while working for a late-tier A-grade Duke.

It was definitely a novel experience, and Jake was all for it.

Chapter 840: Nevermore: Infinite Loop Agent

Mission: Mysterious Organization Double-Agent Infiltration went much more smoothly than Jake had expected. After he left the Barons place, Jake went and just relaxed in the city for a day as he sat down and did a bit more crafting. After this day, he left the city again, still disguised as a scalekin.

Once a good distance away, and when he was sure no one was watching, he changed himself back to looking like and identifying as a human before flying back toward the city with his stealth skill active while also wearing his usual getup. Once he got close to the mid-sized city again, Jake dispelled his stealth skill while still flying up in the air, instantly feeling many gazes on him.

This time, he showed no subtlety but just flew into the city. During the conversation with the mysterious hooded figure, the person had told him to go to the Guild and say that he had lost the package during transportation, and while Jake wasn't a fan of doing that, the Baron and Duke assured him they would still report the job as completed successfully to not impact Jake's reputation negatively.

However, as it turned out, this wasn't even necessary

Shortly after Jake entered the Guild, and before he even had a chance to approach one of the employees, a regular-looking guy sitting off to the side of the room sent him a telepathic message.

Excuse me, you're a Courier, right? Might you be coming out of Hillspring City? I have an aunt living there, and I heard some bad news the person said. Disregarding how weird it was to send a telepathic message to say something like that, Jake knew this was just a probing question.

I am indeed. The trip was long, but when you have an important delivery to an even more important client, you cannot slack off too much, Jake replied. One in high places, both figuratively and literally.

You have arrived earlier than I expected, the person said when he affirmed Jake was the one. I am here representing a mutual friend. Please play along.

Due to the speed of telepathy, Jake had barely entered the Guild as the man sitting close to the door stood up and opened his arms wide. Bloody hell, you're finally here! Lizzy has been on my ass since she heard you were coming. Good to see you, buddy.

The man went over and dragged Jake into a hug, Jake naturally playing along. You know how it is with work and everything. Can't always know my schedule ahead of time, but hey, I'm here, aren't I?

That you are! Now, let's get going before she rips both of us a new one!

Jake did as asked and nodded as the two walked out together while making idle chatter. No one seemed to care about the reunion of two old friends, and Jake and the other guy quickly got away from the Guild as they headed toward a large mansion close to the outer walls, no one following them.

The man Jake had met was barely C-grade, and someone Jake later came to learn was pretty much just a middleman who worked for a wealthy lady Lizzy - in the mansion. However, in order to appear less suspicious, the two of them acted as if they were in a relationship. These were the first two people Jake met, who he confirmed were part of this organization, even if they were auxiliary members who pretty much carried out direct orders without questions while knowing pretty much nothing about the organization that employed them.

Once in the mansion, Lizzy and the man introduced themselves and, after some probing questions, fully confirmed Jake was who he said he was. Jake was subsequently led into a cellar beneath the mansion, where he was left alone with a token and surrounded by quite a powerful barrier. One definitely not made by the two C-grades living there.

Down in the cellar, Jake activated the small token the pretend-couple had given him, and soon after, a familiar hooded figure appeared.

I am glad to see you are reasonable, not only in your decision to take us up on the offer but by not delaying your arrival needlessly, the figure said right away, not even saying hello or anything.

Jake had already taken out a chair before he used the token and was currently sitting in a relaxed pose. Very purposefully, mind you. He had been fronting himself as a powerful individual with this organization before, and he was going to keep doing so.

Eh, I thought I might as well get things done quicker this way, Jake shrugged.

Nevertheless. It was a wise choice, and I hope you continue to make wise choices, the figure answered. Now, could you confirm the nature of the item the Infernal Baron wanted you to deliver? Show it to me?

Patience, patience. Before all that, let me just explain things a bit from my viewpoint, Jake said as he leaned forward and looked directly into where he suspected the eyes of the hooded figure would be. I am right now stuck between two factions. Some nobleman Baron, and a shadowy organization that has been semi-threatening me from the get-go. I am entirely neutral toward this Baron as I, quite frankly,

dont know shit about him. Meanwhile, you have made less than a stellar first impression, which I would heavily advise you to address. Especially as I also get a strong impression you want more than just to buy a delivery from me. So, how about we start with some honesty before we proceed? Who exactly are you?

The figure was silent for a few moments, Jake getting the feeling the person was consulting with someone. After a few seconds, they spoke again. Very well how much do you know of the Infernal Baron and the family he belongs to?

Fuck all, Jake shrugged.

Then allow me to enlighten you...

Jake got his second lore dump of the last two days as the figure explained most of the same things the Duke of Flames had. It mentioned how it was a big family, how their patriarch was a duke and near the peak of A-grade, and how their Path included consuming thus killing elementals as part of their Path. Of course, the tone of the explanation was a lot different than the Dukes.

While the Duke of Flames had presented everything with a sense of pride and matter-of-fact, this figure had a lot more emotion. It was clear they didnt like the family at all. Fact-wise, things were pretty much the same, though, and Jake got the impression neither party was lying about anything. They just had their own spin on things.

As for our organization we oppose the Duke of Flames and the actions of his vile spawn. They are a scourge upon this world, and cleansing it of their presence would be a blessing, the figure finished. As for details I will need to see if you truly have the delivery in question before saying more.

If you encounter this story on Amazon, note that it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

By now, Jake thought he had done enough to not appear like a pushover. He hadnt been entirely subservient, which was exactly how he wanted things to be. Same as with the Duke of Flames. Jake was a contractor, not an employee, so the person who hired him wasnt allowed to say jack-shit about how Jake did things, and he wanted to make it very clear he always had the option of giving them the middle finger and quitting, if just out of pure spite if they tried to fuck him over.

Alright, fine, Jake said as he dug into a pocket in his cloak and took out the Sealed Elemental, which he had re-cast a stable arcane barrier on. Quickly erasing the barrier, the shadowy figure used Identify on the item, confirming its authenticity but making no moves for Jake to hand it over.

The genuine delivery indeed, the figure said with a nod. Thank you for trusting us with this but before we continue, may I ask you. If you were to choose between supporting the dukedom that I told you about or an organization you knew borderline nothing of but who opposed this dukedom, who would you support?

The question sounded genuine, but Jake didn't really appreciate the fact that the barrier he was standing within apparently also had the ability to discern lies. At least the figure tried to find out if Jake was lying using it, naturally failing upon encountering Shroud. It would under usual circumstances, that is, but this time around, Jake let it go through as his honest answer was one he was fine with the organization knowing.

I would support whoever offers me the most. I became a Courier to challenge myself and to gain as much recognition as possible as I grow my reputation and rank. Who I work for doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things as long as I benefit, Jake answered genuinely. Of course, he didn't include the part where he only did all this to get a lot of Nevermore Points and a great Grand Achievement, but hey, they didn't ask.

A purely selfish approach where pragmatism takes precedence, I see but let me ask. What do you think of elementals? How do you see them?

With my eyes? Jake said with a smirk. But in all seriousness, I can't tell you how I feel about an elemental before meeting them, now can I? People are different, and I am sure some of them are assholes.

Once more, Jake allowed the lie-detector skill to fully work. Based on all the context clues, Jake was pretty damn sure this organization was very pro-elemental and cared a lot about them, so making himself appear sympathetic toward them would prove beneficial. Also, it was pretty easy to say he didn't have anything against elementals, considering he didn't.

You referred to elementals as people I hope you realize how rare that is, the figure said.

Shrugging, Jake kept up his casual demeanor. I mean, considering I have a niece of sorts who is an elemental, it would be very weird for me not to consider them people.

Alright, technically, Sylphie wasn't just an elemental but a weird mix between beast and elemental, but that did make her at least partly elemental, which made Jake's statement not a lie.

I see I believe I can explain a bit more about who we are and what we stand for, and with this explanation, you will understand who you should truly support

Once again, it was lore dump time. As expected, the group that hated the Duke of Flames could be summed up as a hardcore elemental rights organization. Not the peaceful protest kind either, but the type to actively try and kill every single member of the dukedom in what they felt was a justified position. The figure even explained how killing anyone who helped the dukedom in any way was the right thing to do. Even if that help only came in the form of being a poor E-grade farmer.

That is when Jake learned that the inconsequential challenges the Duke of Flames talked about them doing for nearly a century were things like this elemental rights organization slaughtering thousands of E and even some D-grades in the Duke's territory in what were effectively terrorist attacks.

Something the Duke evidently didn't give a shit about. He only started to care when the organization began to mess with his ability to collect rare elemental variants. Oh, by the way, rare variants tended to also be the sapient sort and not the regular mindless elementals, so yeah.

After listening and assuming everything he had learned about this scenario was true, Jake reached a conclusion:

They both fucking sucked.

Alas, Jake was not in the Challenge Dungeon to pass judgment, and he was in no position to. At least not yet

Luckily, the shadowy figure was finally finishing the lengthy explanation of the organization's goals, and just in time before Jake decided the Grand Achievement wasn't worth listening to the extremist speech.

and once the elemental race can once more roam freely, fearless of the monstrous Duke and his spawn, only then will our quest be complete. Only when the Path is driven to utter ruin and every single person of that horrible Lineage dead is it time to celebrate. When their legacy is nothing but a bad memory! So let me ask you, Courier are you willing to be on the side of justice?

If justice is the one who offers the best terms, then yes, Jake said, not buying into the extremism. But hey, if its also fighting the good fight, thats just a nice bonus.

I understand you do not share our conviction, but not to worry, that is no requirement. As a Courier, let your actions speak. So let me request of you your first mission. We need information on the Duke of Flames from an insider, and we believe that you could become that insider. Be our agent at his side who will assist us. Of course, to do that, sacrifices must be made, and while it is a shame that a young Soothfire Elemental will meet its end in such a horrific way, the Sealed Elemental must be delivered in order to not raise suspicion. So, are you willing to assist us?

As the person said this, not one but two notifications popped up. One saying he had completed a side job, and one giving him another.

Special Courier Side Job Completed.

Special Courier Side Job: Deliver the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron.

Objective: Package delivered (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

So yeah, Jake had to head back to the Infernal Baron again to deliver the Sealed Elemental for the second time to the same person. It was a bit silly, but Jake was pretty sure he had just gone from being a potential double agent to now potentially being a triple agent.

Also, Jake learned that somehow, the organization knew the name of the elemental within the Sealed Elemental item which made him suspect they maybe somehow knew all along? In either case, shit was getting complicated, and Jake hoped he would be able to keep up with all the nonsense going on.

After Jake left the mansion, he headed straight for the Infernal Barons place again. He still went through the trouble of disguising himself and whatnot, pretty much just putting on a show as he felt people keep an eye on him showing the organization still wasn't super trusting quite yet as he made his way to the Baron.

Of course, the Baron also knew that Jake could be under surveillance, so everyone acted as if it was Jake's first time going. Once he was finally in front of the Baron and re-delivered the Sealed Elemental, the questioning began.

Jake only gave half-truths as he explained his meeting, ending with the organization potentially wanting Jake to join. He purposefully didn't mention anything about them wanting Jake to infiltrate the Duke's faction but did throw in that he believed that was something they could want down the line.

So, to summarize, Jake was now working with the dukedom to infiltrate the elemental rights organization that wanted Jake to work with the dukedom, who wanted Jake to infiltrate the organization, who wanted Jake with the dukedom both sides believing they were the smart cookies who had thought up this wonderful plan, not knowing the other party had the exact same idea.

Where did this leave Jake? Well, from an outside perspective, he could now openly associate with the dukedom faction. He also didn't need to be careful if he ever met with the organization, as that was what the Duke expected Jake to do. Yep, things were definitely a mess, and Jake was looking forward to what kind of high-octane mission he would receive as what he would describe as an infinite loop agent.

The first step has been taken, but we still need to work through the Guild, seeing as you are a Courier. We will need some time to organize things, and we will contact you soon. However, to ensure that you qualify for the next task, it would be pertinent to work on improving your reputation as a Courier and upgrade your Medallion, the Duke of Flames said as their meeting finished, pouring water all over Jake's hopes and dreams.

That's right it was back to grinding regular old Courier Jobs, showing that even when one moved up in the world to become an infinite loop agent, one still couldn't quit the grind.