

Hunter 851

Chapter 851: Nevermore: The All-Stars of the Challenge Dungeons

Jake had never wanted to leave a dungeon faster as he promptly exited the Endless Journey before the Forsaken Dragonkin could properly understand what Jake had just said. He kind of snickered to himself as the chamber got replaced with a white void similar to the ones he had seen before fully leaving other Challenge Dungeons.

Speaking of the Challenge Dungeon Jake had done pretty well, hadn't he? While he was doing the Endless Journey, Jake honestly had a hard time getting a feeling for where his level of performance was at, but considering he got a Mythical Medallion and even did this without losing a single one of his three lives, he had to have done pretty damn well. He wouldn't say it was at the impossible tier, though which was why he was honestly a bit surprised when he read the Grand Achievement.

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Endless Journey while proving yourself a truly Mythical Courier. With minimal errors during Courier Jobs, a persistently near-perfect performance, and fast deliveries, your performance as a normal Courier was unquestionable. During Special Courier Jobs, you showed great skill to get yourself out of perilous situations and using your far overqualified stealth abilities, managed to operate near-unimpeded during all your jobs. Your Journey may not have been Endless, but seemingly, your talent is. 100.509 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 25% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

Jake smiled a bit as he read the description and for some bloody reason, it finally only clicked for him now why the Endless Journey had seemed to be off and easier than it probably should have been. It mentioned his stealth skills were far overqualified, and while his Unseen Hunter was a great skill, he wouldn't say it made him overqualified but Shroud of the Primordial sure did.

It explained a lot. The only times Jake ever got attacked was when he went straight into an ambush or approached enemies by himself. No one ever tracked him down and attacked despite several Courier Jobs saying he would be hunted. So, it seemed like the skill had been far more of a cheat than Jake already knew, and coupled with the cheats Jake used knowingly, he could see how he had gotten the 25% bonus. It was just on the margins, though, if this theory that you needed at least 100,000 Nevermore Points was true.

Jake wasn't going to feel bad about cheating, though. Everyone who was talented was a bit of a cheat in their own right. Just looking at his party should make that clear, with it having another Bloodline, a Transcendent, a weird borderline-never-seen-before hawk-elemental hybrid, and finally, a Unique Lifeform, who were literally born cheaters.

What especially didnt make him feel bad about cheating was the reward he got from it because Jake had succeeded. He felt it in his body he had succeeded even before he saw all his system notifications and, more importantly, that his little theory had been right.

Back when Jake cleared his first Nevermore Challenge Dungeon, and gained the 25% multiplier, it had come with a title reward. It was the only title he had gained from any of the Challenge Dungeons, as the title specified one could only have one at a time. The title itself had been good but not overly exciting.

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

Jake had theorized that there was more to it, though. He believed that if one did reallywell, there would be some kind of meta-achievement for doing extremely well in all Challenge Dungeons. And, as always, his intuition that was the case proved true as he saw the notification.

Reward gained: Nevermore All-Star Challenger Title.

Being right felt awesome, especially when being right also meant you got an even more awesome title.

Nevermore All-Star Challenger Prove yourself a being standing at the apex in not one but multiple different disciplines. Achieve at least a 100% Nevermore Points multiplier through Grand Achievements from the five Challenge Dungeons available in the C-grade version of Nevermore. This must be done while actively competing on the Nevermore Leaderboards. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +300 to all stats. +5% to all stats.

Comparing this title to the one just giving +200 to all stats wasnt even fair. It now being +300 to all stats was nice for sure, and for someone like Jake, it was a few full levels worth of stats, but the 5% was where the real meat was at. Percentage titles werent easy to get and were considered pretty rare even if Jake had his fair share already. Their impact throughout ones entire Path simply made them so meaningful, as they would give massive benefits even when one reached S-grade potentially even in godhood.

One also had to remember one more thing Jake was kind of double-dipping with this title. He had gained a title for getting a big multiplier that could likely help him get yet another title once Nevermore was over. At least he expected there to be another title, as that only made sense the big question just was if there was potentially more than one. Oh well, he would find out eventually.

Taking stock of his Nevermore Point multiplier by now, Jake smiled. He had gained two times 5% - once from the Dark Witch, and another time during the climb along with the 25% from Minagas Labyrinth. Adding on top of the now 105% from the Challenge Dungeons, Jake was sitting on a comfortable 140% Nevermore Point multiplier. And it wasn't as if he didn't have a lot of those.

Nevermore Points: 1,242,425

With the multiplier, Jake had just shy of three million. For now, that is. There was still time to clear some more floors, and who knows, maybe he could even reach above four million total points if things went well.

As he had completed a Challenge Dungeon, Jake had naturally also gained one more thing: His item reward. He hadn't really made many considerations as to what he would get, as most of the rewards so far had been kind of novel or only really things that were useful circumstantially. So, with little expectations, he checked out the reward which turned out to be a bit of a mistake.

What appeared before him was an odd sculpture-looking thing. It looked a bit like a crystalized splashing wave or something, but from it, Jake felt an intense aura and when he saw the name in the system notification, his eyes opened wide. They opened even wider when he used Identify.

[Wyrms Breath of Akashic Awakening (Mythical)] Infuse a piece of equipment with additional Records while also attempting to awaken or amplify existing Records within, upgrading the item to a maximum of mythical rarity. If the item is already at mythical rarity, all existing Records will still be empowered. Contains faint Records related to the Wyrmgod of Nevermore, making this item especially suited to upgrading items related to the space affinity. WARNING: Touching directly upon the Records of an item may make others related to the associated Records aware. Additionally, some items do not have enough innate Records to amplify or awaken, lessening the effect significantly.

Requirements: C-grade. Soulbound.

Sometimes, you go in with zero expectations and end up incredibly pleasantly surprised. This was one of those moments. Jake didnt even have any forethought as to what this Challenge Dungeon could reward so that only made the surprise even better.

Stolen story; please report.

When it came to the Wyrms Breath, Jake also recalled an item he had bought a long time ago, all the way back in E-grade. It was the Token of Akashic Awakening he purchased during his first meeting with Sultan, a token that could upgrade an item to epic rarity. Needless to say, this one was far, far more valuable. Epic items were a dime a dozen, while mythical equipment was incredibly rare. Something that could potentially upgrade a piece of equipment to mythical rarity even more so.

The first Token of Akashic Awakening Jake used on his Boots of the Wandering Alchemist, and looking at the description of this item especially the part about the item he wanted to upgrade needing to have good enough innate Records Jake had a feeling he would use it once more on the boots. Jake had already upgraded them two times, the latest at the beginning of C-grade when he made them ancient rarity, but he felt pretty damn confident they had more than enough innate Records to become mythical too.

Smiling with satisfaction, Jake put the Wyrms Breath away as he exited the white void entirely, leaving the fifth and Final Challenge Dungeon for good. His vision flashed for a moment as he appeared outside of the entrance to all the Challenge Dungeons. Perhaps he shouldnt have been surprised, but there were even more people than usual there, and he was kind of happy he had remembered to put his mask and cloak back on.

Jake released a Pulse of Perception right away as he felt for any of his party members. He frowned a bit when it didnt pick up any of them, making him wonder if he was really the first. At least he did wonder about that until he returned to the Order of the Malefic Vipers very small base of operation on the city floor.

There, he learned that both Sylphie and the Sword Saint had finished their five Challenge Dungeons already, and had both returned back to a prior floor to do their own thing for a while. Jake also remembered the weird time-painting he had been given by the Sword Saint before he entered the first Challenge Dungeon. It was made to track time, so they all would spend only a total of ten years doing the dungeons to still have another ten remaining to do a final push for some more floors and levels.

Taking out his painting, Jake confirmed that he was actually a lot ahead of schedule. All of them seemed to be. Despite having done all five Challenge Dungeons, only around eight and a half years had passed. Seeing as Jake was the third to be done, he also reckoned the Fallen King and Dina would finish before all ten years were up, so there was a chance they would have more than ten years to grind.

Jake considered for a moment if he should do the same thing as the Sword Saint and Sylphie by going to a prior floor probably just the one just before this city floor but after a bit of thinking, decided not to. Instead, he went to one of the private rooms in the Order of the Malefic Viper base.

During the last many years, Jake hadn't really ever taken a break to properly go through stuff, and he decided now was a better time than ever. He had just gained the Wyrm's Breath that he could use to upgrade an item, plus he also had another Challenge Dungeon reward saved, namely the High-Quality Storybook Page.

[High-Quality Storybook Page (Unique)] The page of an unknown storybook containing empty Records of a tale yet untold. Allows you to infuse the Records of a skill into the storybook page. Ripping a page infused with the Records of a skill will grant you an opportunity to upgrade the skill. The effect is lower, the higher the rarity of the skill, and the page will not accept Records of certain skills. It will have no effect if used on skills at or above legendary rarity. Skill upgrades are not guaranteed.

Requirements: C-grade. Soulbound.

With this, Jake would be able to upgrade a skill, and while he hadn't quite decided which one yet, he saw no reason to delay using it any longer. Plus, he wanted to be at his best when it was time to begin doing floors once more.

There was also the Cradle to check for his Soulflame growth and some alchemy to get done, especially considering his party members would probably want more potion and elixirs and such for when they continued. So much to do, and hopefully so little time, because he really hoped the Fallen King and Dina would also arrive soon so they could get going.

Jake was far from the only one who was finishing up the Challenge Dungeons. Many powerful parties were getting them done, though Jake's was one of the first of the Leaderboards teams to do so, as their speed had been high just reaching the city floor where all the Challenge Dungeons became fully available.

However, some other teams did match Jake and companys speed. Whats more, as these people finished up the Challenge Dungeons, they didnt do so quietly. Instead, their results were announced and spread throughout the city floors and quickly picked up by the different factions. Davion from Valhal did all five, ending with a multiplier of 70%, with his best performance in the Colosseum of Mortals and House of the Architect, proving himself a diverse fighter. 70% was around the number where it was worth bragging about, and it was impressive, especially for someone like Davion, who was a very focused fighter to get it.

With time, more scores were shared. Dozens more came out with a 70% score, including people from the Court of Shadows, Holy Church, Altmar Empire, Pantheon of Life, Dao Sect, and pretty much every other faction. Soon, those who had gotten even better than that also reared their heads as a few 75% scores were shared.

Not soon after, the Holy Church made a big deal out of a member of theirs, gaining an 80% multiplier. It was a member of Jacobs party, but naturally not Jacob himself. Much praise was levied, but it was short-lived.

He was soon overtaken when Azal the Ghost King exited the five Challenge Dungeons with an overall multiplier of 85%. This was the kind of score that proved he truly was a multi-faceted genius, and his existing popularity skyrocketed.

Of course, there were also many who didnt share any details about their performances but kept it all a secret. Many were simply disciples of powerful individuals and saw no reason to publicize anything, while others didnt want to draw unwanted attention. They would showcase their true talent on the final Leaderboards instead. A great example of someone who just didnt care about attention was Arnold. He had ended with a total multiplier of 75%, but he didnt tell anyone and he wasnt even the one with the highest score on his team.

Some also performed below expectations. There had been much hype about the new Chosen from the Lifesoul Daolord Eron but his score was never publicized. In part because he only ended with a 50% multiplier total. He was simply too lopsided. He got a 25% score in House of the Architect and 15% in Minagas Endless Labyrinth, but those were his only two good performances, with the only other Challenge Dungeon he got percentages in being the Test of Character.

Time passed, as soon an announcement made waves. A dragonkin from the Regalflight the golden dragons had achieved a multiplier of 90%. She was the daughter of one of the Grand Elders within the dragonflights, and they proudly flaunted their achievement.

Not too long after, a previously unknown figure matched this performance. A Demon Prince from one of the hells that few had their eyes on made this shocking announcement, as the often-forgotten demon faction also got some buzz.

More scores were published for a while, as all the big factions had big performers, but very few reached their mythical 90% multiplier. It had to be noted that these multipliers mattered for more than simply the clout. If one reached 70% after doing all five, there would be a title that improved at 80% and 90%, too. At 90%, it would even give 5% to ones three highest stats, making it incredibly impactful and one many people aimed for and failed to hit.

As the era was long, someone would definitely get more than that at some point but none of them had expected it to have already happened a while ago, as the announcement had merely been delayed. Definitely intentionally so to make it at a good time to generate the most attention.

It was naturally made by someone who cared a lot about his reputation and one of the people most had their eyes on the Chosen of Yip of Yore: EllHakan. His score sent a new shockwave through Nevermore as he didnt just announce the final score but what he got in each Challenge Dungeon.

20% Colosseum of Mortals, succeeding in gaining the recognition of Valdemar with his final life. Proving his ability to fight, even without all his skills.

25% Test of Character, never once taking control, but exploiting the situation by never having to, and instead controlling the person he was inhabiting to always choose the outcome he wanted. This proved his strong character and unshakeable will in the eyes of many.

10% Minagas Endless Labyrinth. The first true stumble on his journey, but still a very respectable score.

20% House of the Architect, showing his ingenious creative mind. Nobody needed to know he had exploited much within this Challenge Dungeon.

20% Endless Journey, proving that even if he was a Chosen, he could also show humility and adapt assuming that is what he had actually done, and not merely made use of his Bloodline to sway things in the directions he wanted, exploiting the prone-to-be-exploited natives of the dungeon.

With a score of 95%, it was difficult to imagine anyone could beat him. While it was true getting a 100% multiplier was possible, it was simply so rare and often didn't happen more than a dozen or so times in every era. At least, that was how many openly stated they had gotten the score, though there may have been more who kept it hidden. In either case, it was simply that hard to find someone talented in so many different areas at once. As for getting above 100%... that sounded like a pipedream to most.

As for Jake publicizing his score well, he was frankly too busy doing alchemy to decide if he wanted to rain on everyone's parade.

Chapter 852: Nevermore: Mysterious Better Boots

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise, but having the strongest people all leave their planets for Nevermore at roughly the same time could cause some troubles, especially for those who had usually ruled with an iron fist. In the absence of a tyrant, a tyrannical rule could easily collapse, and this happened all across the ninety-third universe as uprisings took place, even if the revolutionaries would more likely than not be utterly crushed once the tyrant returned from the World Wonder.

One also had to remember that many places were also still struggling with battles against beasts and monsters. This forced the stronger ones there to make a choice use the token provided by the Wyrmgod to leave for Nevermore, or remain and fight for your faction, family, and friends. To many, this wasn't even a choice, as they wouldn't abandon those they cared for, but for others, it wasn't a choice simply because their own power was the most important.

As for who was right, it could honestly be difficult to tell because even if they fought against the beasts and monsters now, what about the future? What would the plan be to face the Prima Guardian when that descended? It was clear to many that Nevermore wasn't simply an optional World Wonder for people to go visit if they felt like it but a borderline mandatory power boost to make the world capable of facing the Prima Guardian.

This difficult choice of sacrificing the now for the future or risking the entire planet with the hope that they would be capable of facing the Prima Guardian haunted many. Especially those who had managed to become World Leaders, who now had to figure out how to strike a balance between having the strong fighters go to Nevermore or remain and fight.

Of course, some planets didn't face this issue. As only C-grades monsters that hadn't consumed the special unique treasures provided during the integration could enter the areas designated for the enlightened races, the risk of hordes of C-grades invading simply wasn't there. Only the weaker worlds

with only a handful of C-grades faced this, and they were at least lucky that beasts could also go to Nevermore, making many of these potential threats leave which kind of added another threat down the line, as how would those who didn't go to Nevermore compete with those who did?

Honestly, in many places, it was a mess. However, one place that appeared entirely unaffected was a certain little planet called Earth. There, things were very much running as usual, even with nearly all of the most influential people gone. One would think that with the massive influx of freed slaves and other individuals sent by the many factions who wanted closer relations with Jake, things would get a bit chaotic, but things remained calm.

There had been some fear that after Miranda left, issues would pop up with no one to handle them. Especially when Lillian also went to Nevermore, along with several others who were part of the leadership. The only ones from the World Council who remained behind were the Sky Whale, who saw no rush to go to Nevermore, along with Arthur, who wouldn't go at all.

This pretty much left Arthur as the only one in charge at the very top when it came to governing the enlightened races, and his presence was a big reason for the calmness. While he wasn't powerful in the traditional sense, he was a man who had more than enough know-how when it came to management, and with the influence he had been given by being part of the World Council, he easily governed when everyone else was gone as he continued all the policies he, Miranda, and others had enacted.

The factions that still remained on Earth, such as the Court of Shadows and the Sword Saints clan, also didn't start anything during this period. Even if they wanted to, the risk was simply too big. And not just because of what would happen when Jake and the others returned but due to the many people who had arrived vehemently supporting any establishment Jake was part of.

Especially the freed slaves had a high level of loyalty, more so to Miranda than Jake. She had put a lot of effort into integrating the influential former slaves, giving many of them official positions of leadership, and even if many of these influential ones had now also left for Nevermore, those loyal to their former fellow slaves kept carrying out their wills.

The beasts and monsters were also very much not wanting to start anything. Some because of the Sky Whale, but many also due to the overwhelming presence of the Fallen King, whom many saw as the true leader of the monster factions on Earth. Even if the King ruled as a tyrant through power, this was one of the instances where even in the absence of the tyrant, stability remained for they all knew he would come back one day, and none had confidence that even if they tried to take control of things, they wouldn't lose it immediately upon his return. Along with their lives, of course.

All of this is to say that Jake had, very much unknowingly, been the impetus behind establishing one of the most stable planets when it came to internal conflict in the ninety-third universe. And he didnt even need to use his arcane affinity.

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Jake didnt really listen to much of the buzz about people getting big Nevermore Points multipliers and all that other noise. In all honesty, even when he heard some mutters from others in the small Order base, he didnt care either. Despite people probably being curious, he also didnt see any reason to publish his own results.

While it was likely others had worked hard partly for their factions to gain recognition, Jake wasnt like that. The only person Jake needed to recognize he had done well was Jake himself and no one else. His pursuit of power and rewards was as selfish as could be. Not to say that Jake wouldnt go out and tell everyone, he just wouldnt take the initiative to.

If the Viper asked for him to go out and flex, Jake would do it. If EllHakan or some other asshat tried to taunt Jake with their super cool score, Jake would gladly smack down their ego. Going out to brag on his own just seemed a bit too tacky, in Jakes opinion. Besides, they would all know how well he had done when Nevermore ended, and they saw the Leaderboards. That was the score that truly mattered, not this small milestone of Challenge Dungeons.

No, rather than waste his time on all this flexing, Jake focused on far more important stuff. Alchemy-wise, Jake had spent a good amount of time just crafting stuff. He even felt he was very close to gaining a level, though he didnt get one right away as he had only been going for a week, making a few potions and elixirs while also stocking up on poison.

As for why he had just done alchemy so far well, he was kind of stalling.

Jake would be lying if he said he didnt second-guess himself quite a few times when it came to using his newest mythical reward. He hadnt really doubted himself at first when he decided to upgrade his boots, but a small sliver of uncertainty did begin to creep in the more he considered it. Not because he didnt want to upgrade the boots, but because of something in the Wyrms Breath description

Contains faint Records related to the Wyrmgod of Nevermore, making this item especially suited to upgrading items related to the space affinity.

This little part of the description made Jake question if it would even be a good idea to use it on the boots. Not just because of this space affinity thing, but because Jake wondered if perhaps he should actually use it on one of his existing mythical items or maybe even the Mask of the Fallen King. However, without even needing to try it, he understood that the item would have no effect on the mask, likely due to its unique origins.

Improving Eternal Hunger could be big, though. Or maybe even turn his bow into a mythical one. The bow had been given directly by the system, and even if he had upgraded it once, it should still have enough innate Records, right?

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

There were honestly so many good options. Shit, there was even his necklace alright, that one would be a waste, as it was one of the easier items to upgrade. But maybe his creepy cloak could be good to upgrade? At least that would help him find out why that damn merchant had been so happy to get rid of it when Jake bought it.

At this point, Jake fully recognized he was stalling, and rather than keep doing alchemy, which would no doubt lead him to get another level and, thus, a skill selection that would inflict him with even more decision paralysis, Jake stopped fucking around.

After taking off his boots and putting them on top of a small table, Jake also took out the Wyrms Breath. He looked a bit at both of the items before using the Wyrms Breath. Doing so was pretty easy, as Jake just had to hold it while willing for it to affect the boots in front of him. He really hoped things would end well as the Breath began to shine brightly as it let out a torrent of energy. In the next moment, it looked as if the sculpture-like item came alive as it began to burn, releasing a bright white flame that seemed to distort space itself.

The flames soon moved as they flew toward the boots, setting them aflame. Jake felt a bit worried as he saw the torrent of fire only grow until it reached the ceiling, the boots just sitting there, seemingly unaffected. Then, just as fast as everything had begun, the flames dispersed unceremoniously.

Jake stared at the table and boots both looked utterly untouched. The boots themselves were also the same old leather boots that looked like they couldn't even be given away for free at a thrift shop. As for feeling an aura from them well, Jake had never really felt much from the old things.

However, he did get a system notification, and as he used Identify on the boots and saw the change, he knew it had been a success.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Ancient)] Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the ancient alchemist have left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. With every awakening, the Records within grow in power, the item improving in tandem to reflect its growth, even if many secrets within still elude you. Enchantments: +350 Endurance, +250 Agility, +200 Perception. Reduces energy expenditure from all movement-related skills by a moderate amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants and natural treasures.

Requirements: Lvl 200+ in any humanoid race

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[Boots of the Wandering Sage (Mythical)] Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master. With time, this wanderer became recognized as a Sage, the same as his master who once wandered in them, too. This has left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks despite being made of nothing but simple leather. With every awakening, the Records within grow in power, the item improving in tandem as they reconnect with their Origin. Enchantments: +1500 Endurance, +1000 Agility, +500 Perception, +500 Willpower, +500 Wisdom, +500 Intelligence. Reduces energy expenditure from all movement-related skills while also increasing their effectiveness by a substantial amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants and natural treasures. While wearing the Boots of the Wandering Sage, never let difficult terrain impede you, as you shall always find a solid foothold.

Requirements: Soulbound

First of all that was a lot of stats. Secondly, a lot had changed, first and foremost being the name. Boots of the Wandering Sage. However, it still confused him a bit who was the sage? The First Sage? Villy was also considered a Sage, right? Or was it a third person altogether? Yeah, alright, Jake would definitely have to ask Villy about this.

When it came to the effects besides the stats, the natural treasure detector seemed the same. He also quickly spotted that the energy-cost reduction on movement-related skills had changed to also increase the effectiveness of movement-related skills. Such a change was quite frankly massive, and he very much looked forward to seeing how much it did.

The final effect was a bit weird. It said difficult terrain would never impede Jake and that he would always find a solid foothold. This effect could both be extremely powerful but also kind of useful honestly, there was no time to tell before he put on the boots and did some testing.

Now, did this item truly look like a mythical piece of equipment? Fuck no, it was a pair of old worn-out leather boots alright, effect-wise, they probably did. Jake didnt really have a great frame of reference, but he felt like the boots did qualify; it was just that many of their effects were hard to quantify. Also, it was quite shocking to see that even after becoming mythical, they still apparently had room for improvement. This was also part of the reason why Jake was so sure these boots had either belonged to Villy or the First Sage at some point. Who else would have powerful enough Records?

He had questioned if they belonged to Villy before and kind of written that theory off, but now he wasnt sure. As he looked at the boots, he also remembered something as he leaned forward and grabbed them.

Jake quickly checked the lining of the leather boots. He saw that the message about looking forward to meeting him was still there, and for a moment, he was worried until he found another message etched into the other pair. A new one. This one was a lot shorter than the first but perhaps even more impactful.

When two becomes five, reunite with one.

- A Sage

While it wasnt definitive Jake was pretty damn certain this was related to the First Sage. It had to be. Also, when it came to the riddle of sorts, Jake instantly solved it. He currently had two charges of Path of the Heretic Chosen, and this message was telling him to save up five. As for reuniting with one, well, he was called the First

Sage.

Jake didnt really need to think much before he decided to try and reach out to the Viper, as he felt like a conversation about his old boots was long overdue. He barely had reached out when he felt the Malefic Viper respond, surprising Jake a bit, as Jake thought he couldnt normally talk to Villy while inside Nevermore, but things were quickly cleared up.

Alright, got a closed and secure connection. See it as an extra reward for your performance and for your great bug-finding efforts during the Challenge Dungeons, the Viper said. Now, I already have a good idea why you want to talk its about those boots, right?

It is indeed about the boots, Jake responded. So whats up with them?

Eh, alright, Ill give you some lore on the old things. Yeah, they belonged to me. For a while, at least. As a beast in humanoid form, my equipment didnt give me any stats, so it didnt really matter what I wore. So, for a long time, I didnt care much but just took whatever I could get here and there. But honestly, everything just kept getting torn, as nothing was enchanted. After I met the First Sage, he gave me these boots when he sent me out to do stuff, and even after his death, I kept them. Even back then, they were always a bit special. Believe it or not, they havent changed at all from how they looked when I first got them. While I wont say they are indestructible, I sure never encountered anything that could ruin them for good. I dont really know much about them besides that, only that they belonged to the First Sage before me.

If they are so precious why give them out as a dungeon reward? Jake questioned.

He knew how much the Malefic Viper cared about and respected the First Sage, so to give his boots to some E-grade in a Challenge Dungeon really didnt seem like something the Viper would do. Even if Jake was his Chosen, it was still a massive risk to just hand out an item like that. If Jake had died or lost them, they would be gone for good.

Oh well, I guess I didnt include the part where I lost them in A-grade when I had to escape a collapsing minor dimension, the Viper said nonchalantly. So I was a bit surprised when I saw them again because the only reward I had designated to be given for that Challenge Dungeon was the spatial storage necklace. Thats why I was so insistent on you upgrading them because they sure arent the exact same boots I used to have. Those werent even real pieces of equipment with a rarity attached to them.

Wait so the system just decided to randomly reward them after modifying them as a reward suitable for someone in early E-grade? Jake asked, even more confused. Why? Isn't this all a bit too much of a coincidence when I also happen to have met the First Sage in a vision? That I suddenly end up with an old pair of boots of his?

Jake still hadn't shared the thing about the etched messages. Not the first one, and not this new one, as Jake got a weird feeling that he probably shouldn't share it either. The implications behind these messages appearing were simply too impactful, and Jake wanted to figure out more before he would talk about it. And so far, he only had some vague theories. Was the First Sage communicating with him from beyond the grave? Did he have some weird Transcendence that allowed him to somehow know Jake would one day get them? Some kind of future-prediction stuff? Or maybe he really had somehow merged with part of the system or something? There were so many possibilities, and Jake felt equally unsure about all of them. If this was all just some weird coincidence or something, Jake didn't want to give Villy false hope that Jake could somehow communicate with the First Sage directly.

The Viper took a bit before he answered Jake's question as the Primordial sighed.

With the system, coincidences are rarely just coincidences, he said in a thoughtful tone. As for why you got the boots now that's the big mystery, isn't it?

Chapter 853: Nevermore: Story Time

Jake still felt extreme confusion when he thought about the First Sage. All Jake really knew was that he was a man from the first universe who died in C-grade while also being the teacher of Villy. Well, and the fact he had apparently been so ridiculously talented it beggared belief, and that he also had a Bloodline, which the Viper had gained many years after his teacher's death.

However, even taking into consideration his extreme talent, things didn't really make any sense. How was he capable of leaving messages on boots he had owned trillions of years ago? How was a C-grade even capable of doing that in the first place?

Do you think all this boots-business could have been orchestrated by the First Sage? Jake said after a brief pause but instantly felt a bit dumb for even asking. No, nevermind, that's-

He could have, the Viper cut him off. One thing I learned while spending time with him was that he truly encapsulated the meaning of the phrase never say never. He did things as a C-grade that I would think

impossible for anyone who wasn't a god.. or even above that. And that was just what he showed me. I am sure there was far more I never saw.

Jake listened to what the Viper said as he frowned. But how? He was just a C-grade. Aren't there certain rules about equivalent exchange and one having to pay with energy for things? Unalterable rules set by the system that even Transcendent Skills cannot ignore?

There are, but where there are rules, there are also ways to bend them, and the First Sage was a master of bending the rules. Never once did I hear him say something wasn't possible when I asked, just that I hadn't found the right method to do it yet. Moreover, when I pressed enough, he often revealed clues, making it clear he had already found a solution to my inquiry. That is the kind of monster he was someone truly limitless.

Jake was silent once more for a bit before he asked a bit tentatively. If I had a way to meet him

You should do it, the Viper just said. Even if the notions sound silly but I guess you are a bit of a silly existence yourself in the first place. I think he would have found you interesting if the two of you had ever met. Or, from the way you asked your question, it appears he does indeed find you interesting. Let me take a stab, you're going to try and use Path of the Heretic Chosen?

Yeah, Jake nodded. He still wasn't sure how much he wanted to share with Villy about what he knew about the man. Not for any insidious reasons; he just didn't feel like anything he could say would help the Viper. But he did still ask one thing: Also if I could ask him a question for you, what would it be?

If it was me meeting him, I would ask a question I am not willing to share but if it's you, I guess I would have you ask him how come he never found a solution to the one problem that caused his death? Why did someone I do not doubt would have become the first god just give up? Or if he even did give up in the first place or had some higher goal in mind the Viper said, his voice filled with more emotion than usual. The kind of emotion Jake only ever heard when Villy talked about the family he once had as well as the First Sage.

Alright, Jake said as the conversation naturally died out. Which made it the perfect chance to change the topic as Jake asked:

What are your thoughts on all this Nevermore Challenge Dungeon stuff? Mainly the multiplier scores. Should I go out and advertise my score to smack down some fools, or?

Thats up to you, the Viper answered, clearly not opposed to the change of topic. But if you want me to decide, I wouldnt share it. Doing so wont really do you any good, especially not if you wanted to do so with the intent of harming Yip of Yores Chosen. In fact, you may just end up aiding him. He is writing a story where he is the underdog, so if you come out in a clear attempt to suppress his reputation, I am certain he would spin it as you showing fear toward his growth. That you felt the need to come out and show off how much better than him you were. No, if you really want to mess him up, the best thing you can do is nothing. Dont acknowledge him, but just do your thing and regard him as nothing more than an afterthought. You will end up clashing on the Leaderboards whether you want to or not, and you will end up clashing more in the future, so try to not be caught up in his tempo, but walk to your own beat.

Jake listened to the Vipers words as he sighed. Why couldnt you have made enemies and begun some conflict with someone like Valdemar so I could fight his Chosen instead? You know, someone who would actually want to fight me and not all this complicated meta-story bullshit.

Boohoo, this is a good lesson for you! And as I said, you will have your epic showdown someday. Every great story ends with a final battle at the climax you just have to make sure this turns out to be one of those stories where the villain wins in the end.

Wait, why am I the villain? Hes the guy who attacked me first.

Because hes the self-insert author, so you are a villain automatically simply because you are antagonistic toward him ah, but do watch out. With your growing reputation as a Harbinger of Primeval Origins, they may change up their tactics and try to make you into a redeemed villain instead who ends up joining the good guys to take down the big bad. You know me.

And I repeat: please choose a normal enemy next time. Someone with a big sword or something.

How is Yips Chosen that different? He uses a halberd thats got three blades, the Viper very helpfully pointed out.

Small blades.

Very villain-like of you to insult another mans weapon for being too small

You know what, maybe I should join him as a valiant hero who helped take down the evil Malefic Viper once and for all, Jake joked.

Now that would be a plot twist I didnt see coming, the Viper answered in the same joking manner. Anyway, the Wyrmgod is giving me nasty looks, probably afraid I am trying to give tips or share things I shouldnt, and I am sure he is mighty uncomfortable that he has no idea what we are talking about. So when I cut the connection, do something mysterious that makes him question if I broke the rules, alright? See ya!

Right as Villy cut the connection, Jake frowned deeply as he muttered out loud. To think it worked like that

To really play his part, Jake kept looking thoughtful. At least he did it to play the part for a few seconds until he did get thinking about everything they had talked about, especially about the First Sage. Villy clearly suspected things with his teacher werent as they seemed, and he didnt at all seem surprised when Jake said he could potentially interact with him. As if nothing the C-grade could do would ever surprise him. He even recommended for Jake to meet him if he could which Jake most assuredly would.

Stolen story; please report.

I just need to reach level 300 in my profession first, Jake thought. It seemed far away, but Jake believed it wouldnt be that bad.

Refocusing on the task at hand, Jake put his mind off all those thoughts of the future and turned his attention toward the now. Taking the mythical boots off the table, Jake quickly put them on. As his foot slid into the first boot, his eyes opened wide.

This this is the peak of comfort-wear.

It was perhaps the most magical aspect of the boots: how damn good they felt to wear. It was truly out of this world, and Jake couldnt help but smile as he put both on. Oh yeah, the stats and other effects

from the mythical item were also good, but if comfort was an enchantment, that would definitely have been their best one by far.

Sadly, Jake couldn't really test them here and now. He instinctively had some idea about how they had improved, but seeing as the room he was in was sealed off from the outside, he couldn't even test out the treasure-detecting abilities.

However, he did feel one change. It was incredibly subtle, but when Jake stood up to revel in the feeling of the best boots in the multiverse, it was as if he stood more stably than before. He tried to move a bit, but nothing really seemed different besides this minor odd feeling. It was as if he would have a harder time slipping and falling or something.

Shrugging, Jake shifted his attention to the second thing he wanted to get done before his party gathered. Taking out the Storybook Page from his inventory, Jake studied it a bit as he considered what skill to use it with. He had a few already in mind, but the nature of the item made things a bit more complicated than just selecting a skill below legendary rarity he wanted upgraded.

The problem was that the item didn't give a skill upgrade, just the opportunity to get one. As per the description:

Ripping a page infused with the Records of a skill will grant you an opportunity to upgrade the skill. The effect is lower, the higher the rarity of the skill, and the page will not accept Records of certain skills Skill upgrades are not guaranteed.

If this wasn't the case, Jake would have used the page on Big Game Hunter without any hesitation. However, while he couldn't confirm it, Jake felt pretty damn certain that the skill was included in the not accept Records of certain skills part. Another thing he felt sure was included was the archery skill, as well as any of his basic crafting skills, as those kinds of skills were always considered a bit special. That being the case, Fang of Man was more likely than not also restricted.

Jake also pretty quickly decided he wanted to upgrade a class skill, as he wanted another boost in combat capabilities. While sitting there, Jake began going through his skills one by one. As this was just an opportunity to upgrade a skill, and seeing as the effectiveness was lower, the higher the rarity of the skill, he decided on going for one of his epic rarity ones.

He also wanted the skill to be one he would find difficult to upgrade on his own without any new inspiration. This meant a skill like Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang was ruled out, along with something like Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain. Jake felt pretty confident about upgrading those on his own if he just worked on it actively.

Among the skills, he ended up with two he heavily considered. The first of which was Avaricious Arcane Hunters Arrows. It was the epic skill Jake used to just generate his regular arrows, and seeing this upgraded would lead to a significant damage increase. It was also a skill that was kind of difficult to upgrade, as it had the avaricious tag along with its ability to instantly summon arcane arrows. Both of these added quite a lot of complexity, and he really didnt want to lose either effect if he tried to upgrade it himself.

The second skill Jake considered also had the avaricious tag, and was even more complicated than the Arrows one. It was one of the core skills Jake used all the time to do more damage than usual and was, in some ways, one of the reasons his amazingly high Perception allowed him to do as much damage as he did. It was naturally Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter.

As he considered these two skills, Jake brought up both their descriptions and studied them closely. However, after a while, he closed the Arcane Hunters Arrows one. He looked at Mark closer as he was kind of impressed by the many things it did despite only being in epic rarity.

[Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] Your prey is chosen; the hunt is on. Covertly mark targets, making you aware of their positions at all times until the marks expire or are dispelled. All damage done to marked targets is increased. Arcane damage has its damage amplified further. The extra arcane damage inflicted while the marks are active will be built up in the form of an arcane charge that you can detonate to release all the stored-up energy. Additional bonus experience earned for slaying a marked target above your level (this effect remains even if your target dies to the mark detonating or within a short duration of the detonation). Adds a bonus to the damage inflicted, the duration of the marks, the subtlety, and the number of marks available based on Perception.

The skill did a whopping four things at once. It allowed him to mark and track creatures, deal extra damage to those tracked, store up an arcane charge to explode, and even more experience gained for kills. Whats more, everything was scaled solely with Perception. While Jake wasnt all clear on the math, he was pretty certain the damage amplification of Mark was responsible for a good percentage of Jakes total damage output due to this Perception scaling.

Moreover, this was a skill so complicated Jake didnt really have any good ideas on how to upgrade it while at the same time being only epic rarity, meaning the Storybook Page should have a good effect. It

was a bit of a gamble, but unless Jake wanted to rely on another skill selection to get a system-given upgrade, he felt this was the best way.

He could spend a long time thinking up more reasons but after only a few more justifications for this being the best choice, Jake decided to stop delaying as he held the page and began to infuse it with the Records of the skill. He did this simply by thinking about wanting to do it while holding the page, and he subtly felt energy leaving his body as the page began to glow and fill with runes Jake couldn't at all recognize.

Once the runes were complete, Jake tore the page in two, and a flash of energy was released as his consciousness shifted.

As Jake was busy being knocked out by the Storybook Page, his party members were quickly getting done with their Challenge Dungeons. This included the Sword Saint and Sylphie, who had already finished theirs and had both returned to the prior floor to do some minor practice by hunting down monsters and sparring a bit.

During their joint hunting efforts, it was also naturally shared how they had done over the last few years even if communication was a bit strained due to the Sword Saint still not being fluent in the language of Ree.

In the Challenge Dungeons, Sylphie ended up with a pretty good total multiplier of 45%. Her best performance had been Minagas Labyrinth, where she got 25%, being the little cheat of a bird she was. The second best was the Colosseum of Mortals, where she had ended up with a 10% multiplier, though admittedly, many would come to claim the version she did was easier. Instead of becoming level 0, she had only become level 200. The opponents were mostly the same even if there were some monster opponents thrown in there - and the arenas had changed to accommodate the fights of larger scope. Also, even if skills were still removed from everyone, Sylphie was pretty lucky in that much of her magic was just innate manipulation which was how she had done as well as she did. A place she had also done okay in was the Test of Character, where Sylphie had ended up with only a 5% multiplier, a feat she repeated in the House of the Architect.

Her personality was simply too flighty, and her Creations came mainly in the form of skill upgrades she decided to work super hard at, along with some other small things she tried to create. These creations included a nest the size of a smaller city created entirely by collecting every single tree and plant occupying a huge part of the jungle world. Finally, to finish out the list of Challenge Dungeons, there was the Endless Journey, where Sylphie didn't even get a Grand Achievement, meaning she only got some Nevermore Points but no multiplier.

She didn't care much, though. Sylphie had never wanted to compete on those silly Leaderboards when she knew Uncle was going to be the best there anyway. However, Sylphie did notice her current fighting partner seemed to not be all that happy about all the Leaderboards and big score stuff. Even if Sylphie was not the smartest bird when it came to seeing when others felt sad, she could see that the old swordsman she was training with seemed frustrated. Sylphie had gone to this floor because she was bored and wanted to fly around and fight, but the swordsman had come after all of those big announcements of performances in the Challenge Dungeons. As if he felt like he couldn't delay his progress for even a second lest he would fall behind.

Again, Sylphie didn't care about all those scores but the old swordsman sure seemed like he cared a lot.

Chapter 854: Nevermore: Promise & Mark

To be strong was something that truly didn't matter in the world before the system. One could be the best swordsman in the world or the best martial artist, but the difference between the bottom and the top was never that significant. Even the greatest fighter would lose against a few average men who teamed up on him. If they had weapons, even fewer. If they had a gun a single shot could end the journey of a martial artist who had trained his body and skills to perfection over decades of struggle and hard work.

Due to this, and the peace of society as a whole, being able to fight rarely mattered. It was more done for sports or to stay in shape rather than any practical applications. Sure, the army did also teach hand-to-hand, and being able to stand your ground could come in handy when situations got tricky, but that was about it.

Yet Miyamoto had dedicated much of his life to training with a sword. Despite how many people told him he was wasting his time, he kept training whenever he could and only laid down his sword the day his body no longer allowed him to lift it.

It had simply been a passion of his, pursued for no other reason than the fact he enjoyed it. He worked most of his life, and it became his one selfish pastime where he could just be himself and ponder. His one childish pursuit

And when the system arrived, he realized indulging in this childish pursuit was no longer that childish. Instead, it became a true Path to power, and no one looked down on him or questioned if he was wasting his time whenever he trained. One other thing did change, though, and that was the reason for his training.

Miyamoto had always been ambitious. It was simply an innate trait of his. During the Tutorial, he had simply fought, doing his best together with the allies he gathered as he struggled to survive. His body was weak in the beginning, but as time passed, he got stronger and stronger, and he still remembered that one fateful day.

It was a rather large fight, and one of the youngsters was struggling. Miyamoto had a breakthrough as he hurried over and managed to kill the opponent in the nick of time. The young woman who had been lying on the ground had called him something then. Something reminding him of a rather childish concept as she said he was like the Sword Saint of history

The title stuck with him, as others also began to call him it, and Miyamoto never corrected anyone. Instead, he took this new title as a promise. To be the Sword Saint was to be at the peak of swordsmanship. To be the strongest

And as of this moment, Miyamoto didn't feel like he lived up to that promise. He hadn't for quite a while, especially after he returned from the Challenge Dungeons and heard how others had done. Even if others said he hadn't done badly, he was still far from satisfied.

The Sword Saint had done quite a lot better overall than Sylphie and finished with a final multiplier of 70%. His 10% in the Colosseum of Mortals had very much been a disappointment to him, as it turned out to be one of his worst despite, on the surface, looking like one he should have done well at. However, he had also gotten very unlucky. His basic state was that of an old man who had been a single step away from death before the system. When he entered the Colosseum and had his stats reduced, he was far more negatively affected than someone like Jake. His brittle bones made him take more damage every time he tried to block. His old muscles made him slower, and especially his striking power was negatively affected by his aging physique. He simply didn't have a body that could make full use of his stats.

This wasn't a problem when he had his full stats but in the Colosseum, it became a severe limiter, in many ways making it impressive that he even managed to get 10%. He did feel sad about having had to use his Transcendence to beat Umbra, though, as it meant he could barely walk when he faced Valdemar for the final fight but at least the backlash had been minimal due to the special circumstances of the Challenge Dungeon. By the time he had finished the Test of Character afterward, he was all good.

Speaking of the Test of Character, the Sword Saint did a lot better there. In fact, it ended up being one of his best-performing Challenge Dungeons with a 20% multiplier. Despite still being young in the context

of the system, he felt like an old man, and he was very much set in who he was. He was good at judging situations and adapting when necessary, no matter what story he experienced.

A place he did a lot better than expected was the House of the Architect, where he got a 10% multiplier. He had expected not to get much here, but he had ended up surprising himself. In many ways, it had been a good respite as he had done this one last and had spent longer in it than any of the others. This allowed him to spend plenty of time working on his painting skills while naturally also upgrading some class-based skills, making it a very pleasant experience.

Endless Journey had turned into a tie for his best with a 20% multiplier. It had also been another Challenge Dungeon he had very much enjoyed. Doing the menial jobs as a Courier reminded him of the jobs he had when he was young, especially while in the military. The later happenings and dealing with the political turmoil reminded him of what he had to deal with in his later years. Except, the political arena was too simple. Easy. Simplified. There were a lot of twists and turns, but in the end, nothing ever felt too complicated, and he ended up challenging himself by aiming to broker a peace agreement between the Dragon Tribe and the Guild, as well as all the other nations. Something he was quite proud of had succeeded, even if he knew peace would be short-lived had it been a realistic setting.

Finally, he got 10% in Minagas Endless Labyrinth. There was not much to say here. He was fast; he managed to decipher many of the clues given and even deployed some tricks of his own to go faster. All in all, the Sword Saint had performed as a peak-tier genius but he still felt disappointment in himself.

For to only be a genius was far below the promise he had made and the burden of the title he had taken upon himself. He felt far below the realm of monstrous existences like Jake and even EllHakan, whom he had faced in combat once and came out with a minor victory. Yet even then, knew there was more to the Chosen than what he had shown far more, which was clearly proven true with how well he was doing in Nevermore.

Sitting on a small hill on the sixty-ninth floor, Miyamoto simply observed as Sylphie ravaged the land in front of Miyamoto, showing that she had also improved. A figure sat beside him, made up of pure energy that only he could see and interact with.

You are too harsh on yourself, the former Monarch of Blood, Iskar, said.

In Nevermore, he could not fully materialize his body but only be in an intangible form only the Sword Saint could see as the owner of the divine item.

I do not believe I am, the Sword Saint said as he sat meditatively with his sword across his legs. Look at the young hawk. Her personality is utterly whimsical; she never seems to take any situation seriously, and she appears to only be playing around yet her rate of improvement is unquestionable. Despite it looking like she isn't trying, you can see she innately is pushing herself to improve with every fight. Instinctively, she is driven to improve. She needs no motivation or purpose for doing so; it's merely in her nature.

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You speak as if you also aren't improving by the day, the Monarch of Blood added. Every entity has different rates of improvement, coming at different intervals, but more importantly, in different spurts. Remember, the Path to power is not a sprint but a marathon toward the peak.

The Sword Saint didn't say more as he heard the cliché words he had listened to so many times before. He just kept watching Sylphie as she battled the pack of beasts while considering if he truly was going about things the right way.

You know Iskar added after a while. One of the things that are holding you back is your profession.

I will not become a vampire, the Sword Saint said with a sigh.

I'm not saying you have to, Iskar said. I'm just saying that maybe there is just something to be looking at there. You have a lot of untapped potential you never truly dove into, especially in regard to certain affinities because I do not believe that the Primordial of Time chose to give you a Divine Blessing for your swordsmanship alone.

The Sword Saint sighed as he closed his eyes. He feared his Path becoming murky again if he tried to diversify himself too much but perhaps the former Monarch of Blood had a point. His Patron, Aeon, had told him that his time affinity was quite impressive, after all.

The hunter stalked his way through the forest as his prey moved a few kilometers ahead of him. It was a small group of scaled deer-like creatures, all moving in a defensive formation. Even so, the hunter wasn't worried. He knew he would find his time to strike at some point, as he felt for all their locations, and as he peered through the trees, the outlines of every beast were clear as day.

Time passed as the hunter kept up his tracking while making sure to mark any potential future prey along the way. Every time he marked one, he became able to see them even through solid matter as they were highlighted in his vision.

After only a few more hours, the hunter spotted his chance. The creatures had all split up slightly, slacking on their defensive formation as they consumed herbs in a small clearing. Without missing his chance, the hunter took out his bow. Never once did he get close or enter their line of sight as he got to a high position to shoot from.

As the hunter moved to draw the bow, arcane energy appeared as it formed an arrow. Pulling back the string, more arcane power appeared as an Arcane Powershot was slowly charged, the hunter still a few dozen kilometers away from his prey.

Releasing the string, the first arrow flew forth. It slightly curved around all the trees in the way as it slammed into the side of the first beast's head before it could even react, making it fall to the ground, bleeding heavily.

Rather than assist their comrade, the other beasts didn't hesitate to take off in four different directions. However, sadly for them, they were all already marked. The hunter didn't even care to pursue as he sprang wings to fly further up into the air, where he nocked another arrow.

Another Arcane Powershot blasted out as it hit one of the fleeing deer now over thirty kilometers away. The damage was even greater than the first deer the hunter had hit as he promptly nocked another. A second powershot in rapid succession was released, hitting a third deer for more damage yet again. It wasn't an extreme amount, and the reason for the extra damage was the distance between him and the marks.

With a few more arrows, all of the deer were soon taken down except for one. The hunter looked at it closely as the outline of its Soulshape revealed the damage done. The outline was slightly damaged, letting the hunter know the damage was significant and would potentially lead to death on its own. Not that he would let that up to chance as he shot one more arrow to finish off the final beast.

Right as the final beast died, everything warped. In the very next second, the hunter found himself standing atop a watchtower. He narrowed his eyes and spotted a scout in the distance. Instantly, he marked the target, and even when the scout tried to use his stealth skill, the hunter still easily kept track.

as the scout failed to dispel the mark completely, its resistance to any form of dispel mechanics significantly stronger.

After the scout was hunted down successfully, things warped again as a third scenario played out.

This hunter who was using Mark in different ways was quite an odd character because it wasn't really Jake. Not to misunderstand, Jake was along for the ride, reminiscent of the Test of Character though without the ability to take control but even if the hunter used skills Jake had, it clearly wasn't him.

The Storybook Page seemed to trigger a miniature version of a mix between the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon and Jake's Path of the Heretic-Chosen, though compared to Path, it was a lot worse. It didn't have the time-rewind stuff and the ability to allow Jake to hyperfocus during the most important moments, but the Storybook Page did allow Jake to experience the use of a slightly different version of Mark than his own a few times.

A total of nine visions ended up playing out, each of them using a slightly different version of Mark. One of them allowed Jake to kind of see the area all around the target, other upgrades allowed him to use Mark in an area to hit everything there, while a third version changed Mark from a solo-hunting skill to one that was more effective the more people targeted the marked prey.

Nine different versions, but Jake was stuck on the first one as it had the effects he wanted the most. The outline of the Soulshape was something he could see be very useful for a very particular reason that would be clear in the future, and the bonus damage based on distance was definitely a great addition. Ah, not that the part about dealing more damage based on distance was unique, as that was present in all the different skill upgrade Paths, likely due to influence from his class.

After what felt like several days to Jake, but was in reality only a few seconds in the real world, the effect of the Storybook Page was over. Jake awoke back in the Order, but he didn't hesitate to enter meditation as he reflected on the visions. He remembered the feeling of using the skill, and he began to integrate it into the skill.

After about a full day of focused meditation, Jake opened his eyes as a system notification appeared, putting a smile on Jake's face. Success.

Without further ado, he opened up the description of the improved skill.

[Mark of the Horizon-Chasing Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] Your prey is chosen; the hunt is on. Covertly mark targets, making you aware of their positions while allowing you to see an outline of their Soulshape at all times until the marks expire or are dispelled. All damage done to marked targets is increased. This extra damage is amplified further based on your distance from the target. All effects increase for arcane damage done. The extra arcane damage inflicted while the marks are active will be built up in the form of an arcane charge that you can detonate to release all the stored-up energy. Additional bonus experience earned for slaying a marked target above your level (this effect remains even if your target dies to the mark detonating or within a short duration of the detonation). Adds a bonus to the damage inflicted, the duration of the marks, maximum effective distance, the subtlety, and the number of marks available based on Perception.

The description had naturally gotten longer as Jake had added on two extra wonderful features. The first one was the ability to see an outline of his foe, while the second was to make the damage he dealt increase with distance. Yet another skill that did so, which was naturally only good.

Stacking similar or identical effects that worked together was the best way to get extremely powerful attacks. Jake stacked skills dealing more damage to higher-leveled foes as well as opponents he was far away from, while someone like the Sword Saint stacked skills and effects that increased the sharpness of his katana. At least Jake was pretty damn sure he did that.

The final improvement to Mark was something Jake had added on as a bit of an extra. During one of the visions, he saw how the marks had a limited range before they would automatically be dispelled, so he worked on alleviating that, which had materialized in the form of the effective distance now also scaling with Perception. Something Jake was pretty sure it already did, but hey, it was good to have it in system text.

Along with all of the new effects, all existing effects had naturally also increased. With how much the skill did, it wasn't a massive amount, but Jake was pretty sure that this one skill upgrade alone increased his effective damage output per arrow by a few percent, only getting higher if his target was very far away.

Jake felt more than satisfied with the upgrade, and it sure put him in a good mood. His mood only got better a few minutes later when an attendant came and knocked on the door to his chamber to inform him that Dina was also done with her Challenge Dungeons. Now, they just needed the Fallen King, and it was time to do some live testing as they continued their Nevermore journey.

Chapter 855: Nevermore: The Gang Back Together

It ended up only taking two weeks more before the whole gang was back together. Jake spent this time primarily working on some of the things he had been putting off a bit, like making sure everything was still running smoothly in the Cradle for his budding Soulflame and then doing the very important work of briefly checking out his Puzzle Box of the Seeker. He planned to just play with it for a day or two, so it was very understandable Jake felt slight annoyance when he was interrupted after only a couple of weeks.

Sylphie and the Sword Saint had already returned to the Order compound at this point and were all doing their own thing until it was time to meet back up, well ahead of schedule. Jake ended up being the last to arrive at their reunion, as he just needed to get in one more attempt for the puzzle he was currently on, something he was certain everyone would understand.

Walking through the small compound, Jake already saw the four of them gathered in a sealed-off meeting room. He enjoyed the feeling of the walk due to his even more comfortable boots, as he couldn't help himself from feeling for natural treasures using the boots function. He detected a few, and he quickly realized their range covered the entire damn city floor.

Arriving in the meeting room, Jake checked out the situation just before entering. Sylphie was sitting on a small nest she had made on a table from what looked like tablecloths, looking very comfortable. Meanwhile, the Sword Saint and Dina were both sitting in chairs while the Fallen King floated menacingly in a corner. None of them looked different compared to the last time they met, though that wasn't really a surprise.

But that didn't mean they hadn't changed. When Jake entered the room, he instantly took in their auras. Compared to eight and half years or so, everyone had gotten quite a lot stronger. Even if their levels hadn't grown due to the nature of Challenge Dungeons besides Sylphie and the Sword Saint, who had gained one on the sixty-ninth floor that didn't mean they hadn't gotten stronger. Everyone had gained at least one title for a few more stats, but what mattered most were the skill upgrades and improved overall abilities through conceptual improvements and such.

Jake himself had also gotten quite a lot stronger. He was the one who had gained the most levels due to his little meeting with the gods and aura-measuring contest with Valdemar, along with the All-Star title. Not to mention all the skill upgrades he had gained, as well as just overall improvements across the board.

Ree! Sylphie instantly greeted Jake as she zoomed over and sat down on her usual spot atop Jakes head. Jake just smiled as he scratched her head, making Sylphie flap her wings happily. He had to admit he had missed the little featherball.

The last to arrive as expected, the Fallen King commented.

Says the person who was the last to get done with all the Challenge Dungeons, Jake shot back.

Yet I still finished within the agreed-upon deadline. Also, I thought it was viewed as impolite for humans to finish prematurely? Especially for you male versions, the Fallen King retaliated verbally.

Pretty mean of you to insult an old man like that, Jake muttered as he shook his head with disappointment, throwing glances at the old man in the room.

Good to see you too, Jake, the Sword Saint said with a light smile. Now, rather than sit around and take jabs, let us get everyone up to speed. We will have plenty of time for banter when we continue our descent.

The Fallen King didnt argue, and Jake also knew when to shut up as he kept scratching Sylphie, who was also being a polite little hawk. For now, at least.

To begin with let us get a mutual idea of our shared growth during this period, as I am certain it has been most fruitful for us all. Let me begin with how I did in the Challenge Dungeons, the Sword Saint volunteered as he summarized his Challenge Dungeons first in a brief manner. When he was done, he gave the floor to the dryad of their party as she did the same.

Dina had done pretty damn well, with a total multiplier of 70% from all the Challenge Dungeons, tying the Sword Saint perfectly. Broken down, she had gained 15% from the Colosseum of Mortals, 15% in House of the Architect, 10% in Minagas Endless Labyrinth, 20% in the Endless Journey, and 10% in Test of Character. Jake had to admit this was actually pretty good from her, considering she was a healer, and healers tended to struggle in places like the Colosseum of Mortals.

That was until she shared how she won pretty much all her fights by spreading poison spores in the arena to slowly kill her opponents. She did this by getting around the rules of the Colosseum that one

could only bring weapons and tools bought for the arena to a fight. Using her skills and innate talent, she spread spores from outside the entire Colosseum before any fighting even began. She did this through a special flower she grafted by combining different herbs to allow it to have controllable spores while in flight, something she could then use her Bloodline to control. Overall, her tactics had been pretty damn gruesome, yet effective for someone who wasn't the best in a regular fight. The mental image of her just delaying as her opponents slowly coughed up blood and died was a pretty dark mental image, though.

The Fallen King was next up to summarize his last many years, and it turned out he had done quite a bit worse, with a final multiplier of 45%. In the Colosseum of Mortals, he ended with a respectable multiplier of 15%, and in the Endless Journey, he repeated that feat, earning another 15%. However, things only went downhill from there as he only got 5% in the House of the Architect, Test of Character, and Minagas Endless Labyrinth. Jake saw the clear dissatisfaction from the Unique Lifeform, even if Jake understood why the Fallen King had faced so many problems because these Challenge Dungeons truly weren't made for something like a Unique Lifeform.

He didn't have the diversity for the House of the Architect due to his Path, and he wasn't overly fast for Minagas Labyrinth. Additionally, he wasn't as good at deciphering the runes as all his magic was purely instinctive and not something he had studied to learn, teaching him the required skills. As for why he had done badly in the Test of Character, though well, Jake wasn't going to pry too much there.

Sylphie shared her results next, and Jake saw the Fallen King looked a bit grumpy that she had gained the same level of multiplier as him. Something Sylphie clearly also noticed as she very proudly screeched at her great accomplishment.

All you did was find an exploit within a Challenge Dungeon and use that to your advantage. That is not a true representation of power, and a Unique Lifeform such as I am merely disadvantaged due to the bogus rules, the Fallen King argued to make himself feel better.

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Ree!

Having a unique skill does not make you a Unique Lifeform.

Ree! Sylphie refused to back down as she even jumped on the table to look more defiant.

Shes got a point, Jake added. As she is probably the only Sylphian Hawk in existence, calling Sylphie a lifeform that is unique isnt entirely inaccurate.

That does not make it the same, the Fallen King tried to shut Jake down. Unique Lifeforms such as I are clearly defined by the system, not by a bunch of C-grades that think they know better.

Ree.

There is no agreeing to disagree here; we are discussing indisputable facts, the Unique Lifeform, who everyone was bullying into feeling a little bit less unique, argued. Unless you have a title quite literally proclaiming you a Unique Lifeform, you are not a Unique Lifeform.

Ree, ree.

Now it was Jakes turn to look confused as he stared at the hawk. Wait, you do have such a title?

She does not, I can detect other Unique Lifeforms, and she isnt one, the Fallen King said dismissively.

Ree! Sylphie said madly as she screeched a few more times, and Jakes eyes opened wide as everyone looked surprised. He and Villy had talked about Sylphie probably being unique, but they didnt really have any way to truly know. Turns out they could have just asked the little hawk to get a definitive answer all this day.

Sylphie apparently had a title called Lineage Progenitor, which said Sylphie was one of a kind and the first in a new Lineage of powerful beasts. It quite literally called her unique and the first of the Sylphian Hawks. As for the effects of the title, Sylphie didnt share anything as her parents had told her not to share such things. A good politic, making Jake happy that Hawkie and Mystie had at least taught her some responsible things even if they pawned Sylphie off to Jake for most of her life.

However, even if Sylphie didnt give many details, they did have someone in their party who knew a bit more.

Lineage Progenitor I heard about that title before. It usually appears when a regular beast or monster mutates or has a particularly impactful evolution into a powerful variant that differs a lot from any others, effectively creating an entirely new Lineage of races sometimes even entirely new species. Naturally, the level of change has to reach certain thresholds, and the Lineage Progenitor is always particularly powerful. To think Sylphie was one, I will have to tell Grandpa about this, Dina added some of her precious knowledge of the multiverse.

Pretty sure he already knows, considering a whole bunch of gods is having a fun-time streaming party with the Wyrmgod watching us right now, your grandfather among them, Jake added casually with a shrug.

Everyone turned to look at Jake with confusion as Jake realized. Oh oh yeah, they definitely didnt know that.

Alright, things will make a bit more sense with context, so I guess its my turn to summarize my time doing stuff? Lets start with the Endless Journey and work backward, Jake said as he did just that.

After Jake was done telling about the Endless Journey, the Fallen King called him a cheater, as everyone else congratulated him for his great performance. After the House of the Architect, they remained impressed, as Sylphie had to get the jab in that Jake had already tied both her and the Fallen King regarding the multiplier with only two Challenge Dungeons. The small bird truly went for the jugular, gladly accepting mutual destruction.

Jake talked about Endless Minagas Labyrinth next, where he shared how many Sections he did and well, alright, he had probably overdone it a bit as he had done sixty Sections more than Sylphie, who had also gotten 25%. At this point, the Fallen King was truly looking salty over how much of a cheat Jake was. Especially as he had already tied the record-holders of their party with two Challenge Dungeons left to go.

When it came to the Test of Character, Jake had naturally done the worst of all his Challenge Dungeons, but the non-existent face of the Fallen King fell when Jake told about the end of the Colosseum of Mortals.

So, one thing led to another, and I ended up killing the image of Valdemar, which sure raised quite the ruckus, Jake shared. I am not going to give any details, but man, it was one hell of a fight.

You killed that thing?

the Fallen King questioned. I faced a level 100 version and I find it difficult to imagine any being I can remember, even in mid-tier D-grade, ever facing that creature without any skills

I used my spores and reached Valdemar without any deaths at all, even if it got really close against both Umbra and the Undying General but I couldn't do anything against him, as he was entirely immune to my spores, Dina muttered. I died ten times in a row without ever even standing a chance, no matter how many preparations I made. I even tried filling the entire arena with seeds, and he just cut everything down.

Ree, Sylphie also said, a bit depressed that Valdemar had apparently just said he really liked her wind and found it refreshing, before cutting it apart, Sylphie quickly getting torn apart despite her semi-elemental wind form. Valdemar's Transcendent skill simply didn't care if something could be cut physically he would cut it anyway.

Well, as you all noted, it sure as fuck wasn't easy, and apparently, killing the image is so rare that Valdemar himself decided to come by followed by a few others, including Dinas Grandpa who came along with Artemis, Jake shared.

Why would Artemis come? I know she had an image in the Challenge Dungeon, but Dina said, confused.

Eh, private reasons, Jake just waved it off, not wanting to share more than he had to. In order to not get questioned, he decided to add something he knew would surely shift everyone's attention. Oh yeah, the Blightfather and Holy Mother also stopped by, and when they came, a whole lot of other gods also arrived by now, it's a whole party up there.

You talk as if you've been there, Dina said a bit tentatively.

I have, Jake confirmed, seeing no reason to deny it. Was an experience for sure, even got a few levels from it. Anyway, let's get a move on already. No time for banter, right?

No, I am actually very interested in what happened, the Sword Saint commented, not letting Jake get away that easy. For you to have gained levels must mean you did something, right?

Just a small presence competition with Valdemar for the fun of it, Jake once more tried to wave it off.

Why would you ever openly oppose a god like that!? Much less a Primordial! Dina said in a very critical tone. That was just so needlessly reckless.

In my defense, we both had a good time, Jake defended himself excellently.

Ree?

Oh no, Valdemar is way fucking scarier in real life than just his image, Jake answered as he still vividly remembered the presence of the man. The sheer bloodlust he had built up and the overwhelming power that would have crushed Jake into paste if the Primordial had poured in the slightest energy.

Are we just going to ignore how this living cheat also got a 25% in the Colosseum of Mortals? the Fallen King finally brought the conversation back on topic. If my math is correct that puts you on a total multiplier of 105%.

Truly a math genius, Jake smiled.

That is impressive, Dina muttered. With that, you can really compete

You're not going public with it? the Sword Saint asked.

No, Jake shook his head. Everyone will know when it matters anyway.

Fair, the Sword Saint nodded as he smiled. While it saddens me to know that my own chances are slim on these Leaderboards, there is one thing we can all still do: prove we are the best party. Also, while Jake can indeed compete, his final score is still reliant on everyone here so let's show them.

Jake smiled at the small pep-talk as he stood up. I assume that means no more fucking around?

The old man nodded. Lets get back in gear and see how far we can truly go. Even if I cannot find my own name atop the Leaderboards... I guess its acceptable to be known as one of the four party members of the top record holder.

Chapter 856: Nevermore: Floor Seventy-One

Welcome to the Seventy-first floor of Nevermore: The Nine Towers

You have arrived on a planet long abandoned by those who once lived there. Yet artifacts are left behind. Nine massive towers are scattered across the planet, once part of a greater purpose, each holding secrets and power of the civilization that once was.

Your goal is to explore each tower and then ultimately decide if you wish to activate or destroy them. But be warned, for even if much time has passed, the defensive systems of the towers still remain, and who knows what entering them might lead to, much less the outcome of their activations.

Main objective: Activate or destroy the Nine Towers.

Bonus objectives: Discover the true nature of the Nine Towers.

Current progress: Towers activated (0/9), Towers Destroyed (0/9)

Note: More hidden events, achievements, or objectives may be hidden on the floor.

Current Nevermore Points: 1,242,425

It was almost nostalgic reading the long system message about the floor they had just arrived on. Jake would rate it just about as nostalgic as the feeling of the Golden Mark left by the Fallen King, allowing them all to stay in communication even when far apart.

The five of them had appeared on top of a small hill, giving them a pretty bad view of what they were dealing with. Jake, taking the job of scout as usual, quickly flew into the sky and scanned the area before he made a rough calculation of the curvature of the planet and ultimately concluded it was pretty fucking big. It was not as big as Earth after the system, but maybe about two-thirds the size.

You see anything? the Sword Saint asked when Jake landed back on the ground.

Bunch of beasts, but they are all weak and barely in C-grade. Ah, but there are quite a few elementals here and there, all levels around 280. I also spot two towers, one over there and one over there, Jake said as he pointed in two directions. The others could see one of the towers far off in the distance, but only Jake had the Perception to see the tip of the second.

These towers were all roughly ten kilometers tall each, looking like huge skyscrapers. One of the two Jake saw had a red crystalline color, while the second looked more yellowish. So, it appeared that the towers had been nicely color-coded, which was nice as it made it a lot easier to communicate about what towers people were at.

Jake also shared the size of the planet and other characteristics as the others listened. Once he was done with his explanation, Dina briefly shared that the plants around told her that this planet was rather special in that it had absolutely no underground nor any bodies of water any larger than lakes anywhere on the entire planet. It was definitely a weird place, but confirming those two things was helpful as it meant they wouldn't waste any time looking for hidden achievements underground or underwater.

So, I guess we all know what we're doing? Jake asked after they were done talking.

Split up, the Fallen King answered without any hesitation.

That does seem like the best way, Dina nodded.

Ree! Sylphie agreed.

Alright, and if anyone is in trouble well, better make it on your own and get the fuck away because no one will be nearby, Jake added with a grin. Then we can all group back up and take down whatever may be the issue.

Sounds like a plan, the Sword Saint said, seeming almost giddy to set off on his own. They all were.

After a brief division of where to go, they all set off. Dina would take the second-closest tower, while the Fallen King would take the closest. Jake, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie would head off in three other directions to try and find a tower each. The Sword Saint did stay behind for a second, though, as he took out a canvas and began to paint one of his teleportation paintings so he could return to the hilltop if needed.

Setting off, Jake quickly used One Step-

Everything warped for a second as Jake suddenly found himself far beyond where he had wanted to step down, temporarily disorientating him. What was oh.

Jake had made some estimations of how good his newly upgraded boots were, and concluded it was good but not overly impactful. That is until he took that very first step. He had traveled nearly twice as far as a usual One Step and consumed even less stamina than before and that wasn't even the crazy part.

The crazy part was how Jake felt space warp around him, yet he remained so utterly stable within this warped reality. It was like he was an untouchable entity within the fluid and warping space, as he only now truly realized the meaning when it said Jake would always find a solid foothold. What also surprised him was the concept behind this effect. It was pure stability. It was a slightly different concept from his arcane affinity, but definitely similar in many ways.

Taking a few more steps, Jake continued to feel space warp as he began to pick up speed. The reason why space warped as it did was because the skill was getting pushed beyond what it normally allowed Jake to do forcibly which introduced the easy fix of just following the advice he had given the Forsaken Dragonkin in regards to using the skill:

To get good.

It wasn't as if the boots actually made movement skills twice as effective and barely cost anything. It was that Jake was horrible at using One Step according to the standards of the mythical boots. Making the baseline improvement from the boots incredibly effective. Which was fair enough. One Step was just an ancient skill, after all.

Hours quickly passed as Jake zoomed forward, pretty damn proud of his speed. He had improved a lot, but as he felt the Golden Marks and the locations of his other party members, he realized he was

definitely not the one who had improved the most. The Sword Saint, Dina, and Fallen King were also definitely moving faster, but Sylphie? Sylphie was on a whole other level as she was just zooming.

At first, he wondered if she was using her sprinting skill and was quickly running out of gas. But she kept up her utterly ridiculous speed for hours as she moved far faster than Jake no, not just Jake. The four other members of the party put together.

Hey, Sylphie, Jake asked through the Golden Mark. You sure got a lot faster, eh?

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Ree! Ree ree ree, she responded, gladly explaining how she had managed to drastically improve her ability to move incredibly swiftly while at the same time remaining ridiculously efficient.

I am not entirely sure what riding the wind super swooshyly means, but if it works, it works, I guess, Jake responded, realizing no Sylphie explanation would ever help him.

Not long after, the Fallen King was the first to reach his destination as he had gone to the closest tower. Right as he arrived, he contacted the group.

Allow me to send you some mental images of what I see, he communicated to all of them, as it appeared he had made an upgrade to his Golden Mark skill, now allowing one to also send pictures. What the Fallen King sent couldnt really be called a picture, though.

Jake received an odd mental image of sorts that, while clearly visual in nature, just looked off in every way. He saw a strong outline of the tower, but the color of the tower was an odd shade of gray with weird lines going across it. He also saw what looked like veins running through the entire tower, as well as small wisps of energy in the ground and even some floating in the air all around the Fallen King. Because, oh yeah, the picture wasnt exactly a two-dimensional one, but more of a semi-three-dimensional snapshot where what appeared in front of the Fallen King was far clearer than what was behind and to his sides.

Is is this how you see the world? Dina asked pretty quickly after the message was sent.

I tried to make it more interpretable to your minds, the Fallen King answered.

Imagine not having eyes, Jake joked, even if the lack of eyes was the reason the King's sight was so odd. He viewed everything through some weird soul-sight or something at all times, which definitely had some advantages but also many disadvantages, as his view distance was quite limited.

The King didn't say more as he entered the tower through a gate. Inside, the tower was clearly spatially expanded, and from what Jake saw in the limited vision pictures the Unique Lifeform repeatedly sent, everything was a mess inside. Nevertheless, he began exploring as he looked over the lobby, trying to find any clues for the bonus objective.

After searching and not finding anything, he began to climb the stairs of the tower. There was also what looked like an elevator there, but it was clearly broken, and the Fallen King also quickly confirmed that breaking walls and ceilings wasn't feasible as everything was incredibly strengthened. That wasn't to say it was impossible, just way too time-consuming.

Reaching the second tower floor, the challenge of the tower began to appear as they got their first clue as to what kind of creatures had built these towers in the first place. Robot-like golems were stationed as guards on the second tower floor. Eight in total, with four of them patrolling, with four others sealed-off side rooms. Their levels were all 275 to 280, making them relatively strong but far from strong enough. This was also where the King's vision was good, as things like walls didn't matter when it came to detecting living beings nearby which kind of made Jake feel dumb for when he tried to hide behind trees from the King back in the Tutorial.

The Fallen King didn't hesitate as he simply floated into the room with the four guards. He was instantly noticed by the guards, who quickly proved to be aggressive as they attacked on sight. The four of them charged at once as the Fallen King raised one of his ivory claws that began to glow with golden power.

A wave of golden force was blasted out the very next second, hitting all the guards. They all stumbled back, physically seemingly unhurt, but through the vision of the Fallen King, Jake could see it definitely wasn't so. Golden cracks had formed on their Soulshapes, signifying some significant soul damage.

Before they had a chance to attack again, the Fallen King continued forward as a second golden wave released. The four guards fell back further as a third wave came soon after. One of the four Soulshapes shattered on impact like it was made of glass as the golem fell dead to the ground. A fourth wave spelled the end of the other three as the King kept up his casual demeanor.

Gotten a lot stronger, Jake mentally noted as the Unique Lifeform continued exploring the floor. However, it quickly became clear this wasn't going to be a fast endeavor. On a wall, he found a floor plan that depicted around a hundred floors in total for the tower, with the lower levels being residential while the higher ones were research-based. The ones at the very top had no information on them at all, but just looking at the floor plans, Jake already had a good idea of what they were dealing with.

Each of these towers are probably mini-dungeons of sorts that get progressively harder the further up you go. Also, expect a boss of some kind towards the top, Jake communicated through the Golden Mark. Also, since there are nine if you get the chance to activate the tower, don't do so right away, alright? Getting a feeling we shouldn't just activate these towers willy-nilly.

As you will, the Fallen King responded, not trying to argue. The other three also quickly agreed, no one questioning Jake. They had learned over many years that questioning Jake's gut feeling led to nothing good, and to just trust it instead.

While the Fallen King continued his tower climb, the others continued exploring the planet. Dina also soon reached her tower and began to climb it, and not that long after, Sylphie also discovered one, which she promptly entered.

Jake was flying very high up in the sky as he peered down, trying to get a proper lay of the land. Most of the planet was wide open plains with a few lakes here and there, with intermitting large deserts in between. There were barely any mountains or hills. The only tall things were the towers.

What really surprised him was that he saw no buildings anywhere. No traces of any civilization having ever lived there at all, despite the floor descriptions. The beasts roaming were also surprisingly low in number. There were far fewer than Jake assumed there would be on a planet this big.

His big clue as to what was going on came when Jake saw what looked like a small forest. All the trees still looked young, making Jake frown as he sent a message to Dina. Hey, Dina, can you ask some of the plants you encounter how old they are?

You also noticed? she quickly responded. Something is wrong for sure. Meadows of grass can often be extremely old, yet I didn't meet any that was more than fifty years old. Actually, I have yet to encounter any plants older than a few decades at most

Frowning at the revelation, an idea had begun to form in his head. After a week or so, they had all arrived in towers and were exploring them. The Fallen King had taken nearly half a day just clearing one tower floor, and finding the way to the next one proved challenging simply due to how big they were while being filled with enemies.

Jake was quite a lot faster, and despite reaching a tower only on the third day since their arrival, he had already overtaken the Fallen King as he did something very cheat-like. Rather than fight all the guards, Jake used Unseen Hunter as he snuck through the tower, using his Sphere to navigate.

Only on tower floor fifteen Jake began having to fight as there were methods of detection he couldn't avoid such as golems blocking doorways he had to pass through. Jake was making rapid progress, but he was not the only one, as all of them were breezing through the towers.

When they had finished Nevermore floor sixty-nine, they still did well, but things had begun to get hard toward the end, and getting good achievements started to prove difficult. Now, it was as if they had been given a second wind from the Challenge Dungeons. They had gotten stronger, refined their skills, and become refocused. However, that wasn't the only thing that had happened.

After just reaching C-grade, one would have a lot of momentum for gaining levels. They came fast and easy, at least for a little while. But, soon, one began to run out of momentum as experience accumulated faster than quality Records, resulting in lower leveling speed. This was inescapable, even for someone like Jake, who had insane Records due to his Bloodline and Path as a whole.

Jake and all the others had begun to level slowly for the last many years of doing floors but that too had changed now. The Challenge Dungeons had given jack shit when it came to experience but had instead refueled them all with new Records. It had filled up their momentum tanks, and now

You have slain [Tower Golem Enforcer lvl 287] Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 257 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 258 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Now, the fast levels were back on the menu, as Jake, with excitement, slaughtered his way up the tower, feeling the same glee from the rest of his party as a second growth spurt was underway.

Chapter 857: Nevermore: Chief Overseer

Jake sat atop a pile of metal as he quickly deciphered the magical seal on the cube he had looted from the dead Tower Guardian lying destroyed beneath him. As he got the cube open, he quickly checked its contents and nodded.

Yep, I can confirm these towers are all made to terraform the planet in some crazy experiment, Jake sent through the Golden Mark. They had already kind of known it from other clues, but this was confirmation, which was good enough for the system.

Bonus Objective Completed: Discover the true nature of the nine towers. 3500 Nevermore Points earned.

Bonus Objective Gained: Locate the ones behind the construction of the nine towers.

Jake put the cube away as he jumped off the pile of metal and prepared to head to the top room of the tower he spotted through his sphere. As he walked toward the hidden stairs, he threw the large golem a final look with a smile. Pretty fun fight, even if it was quite a bit weaker than the scalekin metal mage.

His satisfaction with the fight was helped along by the fact that Jake had gained yet another level, far faster than he had expected.

You have slain [White Tower Guardian lvl 305] Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 258 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Jake was the first to reach the top of a tower due to the power of stealth. The others were also quickly doing their thing, and it wouldn't be that long before five of nine towers were conquered, as he felt

confident all of his party members could beat the Guardian on their own if it was as only strong as the one Jake had just taken down.

Reaching the hidden staircase, Jake summoned his Alchemical Flame and burned a hole in the wall as he couldn't be arsed to try and find the opening mechanism. Walking up the stairs, Jake had already scanned the hidden room, and while there was no one there, it was bloody filled with electronic stuff.

The room below did have a few computer-like things, but Jake had the feeling that it was just a front of sorts, while the real deal was to be found on this hidden top floor. As he reached the top of the stairs, a new achievement popped up for all of them.

Achievement earned: Reach the top of one of the nine towers and uncover the hidden control room.
2000 Nevermore Points earned.

It was pretty easy points, and Jake sure wouldn't complain. None of the others did either, as Jake found another cube with information and deciphered it. This hidden control room was for advanced forms of terraforming and to control the automatic experiment still in progress. In fact, it was revealed that should anyone mess with the control panels on the floor below, the ones who had set up the experiment in the first place would be alerted.

On this top floor, Jake also found a deactivated teleportation circle, and while Jake didn't have a good grasp of how these kinds of things worked, he could luckily do the same as the Fallen King and temporarily share his vision. Using that, he learned from Dina that it was a special closed-circuit teleportation circle, with them all guessing this circle connected to corresponding circles in other towers.

Jake spent the next full day or so deciphering all the information he could in the tower, primarily to figure out how to activate the teleportation circle. The magical puzzles to unlock stuff weren't that complicated, and soon enough, Jake also came to learn that activating any one tower would start a chain reaction, also activating others, the end result being that everyone not currently inside a tower would die. As for what would kill them

So not to scare anyone, but there seems to be a total of four space stations in orbit around this planet, as well as a few thousand satellites, all aimed to scorch the surface of the planet on command, Jake warned everyone. The good news is that we are in what's called a hibernation period right now, where only a few people are awake on the space stations, so as long as we don't activate something haphazardly, they probably shouldn't notice what we're doing.

At least, that's what Jake said but it quickly became clear whoever was controlling these towers had already detected Jake and company and what they were doing as they quickly deployed countermeasures. Luckily, they couldn't activate the extermination protocol without entering the towers, but transport ships were sent down, filled with even more C-grade golems.

It was a great time all around. Jake had initially been a bit disappointed with the number of enemies, but now they were practically being delivered on a silver platter. After Jake left the tower, he was attacked by a few dozen golems who seemed intent on capturing rather than killing, but Jake was having none of that as he destroyed all of them after getting agreement from his party that this was the right course of action, of course.

This seemed to get the message across, as every subsequent attack was made with deadly intent. Jake kept exploring the planet with intermittent fights as he felt himself being observed by satellites far above. About a week later, the Fallen King was also done exploring his tower, too, followed by the three others, also getting done within a few days. As predicted, every time a tower was cleared, they could activate the teleportation circles and travel between all of them freely.

Which was a necessity as the annoying space golems kept coming down and entering the towers, trying to take back control. Or worse, activate the towers and kill everything on the planet. This forced their party to have two people at all times play defense, teleporting between towers when necessary to keep things defended. This task was designated to the Fallen King and Dina, as Dina was especially well-suited to defend a location as she quite literally took root and planted flowers to both forewarn and defend. The Fallen King was just a menace in the smallish hallways, and his soul attacks were especially effective against larger crowds of golems. Oh yeah, and he was pretty damn slow anyway.

Meanwhile, Jake, Sylphie, and the Sword Saint acted on their own to get the final four towers. Due to the size of their planet, they had to travel a lot while getting harassed by the damn space golems, who seemed to have endless numbers.

After an additional month, the second batch of towers had been taken over, bringing their total number of captures to eight of the nine towers. However, the final tower turned out to be quite a bit more difficult to capture than the others, as the researchers had decided to fortify the location. The attacks on the other towers didn't stop, though, and ultimately, they decided on just having Jake and Sylphie attack the final one, as the Sword Saint also stayed back to defend while also researching more of what these towers could do. When they finally conquered the final tower, the ability to teleport to one of the four space stations above was also unlocked, and well...

One thing led to another, and after Jake and company had crashed through the atmosphere on a mothership around a year later while fighting a horde of five-meter-tall mechs with miniguns, they were already approaching the end of floor seventy-one.

Only a final fight awaited them, as they needed an access code to start something called the Revitalization Protocol to begin restoring the planet to its former state while putting an end to the experiment that had periodically killed all life on the planet. The entire point of this experiment had been them trying to manipulate the planets innate affinities, and from the looks of it, the researchers had failed horribly despite keeping the experiment going for so long.

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In the present, Jake, Sylphie, the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Dina found themselves standing in front of the burning wreckage of what had once been a kilometer-wide mothership that once served to coordinate with the four space stations that they had naturally also destroyed.

From the wreckage, a single figure rose, having been awakened from hibernation by the crash, yet remained entirely undamaged as it had been in a sealed-off control room. Standing over ten meters tall, the robot-like creature reminded Jake of those car-transforming robots from movies and TV, and when it pulled out a sword, Jake feared copyright infringement was taking place right in front of his eyes. Things got a bit better when it activated what was clearly some kind of astral magic, which Jake definitely hadn't seen in the movies. Oh yeah, it was also definitely a lot stronger than the movie robots at least it was the strongest thing on this floor by far.

[Chief Overseer lvl 320]

The party didn't even have to communicate as they made their move. The Fallen King and Sword Saint moved toward the robot as Sylphie circled around while Jake made some distance. Dina was the only one who remained roughly in place as she took out her staff and cast supportive magic on their two front liners.

Mana gathered as a large discharge of astral energy was released from the boss, bathing the surrounding area, as the old power generators of the mothership served to amplify this mana, effectively creating a massive domain that helped empower the boss.

With swift movement, especially for such a large creature, the Chief Overseer charged at the Sword Saint, who was closest. The old man didn't react as the huge blade bathed in starlight descended, as two barriers overlapped right before he was hit one green and one golden.

Not having to block, the old man drew his blade and released a large crescent cut that sent sparks and small metal fragments flying as the robot was pushed back. At the very same time, an arrow also arrived, but in an impressive display of dexterity, the boss managed to barely block using its blade.

Sadly, this made it unable to defend itself when a green whirlwind struck the boss from behind, throwing it entirely off balance. The Fallen King also didn't sit idly back, as while he had made a barrier with one claw, he used his second to attack as a shockwave of force blasted into the robot's leg. A second barrage of Arrow Rain also struck the boss soon after, with the Sword Saint also following up.

The Chief Overseer wasn't as weak as to simply fall to this pressure, as its entire form turned into light as it teleported right behind Dina, evading another barrage of attacks. It swung its blade down toward the dryad, but found itself blocked as Bobo, her living armor, was already ready to defend as Dina also turned and slammed her staff into the ground.

A torrent of vines erupted from the ground, entangling and sending the boss airborne, as another Arcane Powershot blasted it to the side, sending even more metal parts flying. The other three also struck again, forcing the robot to turn into a beam of light once more, this time going after Jake.

However, right as it appeared behind Jake, he just smiled as he took a step and teleported nearly five kilometers away, and with a second step, he was back with his party, almost ten kilometers from the boss. This was when they learned the big robot also had some solid ranged weapon options as light erupted from its back and dozens of warping beams shot toward the five of them.

The boss also moved, arriving at the same time as the attack, but its sword found little purchase as a vine erupted from the ground and stopped its swinging arm. A shockwave of force sent the robot flying as the Sword Saint, Jake, and Sylphie all unleashed ranged attacks, resulting in the Chief Overseer getting pushed further and further back while trying to defend itself, revealing several other weapons that all proved mostly useless.

One could say many things about this boss, but it was definitely durable. Despite all of them attacking repeatedly, they had managed to do little noticeable damage, and whenever they did cut or blast off large chunks of metal, the Chief Overseer used some kind of self-repair magic. Alas, even if it looked like the robot was barely being damaged, its energy resources were drained at a rapid rate. The large astral

domain did help the robot, but honestly, it barely seemed to do anything as the Fallen King and Dina both messed with it in between attacks.

What the boss also severely lacked were adequate offensive tools. The sword strikes seemed strong, but against the double barriers, it simply didnt stand a chance. While it did have a lot of offensive options, none of them were truly powerful. Minutes passed, and the boss was slowly getting whittled down until they finally reached the second phase of the fight.

Turning into a beam of light, the Chief Overseer returned to the wreckage of the mothership. It stopped, floating just above the pile of metal as it raised its sword toward the sky. The sword rapidly began to transform into an umbrella-like-looking thing, and at the same time, the astral domain also began to react.

It imploded in an instant, as all the energy that remained in the batteries of the mothership was also drained. A dense barrier of powerful mana surrounded the boss as the umbrella-like thing turned out to be some kind of satellite dish or something because, at the very next moment, it shot out a beam of light toward the sky.

Kill it quickly!

Jake sent through the Golden Mark as he got the feeling things would get annoying if they didnt hurry. It didnt take a genius to figure out the Chief Overseer was communicating with the many satellites they had done nothing about still floating in orbit far above them.

Everyone responded to Jakes words as no one held back.

A giant golden beam erupted from the Fallen King, shearing away much of the barrier, followed by a pillar of pure vines erupting right below the boss, physically piercing into the barrier and forming cracks all over it. Jakes Protean Arrow arrived next, as the entire barrier shattered and an explosion of powerful arcane energy washed over the Chief Overseer. Yet, even so, it didnt stop what it was doing, even if it did move the arm, not holding the transformed sword to form a shield which ended up doing very little.

The Sword Saint stood right in front of the giant robot as he drew his blade. His entire aura changed when he did, as his entire body seemed to turn younger for a second as he executed what was still the single most powerful attack anyone in their party was capable of.

Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut.

As if a new crescent moon of water was born on the surface of the planet, the swing released a massive wave that cut through the large robot. The arm it tried to defend with was cut straight through as half of its body was also cut into, doing extreme damage as several parts began falling to the ground. Yet the Chief Overseer had barely survived. For half a second longer, that is.

A loud boom echoed out as a green gust passed, serving as the calm before the storm. The Chief Overseer barely managed to turn its head as Sylphie arrived in the form of a massive green tornado that had taken the rough form of a drill, Sylphie herself serving as the pointed end.

The entire weakened robot was blasted apart as the beam of light from the sword faded away. Yet as it did, Jakes danger sense also warned him as he quickly said through the Golden Mark: Self-destruct!

Without anyone needing any further prompt, they all arrived at Dinas location near-instantly as she was already casting her magic. Everyone helped form their own barriers, and just as they did, the boss body lit up as it went supernova and exploded, sending out a wave of powerful, destructive astral light.

Several defensive barriers were burned away, but in the end, the death explosion failed to get through Dinas final barrier. It soon faded as they now found themselves standing in an utterly massive crater, the wreckage of the mothership entirely obliterated. The only trace that remained was a large sword now stuck in the ground in the middle of the crater. It wasnt far-fetched to assume that was where the access codes could be found.

Also, it wasnt some bait-and-switch, as the boss was indeed very much dead.

You have slain [Chief Overseer lvl 320] Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 259 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 259 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Well done, everyone, the Sword Saint said, looking a bit tired as he usually did after pulling off his Transcendent mini-version skill.

Jake nodded as he smiled. It sure was good to have the whole gang together, and they had all gotten substantially stronger, not to mention the second wind of levels that would just make them all grow even faster. It honestly made him feel bad for the poor enemies on the floors to come

Alas, sacrifices were inevitable in the glorious pursuit of making numbers go up.

Chapter 858: Nevermore: Level 260 Class Skill Selection

It didn't take long before they used the access code to finish off the seventy-first floor, having done so quite a lot faster than floor seventy. Also, while it was true these floors were quite a lot bigger than those before, everyone in the party had also gotten quite a bit faster, and when fighting didn't slow them down as much, it added up.

Activating the Revitalization Protocol took place within one of the towers as all five of them stood together as Jake pressed the big red button. When he did, all of the towers hummed to life, sending beams of light into the sky as they released waves of mana that washed over the landscape. All of the satellites in orbit also began to shoot down beams that infused the world with mana and different affinities, doing just as the protocol said it would. Soon, the satellites would run out of energy and shut down, and the towers were also quickly emptying themselves, putting an end to the experiment once and for all.

With time, the planet would recover, and the towers would just become empty relics that would eventually break down due to environmental factors. Jake and company naturally had no intent to stick around for that long as they saw that behind them, where the teleporter taking them to different towers was, a door had appeared right beside it.

Well, this floor could have gone worse, Jake muttered as they all entered the door to the in-between room. Sadly, this one was as boring as the prior ones, with only Minaga having had interesting ones. It still had the same features, such as a door to the latest city floor, one to the next floor, and, naturally, the one they had just entered through.

The Nevermore Points are adequate, if fewer than I expected, the Fallen King said.

I just think our sense of what we should get was warped by the Challenge Dungeons rewarding so many, the Sword Saint responded as Jake also checked over all the Nevermore Points they had gained from the floor minus the two bonus objectives Jake completed early on.

Seventy-first floor completed. 14200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Activate five tower teleporters within a month (30 days) of each other. 3000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement Earned: Never once allow any of the Researchers to enter the top floor of a tower. 3000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Defeat the entire command structure of the Researchers. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Chief Overseer without ever allowing it to trigger any of the satellites. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement Earned: Do not cause needless destruction or kill unnecessary wildlife. 1000 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Activate the Revitalization Protocol. 10000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the seventy-first floor within 500 days while triggering the Revitalization Protocol. 7000 Nevermore Points earned.

Current Nevermore Points: 1,296,125

Overall, the floor had given just a bit over 50,000 Nevermore Points, making it quite good. Less efficient than the Challenge Dungeons, yes, but those had honestly been overpowered when it came to getting points, just as the Sword Saint said. Speaking of points from the Challenge Dungeons, Jake wondered:

So, I need to ask do I have the most Nevermore Points with-

Yes you do, Jake, the Sword Saint cut him off before Jake had a chance to unsightly humble-brag. Now, do we need a recovery period, or should we proceed immediately?

Jake was a bit bummed, but with the other wanting to get a move on, he agreed as they went to floor seventy-two.

Right as they entered the door, they found themselves in the middle of what looked like a hastily constructed city square, as the floor description popped up.

Welcome to the Seventy-second floor of Nevermore: Settlers of Kantaan

Jake quickly skimmed the rest of the description, and to sum it up this was a city-defense floor, at least for the most part. The story was that a faction of different enlightened species had sent people to this planet far away using some special teleportation measure to set up a city in preparation for the rest of the citizens to arrive in a big ark at a later date. The problem was that they had kind of fucked up when measuring what kind of beings lived on the planet already and how receptive they would be to these new settlers.

Because the natives were not happy with these unwelcome guests.

Their job was to defend this city from rampaging beasts from different monster factions present on the planet while even expanding and placing two new settlements for when help arrived. This help in the form of the ark would arrive after five years based on the description, but through different means, they could speed up and have them come faster.

There was probably more to it, but Jake and company didn't have much time to think as soon after arriving, an attack arrived from a horde of rampaging monsters. They were a mix of dinosaur-looking beasts and based on what Jake and the others later learned, the beasts generally came in four flavors: lizards, mammals, elementals, and even undead.

There is probably some moral question here regarding settlers just coming to a new planet and trying to take it over unceremoniously, Jake said, the Sword Saint nodding.

Its effectively a form of colonialism, the old man nodded. Though the matter is complicated by these settlers having been forced to go here by their faction. They dont have much of a choice but to go here, effectively making them refugees.

Dina looked a bit confused as they talked. Why is it complicated? Isnt it normal to want to spread out and expand even if you are not forced to? This faction merely wishes to grow and has sent a seed to sprout on this planet.

On our homeworld, the act of expanding and forcing out the natives already living there has a very negative history, and for good reason, the Sword Saint answered her calmly.

But if any living being needs to keep expanding to realize their Path, its natural that others will be pushed away. A trees growing crown steals sunlight from those in its shade, and there is limited mana for all to share in the ground below, Dina said, not sounding like she was trying to argue but was simply confused about why Jake and the Sword Saint even discussed morals in this case.

Humans from Earth are always keen on discussing the rights and wrongs of a situation. I learned that plenty by attending the World Council we established. Yet they are also utter hypocrites in many matters, including happily encroaching on nature to expand their settlements and industries. As long as they dont hurt other humans, they tend to show little care, the Fallen King chimed in.

Isnt that fine? Humans are a social species who live together and their Path is to grow through working in unison and sharing Legacies and whatnot. To care about the preservation of humans over the lives of others is just natural, Dina said.

You know what, now were getting all philosophical again, which we frankly dont have the time to as the attack arrives in like thirty seconds, Jake said. So, quick vote, do we do the objective and defend the city or try to look for an alternative solution?

Jake wanted to put things to a vote to finish things quickly, but well, it turns out no one really wanted to vote, as they simply didnt have any strong feelings either way, making everyone abstain in case someone did have an opinion. Jake also didnt particularly care if these settlers were evil colonialists or desperate refugees; he was just there for the levels, and if defending the budding city gave more levels, he was all for it.

On a side note, Jake did think his leveling had been a bit slow on the prior floor, even if he had admittedly avoided combat when he could, as the hunting teams and whatnot weren't that interesting opponents. Also, the Path Jake walked was one where he wanted to be challenged, so he wanted to avoid easy fights, but still, levels had come slow.

Well, it turns out part of the reason Jake had leveled slowly was that he was just before a level-up when they killed the Chief Overseer which translated to Jake also getting a level only within an hour of arriving on floor seventy-two.

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 260 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Jake got the level, and after only a bit more fighting, all the attackers were dead. At this point, he had already informed his party of his level-up. Everyone gave him knowing looks as Jake retreated from the frontlines and found a little spot to sit and chill while smiling and opening the system menu. That's right, it was time for an old tradition.

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Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge class skills available

It had been quite a while since Jake had his last new class skill. Back then, he had selected Arcane Supremacy, which had been a great boon, and he was definitely looking forward to what was on offer this time around. With all the Challenge Dungeons, there had to be traces of Records from those in the skills available.

With great expectations, he proceeded as usual and went through his options one by one.

[Superior Arcane Kick (Rare)] You have shown yourself an experienced martial artist, allowing you to-

Jake kept smiling even if he was saddened to see there were only four new skills available because fuck that shit. So, he moved on to the first real option, even if it wasn't that much better.

[Cursed Arcane Bolt of Hunger (Rare)] - Allows the hunter to summon bolts of arcane mana containing curse energy to defeat your foes. Two kinds of bolts can be summoned: a stable and a destructive version. The destructive bolts will explode upon impact, and the stable version will be tough and piercing. Stable cursed arcane bolts will have the curse energy be slow-acting, while destructive cursed arcane bolts will act aggressively. Due to the Sin Curse of Hunger, the overall damage of the Cursed Arcane Bolt is reduced in exchange for all damage dealt, now stealing a slight amount of energy. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Intelligence when using Cursed Arcane Bolt of Hunger.

This was one of those skills Jake had no intention of ever selecting but still valued as it gave him some insight into what was possible. It was clearly gained due to his research and improvement of his control of curse energy during the House of the Architect and was an interesting merging of curse energy and Jakes arcane affinity. Having life-stealing arcane bolts definitely did seem intriguing, even if he wasn't sure how useful it would actually be if it came at the cost of overall damage done.

Either way, cool skill to look at, but not really an option. Especially not with such a low rarity. Not that the next skill was that much of an improvement either, even if the rarity at least went up.

[Destabilizing Arcane Explosion (Epic)] Remain unimpeded as you destabilize the world and all that seeks you harm. Allows the hunter to erupt in a destructive arcane explosion with the aim of disrupting all energy constructs and the concept of stability itself in your immediate surroundings. This arcane explosion will significantly weaken all environmental mana and objects and is incredibly effective at dismantling enemy energy constructs. Adds a bonus to the effects of Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence when using Destabilizing Arcane Explosion

He wasn't quite sure what to think about this one. Was he going to pick it? No, definitely not, but the concepts in play were a bit surprising. The description told him that it was possible to directly attack the concept of stability itself using his arcane mana, which was well, wasn't that pretty much what the acid Jake had made also did? It kind of was.

Definitely another one of those skills to keep in mind for future freeform magic and when considering other upgrades. He was a bit surprised at one thing, though. This was the third skill, and it was only epic rarity. He had kind of expected better with his high-tier class. Then again, he probably shouldn't be that surprised.

Jake remembered something he had read a good while back, which made him theorize that the reason the skills weren't that awesome was due to Jake having improved some himself already. Seeing an

upgraded version of Mark was definitely something he could have imagined, along with a better stealth skill. So it seemed like the system had to make skills more from things Jake had done rather than the innate Records of the class itself. Not to say there weren't any skills like that the next one available being one such example.

[Barrier of the Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge (Ancient)] Embrace stability as you become impervious. Allows the Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge to summon a barrier of pure, stable arcane energy, blocking out any kinds of direct attacks that attempt to pass through both physical and magical attacks alike. This effect is further improved when blocking attacks made from a far distance and from higher-leveled foes. All affinities not of your creation will be significantly suppressed within the barrier and a slight area around it. Mana or stamina will be consumed depending on the nature of the blocked attacks. Adds a bonus to the effects of Wisdom and Endurance when using Arcane Barrier of the Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge.

Definitely the first real skill to consider. It was very similar to the barrier skill that had been offered back in D-grade, even having the same concept-suppressing effects. This one was quite a bit better, though. He especially liked the part that made it better, the more powerful and far away the attacker was.

Admittedly, Jake did kind of lack a good defensive skill. Right now, he relied on freeform stable barriers and Scales of the Malefic Viper whenever he had to block an attack he couldn't simply avoid. Then again, that was also the biggest reason why he maybe didn't need the skill: Jake would rather just dodge. So this skill would only be useful when there was no other choice.

That led to the question of how much better it even was than just a few layers of freeform stable barriers coupled with Scales. Jake naturally had no way to determine that, but it was a valid concern in his mind.

Ultimately, Jake wasn't that keen on the skill, even if it could be useful in some cases. He was more interested in just improving his freeform arcane magic instead, perhaps taking some inspiration from this skill. He had taken inspiration from the last barrier skill offered, too, partly in his Unseen Hunter skill, where the barrier he could create when not moving was capable of suppressing concepts.

Moving on, Jake honestly felt a bit disappointed so far. However, when he saw the final skill yeah, Jake still wasn't sure how to feel. The rarity at least looked great.

[Brave Presence of the Emerging War God (Mythical)] As you step foot upon the battlefield, let none hold doubt that a god of war has appeared. Having proven yourself and received the personal

recognition of Valdemar, you have shown yourself to truly have the bravery and presence required to one day be recognized as a true War God. Allows you to emanate a Presence of Bravery by infusing it with inner energy, increasing the physical stats of all allies nearby while putting mental pressure on your opponents. Any allies fighting in the presence of the Emerging War God will be near-impervious to all forms of mental attacks. As bravery fills their spirits, retreat is no option, as even when resources are lacking, bravery remains. All effects of Brave Presence of the Emerging War God scales with Willpower and Endurance, as well as your overall level of power.

There was no need to try and theorize how Jake had unlocked this skill choice. It said why right there in the description. This was born of the Records from Jake clashing directly with Valdemar, probably coupled with the Primordials genuine intentions of having Jake join Valhal. Records recognizing Jake could be an Emerging War God.

Jake wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Ignoring everything else and just looking at the skill, Jake had to recognize it was a damn powerful one. It would allow him to make everyone around him more powerful simply by being near him, put pressure on enemies, and even make all allies borderline immune to certain forms of magic. Based on that thing about bravery and lacking resources, Jake also read it as allowing those influenced by him to keep fighting despite not having stamina and mana left. All in all, it was a mythical skill through and through but not one fitting Jake's Path at all.

The skill never once mentioned making Jake himself stronger. Even if it did, the skill still had a stamina cost Jake didn't doubt would be high. He didn't need all the mental resistance stuff, either. This skill was, without a shadow of a doubt, absolutely incredible for someone leading an army or even a party leader, but Jake was neither of those. He was a hunter who was solo most of the time. He was no god of war, and quite frankly, he didn't want to become one.

In the short term, this skill would probably still be useful as he was fighting in Nevermore with his party, but what about when they were out? Jake was going to be alone for the most part again, out hunting more and more powerful foes. This skill would be nearly useless in that case.

Not to mention how Jake felt it would pollute his Path as a hunter to have a skill like this. He feared it could end up unlocking a bunch of other commander-like skills in the future, something Jake definitely didn't want.

No no, while the skill was interesting and even a bit flattering, it wasn't one Jake wanted. It didn't fit him, no matter how powerful it was.

This left Jake with a bit of a problem when the usual strategy of just picking the highest-rarity skill at the end of the list didn't work. It didn't help that he didn't like any of the other skills on offer either.

However, where one sees challenges, there can also be opportunities. Because, while none of these five options were any good, they weren't the only ones he had to choose between. Jake still vividly remembered the skill he had skipped for Arcane Supremacy when he reached 230, and when he checked the list, it was still there, just as he had hoped.

He was naturally talking about Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizons Edge.

[Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizons Edge (Ancient)] No defenses shall stop your arrows as they pierce the foes that dare impede your Path toward the horizon. Allows the Hunter to create a Penetrating Arcane Arrow that will pierce through nearly any natural barriers and have a far higher penetrative effect on any defenses made by the target. Will temporarily lower the defenses of the foe if they are struck successfully. These effects are more powerful the higher the enemy's defenses and the higher the level disparity between you and your opponent. On an internal cooldown, the Horizon-Chasing Hunter can push himself beyond his usual abilities and infuse the concepts of the Penetrating Arrow of Horizons Edge into another self-created arcane arrow. Doing this will temporarily make the skill unavailable, with this period dependent on the power of the arrow you infused. Due to their conceptual synergy, Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizons Edge receives significantly increased bonuses from Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility, Strength, Wisdom, Intelligence, and Perception when using Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizons Edge.

Reading this skill once more, Jake felt certain. He had wanted it back then already and had only skipped it because Arcane Supremacy was just too good in comparison. Now, there was no clearly superior other choice, and Jake was more than pleased with selecting this one, as it would finally give him proper armor-penetrating attacks. Especially the ability to infuse the skill into another self-created arrow interested him, as he looked forward to seeing it mesh with Protean Arrow.

After barely any more thinking, Jake selected the skill as the instinctual knowledge entered his mind as he closed his eyes and took everything in. Once he had fully internalized all the knowledge, he opened his eyes again, as the Sword Saint had come over to check in with Jake as they waited for the next attack to arrive.

Got a good new skill? the old man asked with a smile. He still had a couple more levels to go before it was his turn, but it wouldn't be long.

Yeah, Jake nodded as he stood up.

The Sword Saint smiled even more as he raised an eyebrow. You know, while you were selecting a skill, the others and I discussed this floor, and we agreed that perhaps it would be wise to send one of us out to scout the area and perhaps see if we could slay any leaders or commanders in charge of-

Yes, Jake cut him off as he grinned. He wasn't going to say no to a chance like that.

How lucky you agreed; I was just thinking you would be suitable for the job, the old man chuckled. Now, get going as we hold down the fort. Stay in touch and keep us informed of what you find.

Jake didn't need to be told twice that he could go play and took to the air. He briefly exchanged a glance with his party members as he passed, who waved him off as he heard the Sword Saint's voice through the Golden Mark.

Happy hunting.

Chapter 859: Nevermore: Some Proper Bloody Hunting

A vast grassland filled with flowing hills, some of which were kilometers tall, stretched as far as the eye could see. Large piles of dirt were further stacked atop many of the tallest hills as monsters sat there, watching the horizon.

The grasslands themselves were filled with beasts of all sorts. They populated the area as many made small nests or caves to call their own, as they took in the dense natural mana filling the environment. In some of the deep valleys between the hills, forests could be found, creating natural barriers to defend the beasts within while also serving as focal points of natural mana gathering. These small forests were where the strongest beasts were gathered, as they absorbed the environmental mana to grow stronger while at the same time allowing their kin to function as meat shields should there ever be an invasion.

Within the deepest of all these forests, a powerful being sat in a clearing, as it munched on fruit that could only be classified as valuable natural treasures. It was a large beast, about four meters tall, with

two arms and legs, incredibly thick fur, and two curved horns growing on each side of its head. It was incredibly bulky, and the long hair and hide looked more suited for a cold environment, which wasn't overly surprising when one saw its race.

[Woodland Yeti Lord lvl 310]

It was a creature that had likely left the cold northern pole of the planet and evolved with time to become the local lord. With its power, it had become an overlord of these vast plains, leading and commanding them to attack the newcomers who had come and begun to encroach on its domain. So far, it had only sent the weaker of its kin, but with time, it would no doubt send more, perhaps even joining the assault on this new settlement itself. Naturally, it would also have to consider the movements of the other lords first so as to not weaken itself needlessly.

For now, there didn't seem to be any rush as the yeti ate the fruit and absorbed the energy within. The plains were peaceful, and the guards hadn't reported anything wrong. Not that the Yeti Lord wouldn't know if something was wrong even without those weak guards. This was its domain, after all. It had skills that made it impossible for anything to strike her unnoticed from any-

The warning from her danger sense arrived too late, and even when it tried to move it couldn't, as it felt its very soul shake with fear as some powerful apex predators eyes landed on it.

An object struck the Woodland Yeti Lord on top of its skull before it barely had time to move its neck. A passive skill of the yeti activated as its hide and long hair got significantly more durable, but the sharp object still easily pierced through, hardly meeting any resistance.

Blood flew out but was annihilated by the purple-ish destructive energy surrounding the attack as the sharp attack went into the yeti's skull and continued its descent through its entire body before striking the ground beneath, sending up an explosion of soil, rock, blood, and flesh, all embraced by destructive energies as hundreds of trees all around the clearing fell over from the shockwave left by the impact.

The Woodland Yeti Lord tried to fight back against its certain death, but as if to rub salt in the wound, a powerful toxin had quite literally been rubbed into all of its wounds, making the situation more than a little bleak.

Still, a late-tier C-grade lord was not to be trifled with. A powerful skill activated as the yeti's body grew in size and was empowered as the yeti used its ultimately boosting skill in a last-ditch effort to-

A second attack arrived as a second explosion rang out within the forest. The yeti, who was already almost dead, fell over on the soil that pulsed with powerful veins of destructive energy, never to get up again. In such a fashion, one of the powerful lords of the planet fell in the midst of its own domain. Slain without anyone ever even noticing that a hunter had chosen it as prey.

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You have slain [Woodland Yeti Lord lvl 310] Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake stood in mid-air as he stared down at the scene far below and the carnage he had wrought. Several hundreds of kilometers beneath him, a clearing had been destroyed as there now was a crater with a dead yeti in the middle; all the trees around this clearing tipped over away from the crater. Four more arrows fell atop the corpse in the following second or two, having been unnecessary in the grand scheme of things, but Jake had shot them just to make sure. It took a while for his arrows to arrive, after all, so he couldn't wait to see the results before deciding if he had to shoot more.

At that moment, Jake was feeling both happy and a small tinge of annoyance. Happy that he had killed a boss monster of the Nevermore floor so easily, but a tad annoyed he hadn't done so in a single shot. It was the peak of first-world problems, and Jake knew it, but he had still hoped to kill the yeti in one shot. Things were only made worse by it being so bloody close to being enough with only a single arrow.

Ill get the next boss in one shot, Jake assured himself as he reentered stealth and moved on toward another direction. Through a mix of a ridiculously high Perception stat, his tracking skill, and just looking at where monsters tended to gather, Jake sought out the next lord for him to test his newly empowered most powerful arrow on.

It ended up only taking him a few more days before he arrived at a big lake with a few smaller islands in the middle, the largest of which had a big lizard in it, just chilling there in its home. When Jake saw it, he was happy because it had really thick scales, which was helpful when testing his new Penetrating Arrow. At least more useful as a test target than the yeti had been.

[Targehide Lizard Lord lvl 308]

This lord looked a lot like an ankylosaurus. Why did Jake know what an ankylosaurus looked like? Well, he, like many others, also had a period of his life where he liked to read online wikis for far too long, giving him more knowledge about ancient dinosaurs than he could possibly ever need.

Anyway, the ankylosaurus was known for its incredibly thick armor, especially on its back. This Targehide Lizard was exactly the same, with a back covered in thick plates of tough hide with small studded gem-looking dots spread throughout. Despite being two levels lower than the yeti, this one was definitely stronger and far more durable.

Floating far up in the air, he began his setup for the one-hit kill attempt. First of all, before he even flew up to his attack location, he marked the lizard, revealing the outline of its Soulshape and naturally increasing all the damage he would do to it. As he observed it closely, Hunting Momentum was also building up just a little bit. Not much, but everything counted.

While Jake didnt have full knowledge of his opponent, he did have a good enough general idea of what he needed as he began to construct his Protean Arrow. Everything was being done far up in the sky within Jakes stealth field from Unseen Hunter as countless strings were assembled into an arrow made to pierce the thick natural armor of the dinosaur.

Once the arrow was fully assembled, Jake observed the one-and-a-half-meter-long spear-like arrow and nodded, satisfied. Usually, he would have created the arrowhead with a payload at the front to explode and break apart some of the armor to get through, but from the last arrow, he felt certain that wasnt needed. This one, he could hide another surprise within.

Taking out a bottle of Heartrot poison, he coated the arrowhead fully, making sure there was plenty for the big body of the dinosaur far down below. Lastly, he moved on to the new step of his preparation phase introduced by the Penetrating Arrow skill.

Holding the shaft, Jake channeled energy into the Protean Arrow. There was no visual effect except for a brief moment where a small gleam of energy ran across the entire arrow. It didnt feel any different either, but Jake felt the effect as he smiled, took out his bow, and took a deep breath.

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Arcane Awakening activated fully at 60% in the very next second, making his body erupt with arcane energy. As a reminder, using the boosting skill during preparations didn't really have any effects and often made things harder as his energy was more volatile due to the boosting skill.

Nocking the arrow, Jake took aim at the dinosaur below. It was relaxing, hidden within a small cave on the island, but with the Mark, Jake could easily see through the rock. The eight or so meters of rock the arrow would have to pierce through before hitting the dinosaur didn't really matter, courtesy of Penetrating Arrow. Due to its increased bonus from Unblemished arrows, the destructive arcane energy surrounding the arrow would be enough to easily shear away a few dozen meters of un-reinforced rock.

Energy began to spike around him. as he charged Arcane Powershot. Seconds passed as the energy kept building. Several skills were working in tandem, reinforcing and stacking on top of one another. Big Game Hunter, Unblemished Arrows, his archery skill, Mark, Steady Aim, Arcane Supremacy, Stealth Attack, and several others all to unleash one devastating strike few C-grades his level would ever have a chance of matching.

While it was true that the Sword Saint had the strongest attack in their party with his Glimpse of Spring not counting the Fallen Kings unique skill - that was only during normal combat. In circumstances like this, the old man simply didn't stand a chance against Jake's sheer offensive might, and they all knew it, which was why Jake had been given this task.

Jake continued charging his arrow for a dozen more seconds before he felt his body become unable to hold on. His skin flayed, but as always, he pushed himself just to the very edge before he released the string. A massive explosion of arcane energy rocked the sky, all of it concealed within the domain Jake created with Unseen Hunter, resulting in no one noticing.

What they did have a slight chance of noticing was the rapidly descending arrow, but even that was mostly hidden by his stealth skill.

Right after shooting his first arrow, Jake shot another, followed by several more in quick succession, all using Arcane Powershot. He only stopped when he felt like something in his shoulder would break if he shot one more. Besides, it was also time for the final nail in the coffin.

Within the cave, the dinosaur noticed the first attack a few moments before it arrived, warned by its instincts. However, right as it tried to mobilize its energy to defend, it found itself fully incapacitated as

Jakes eyes glowed orange from Primal Gaze. This was one of the hidden bonuses from Mark despite the physical barrier, Jake still had clear visual contact due to Mark allowing him to see the Soulshape, which was more than good enough for Primal Gaze.

Effortlessly, the arrow penetrated through the eight meters of rock before striking the Targehide Lizard Lord on the back, right where the armor was strongest. The sheer impact created a crater and destroyed the entire cave, creating a shockwave that rocked the small island as the beast slammed into the ground. Jake would be lying if he said it didn't face resistance, but it still managed to pierce through, something the lizard lord had clearly not expected as its eyes opened wide just as it could begin to move again.

The arrow pierced deep into the beast, but its sheer resilience ultimately proved too much, as the arrow only got about halfway before stopping. Luckily, Jake had partly expected this to happen as he unleashed his little surprise hidden in the Protean Arrow. The large arrowhead exploded in the very next moment while deeply embedded within the dinosaur, leading to a devastating result. Fragments of sharp, stable arcane mana coated in Heartrot Poison blasted out from the exploding arrowhead, filling the inside of the beast with what was effectively poison-coated shrapnel. The beast roared in pain, heavily damaged but not quite dead yet.

Once more, Jake had failed to kill in a single strike, and the dinosaur responded as best it could. The gem-like objects on its armored back began to glow as a powerful white light emanated only to be instantly suppressed when Jakes follow-up attack arrived.

An arrow rain slammed down as dozens of arrows exploded the entire immediate area, doing little damage due to the high durability of the beast but still managing to momentarily stop it in its actions. The next many follow-up stable arcane arrows hit the lord directly, penetrating into the hide that was significantly weakened and cracked from the first arrow. Coupled with the reduced overall resilience from the debuff left by the arrow, Jakes attacks all did some some real damage.

Yet even when the final arrow landed, the beast still lived, though not for long if a certain hunter had anything to say about it. Jake, still standing far up in the air, reached out as his hand began to glow dark green. From afar, he used Touch of the Malefic Viper to further amplify the Heartrot Poison he had inflicted the boss with as it continued to ravage the beasts body, and as a final touch, he exploded all the arcane shrapnel within the dinosaur.

It struggled, and Jake knew that no matter what, the boss was already doomed. Activating the arcane charge from Mark, the beast below flashed with energy for a second before it finally went still, breathing its last a few seconds later.

You have slain [Targehide Lizard Lord lvl 308] Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake nodded as he deactivated Arcane Awakening and let the weakness wash over him. The arcane platform beneath him had long been destroyed, but even without pouring in any energy, Jake still stood solidly on the ground because, yeah, that was another benefit of his newly upgraded boots. When they said he would always find solid ground, they meant it, even if that solid ground wasn't ground at all but just air.

After recovering, Jake continued his hunt as he kept tracking down boss after boss. They were all roughly at the same level, and Jake killed them one by one, even having a happy moment when the ninth boss truly did die in a single arrow. Primarily because it had been a lich belonging to the undead natives on the planet, making it a caster with pretty bad defenses.

There were only a few cases where Jake got into a real fight, having to do more than just bombard with arrows from what was probably the stratosphere. He still handled all these pretty smoothly and got away before he was overwhelmed by hordes of monsters coming to the aid of their lord.

As he killed more and more, the other lords did become more cautious, placing more sentries, and defending themselves more. Alas, they couldn't act cowardly as it would undermine their authority, meaning most still had mostly solo domains. It didn't help that Jake purposefully tried to avoid going in a predictable pattern, even skipping some lords on purpose to attack some further away from the settlements. Because, oh yeah, there were now more settlements, something he learned as he kept in contact with the others through the Golden Mark. In fact, a second city had been established only a month after Jake left the reason for this happening so quickly being quite apparent.

The settlers' leader has shown surprise at the decrease in the frequency of the attacks, almost as if someone had been going around killing the ones in charge of leading these attacks, resulting in the unity between these beast hordes breaking down, creating internal strife as they fight to select a new leader among them, the Fallen King shared with Jake, obviously amused.

What few attacks did come were easily handled by the four others, as they also actively worked to make the settlements grow faster and did things to speed up the ark's arrival and, thus, the completion of the floor. Something that came a lot sooner than usual at least from their perspective.

When Jake had killed so many leaders of these beasts and monster factions that the attacks had pretty much stopped, Jake made his way back to the settlements where the Sword Saint had already made his preparations. Dina had also created quite a few plant soldiers to defend and act as sentries should anything happen as Jake arrived and saw what the old man had cooked up.

One had to remember that the time they had in Nevermore was based on how much time the party spent there from their perspective. Waiting for an ark to arrive wasn't something they wanted, which was why Jake felt pretty happy they had a guy blessed by the Primordial of Time on their team.

The Sword Saint had created an odd room within a house of the settlement using his painting skills with odd murals on the walls. Jake had been unsure what it was when he first arrived but soon learned it was a damn time dilation chamber. A pretty simple one at that, but it was actually pretty damn effective as when within it, every two hours passing was an entire day in the outside world.

Using that, they passed the seventy-second floor within only eight and a half months. For the settlers, it was more like fifteen months, but time dilation was overpowered. They did still have to go out once in a while when some attacks arrived, but Dina's summons made them aware every time with ample warning.

Moving on to the next floor, Jake hoped he could repeat the one they had just done because hot damn, had it been effective in the leveling department as Jake finally did some proper bloody hunting, fully following his Path.

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 261 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 265 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 260 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 262 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Luckily for him and all the others, the next few floors had far fewer gimmicks but were all pretty much just pure combat and leveling galore.

Chapter 860: Nevermore: Approaching the End

Time passed swiftly within Nevermore as the final sprint to complete as many floors as possible to rake up all the points possible continued. The gods naturally got more active as they monitored all the important groups as the end gradually approached. As of the final ten years, there had been approximately a few hundred individuals who were fighting for the top spots of the Leaderboards, with this number only decreasing as the months went by.

The gods chilling in the streaming room couldn't hold themselves back from commenting on all the developments, especially when they viewed the ones associated with their own factions. Yet, one person kept being brought up, not just because of himself, but the party he had. It was rare to see a single group with close relations to four Primordials after all, and with Valdemar getting quite invested, too, the demand for Jake clips was through the roof.

You still aren't sad Jake didn't want a skill based on your Records? Minaga asked as they had just gotten done watching a highlight from a fight Jake and his party had. I think he and that Runemaiden of yours could make a good team if you brought him to your side. One wielding a bow with devastating arrows in the back while the other keeps the foe at bay while being nearly impervious to damage

They all knew Jake had rejected a skill related to Valdemar. Not because they knew what kind of skill had been offered but because they knew he had to have been offered one. The Primordials were the gods that had been around the longest and knew the most about the system, so for them to deduce Jake would have to be offered some skill because of his clash with Valdemar was only to be expected.

Heh, if it didn't suit his Path, it didn't suit his Path, Valdemar shrugged. Isn't it only more exciting that he rejected me? Actually, isn't it better? For someone powerful like him to join Valhal while not really having any skills from Valhal will only expand our Legacies! Gudrun is gonna be more than on board to recruit him.

Openly talking about stealing someones Chosen isnt proper etiquette, now is it? the Holy Mother chimed in, in a more playful than scolding tone.

Bah, Jake is his own person; he can do whatever he wants, Valdemar waved her off. Ill just make sure we give him the best offer to join us. I might even throw in a case of my personal brew to really convince him.

That ones gonna be tough, Minaga said, shaking his head. The Endless Empire is already willing to- no, wait, never mind. That was confidential. Ignore that I said anything; the source is unreliable anyway, and Ive never even met the guy in person. What I am saying is, if Jake ever shows himself open to recruitment, theres gonna be competition.

Vilastromoz had remained quiet as he finally joined the conversation. You talk as if you stand a chance dont you think his current Patron may have something to say?

Sure he might, Valdemar grinned as he leaned forward. But if he can hold onto my fellow human is entirely dependent on if hes powerful enough to, now isnt it?

Valdemar and Vilastromoz both spiked their auras for a moment as the Wyrmgod interfered instantly. His own presence washed over theirs before they could cause too much of a ruckus. It pushed both of theirs back, suppressing them slightly with a clearly superior aura.

Behave when you are in my domain, the Wyrmgod said with a sigh.

Vilastromoz and Valdemar both did as told while the human Primordial muttered, dissatisfied. No matter how powerful they were, they were still within the domain of the Wyrmgod. In Nevermore, he was the most powerful being beside the Bound God of the World Wonder itself. Considering the limitations of Nevermore and the contract that the Primordial and she had made, the Wyrmgod was definitely the one most able to use his powers of the two.

That was obviously part of the reason no one had shown up with their real bodies. Now, chances are they would be able to escape Nevermore if they were truly there and got into a conflict with the Wyrmgod, but it certainly wouldnt come cheap, not even for Valdemar.

The mood had turned a bit sour, but an unexpected savior of the vibe entered.

Its almost disgustingly simplistic, the Blightfather commented as he studied a clip of Jake slaying a mini-boss on floor seventy-eight with a single arrow as he expertly changed the subject. Quite easily so, as he hadnt really been paying much attention to the bickering. The hunters Path, that is. There are certainly many complicated concepts infused into his blows, but all the applications are so minimalistic in execution. Complexities are sheared away for pure useability when he fights. There is little thought, yet his actions are rarely ever something that could be considered questionable. I understand it when Minaga described him as a natural fighter indeed, his adaptability when facing any opponent is remarkable.

Dont tell me you are also trying to steal another Primordials Chosen? the Holy Mother asked him. It shouldnt surprise me, yet I still find myself disappointed.

I never said I wanted to recruit him. One can admire something impressive without coveting it, a concept I understand you find difficult to comprehend, the Blightfather shook his head. Besides, even if I did want him to join the Risen, I am uncertain how well his Path would mix with changing his race, especially as I sense his soul is altered, likely by a skill of some kind. His Bloodline certainly also complicates things. No, I wouldnt want him to be one of the Risen, but I would certainly welcome him to come for a visit. Perhaps to see an old friend of his.

Vilastromoz wasn't surprised the Blightfather had already seen through some aspects of Jake's soul, even the part where his Truesoul had slightly changed when he got the Anomalous Soul skill. The Viper had few he would say could match him when it came to the study of the soul, but the Blightfather was definitely one of them. If not, he wouldn't have been able to create a race like the Risen and the entire ecosystem required for this new undead race to not only survive but thrive.

Speaking of old friends, how is that cursed trapper Jake knows doing? Vilastromoz asked.

Adequately. Better than I expected, honestly. Which perhaps shouldn't be that surprising considering his talent in dungeon engineering. The knowledge he had before the initiation has led to some interesting insights those who were born into the system simply cannot possess due to the fundamental change in natural laws, the Blightfather responded. Not that he is a contender for any Leaderboards. But he is worth nurturing, I guess, if for nothing else but because of his connection to your Chosen.

Hey, Casper is a great guy all on his own, and I will hear nothing to the contrary, Minaga cut in as he crossed his arms.

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I never said he wasn't, the Risen Primordial said as he changed the topic slightly once more as he glanced at the Wyrmgod. Now, how are those Void God fanatics doing? Are they a threat to the Leaderboards?

You know I am not going to share any details, the Wyrmgod shook his head. But if you are asking if I expect to see any beings with close connections to the Void Gods on top of the Leaderboards, I would have to say no.

A bit disappointing, the Viper added with a sigh. I thought we could have a first.

The Path related to the void is simply too limiting in nature, the Wyrmgod shook his head.

It was a bit like with Unique Lifeforms. Being someone using void energy limited you to only having void energy, as it simply consumed every other trace of energy within the body. This meant there were many things one couldnt do that could make some floors or Challenge Dungeons harder than usual, much like the Unique Lifeforms, who also had very limited Paths. This was also why Unique Lifeform barely ever placed top ten on the Leaderboards despite their many innate advantages as pinnacle beings of the multiverse.

Any news from the Dao Sect who has the Chosen of the Lifesoul Daolord participating? Natures Attendant finally also asked, the man rarely speaking. He just focused on making sure Artemis wasnt overwhelmed while being forced to be in the presence of the five Primordials, who sometimes got into arguments and flared their auras. Most of his time outside of that was spent watching Dina and her adventures, along with some other promising groups from the Pantheon of Life.

The fact he was interested in the Bloodline Patriarch from Earth didnt surprise Vilastromoz either. The man was an absolute anomaly with magic clearly based on his Bloodline, making it almost transcendent in nature. The sheer absurdity of his existence simply went a bit under the radar due to the other overshadowing anomaly from the same homeworld.

As someone using life magic, it only made sense the Pantheon of Life was interested in what he did, even if the Viper knew Natures Attendant wasnt a big fan of the C-grade. Because what he did was far from something that followed the natural order.

While the Chosen of the Daolord isn't a contender for the Leaderboards, a party member of his is, the Wyrmgod answered. She is the disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, and while she only carries a Divine Blessing, chances are big she will be made a Chosen when she reaches A or maybe even B-grade.

They proceeded to discuss a few more candidates. Some of whom had only really made themselves known during the Challenge Dungeon period and truly grown into their power over the last decade. The multiverse was a big place with no lack of talent. Some young, promising geniuses from the United Tribes proved themselves, others from the demon factions showed their skills, as well as people from many different powerful factions. Not to mention those who were just personal disciples of powerful beings in the multiverse or standalone talents, many of whom none of them knew of before Nevermore, despite every Primordial factions extensive information network.

Some geniuses were also looked at and then forgotten if they disappointed expectations. Others were just somewhere in the middle where the gods could look at them, nod in unison, agreeing they were talented and had a good chance to reach a high grade, and then move on without thinking about that person again. People like Draskil fell into this camp, as well as, quite frankly, ninety-nine point nine percent of the geniuses of the many factions. Because here, towards the end, they only focused on those at the very top who truly stood a chance to grab a top spot on the Leaderboards.

Yet even as all the promising young talents showed themselves, and no matter how many rising stars proved their worth, two names were always mentioned. Two geniuses from the new universe who had already proven themselves as apex beings of this generation, both Chosen of gods recognized as also standing at the pinnacle.

It was naturally Jake Thayne, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and EllHakan, Chosen of Yip of Yore. These were the two people the gods were in agreement would more likely than not claim first and second the only question is who would take the number one slot and how their presence would shake up the All-Time Leaderboards.

While many competed for the top spots on the Nevermore Leaderboards, one must remember that the vast majority of those who did the World Wonder had nothing to do with this competition. There were

many limitations as to who could compete on the Leaderboards, and most especially those who knew it wasn't like they were competing with the top geniuses just ignored that entire feature.

Instead, they used Nevermore for all its other merits. They used it for the same reason nearly everyone went back to Nevermore in all grades and even into godhood: it was simply one of the best leveling spots in the entire multiverse.

Dungeons, in general, were borderline a requirement to facilitate progress. The natural ecosystem of planets couldn't support the growth of everyone at once, especially not when more powerful beings appeared. A single monster going from C to B-grade would lead to the deaths of numerous roughly equally leveled creatures. This was obviously unsustainable, which was why a proper source of creatures to fight was required which was where dungeons came in.

A single dungeon could be used over and over again to progress, removing the need to hunt other forms of life, thus preserving the planet at least a little bit.

This naturally became less of a problem when one reached higher grades and could explore space. Based on estimates, less than a thousand-in-one planets were fully integrated into the wider social system of the multiverse but were just planets that had never truly made contact with any other factions or perhaps just ones filled with monsters who never developed sapience.

Even more planets were just empty, save for elementals who spawned simply due to the mana density. These areas of wilderness in space were great hunting spots, even if they did have the challenge of powerful foes often being few and far between, a problem dungeons didn't tend to have. So, dungeons were still a better option.

And ultimately, Nevermore was just the biggest dungeon in the entire multiverse. It was somewhere people just went to get levels, and with the special time dilation of the World Wonder that didnt result in a negative impact on Records, the place just got even better.

On top of that, Nevermore as a World Wonder had special titles associated with it. This was outside the Leaderboards and Challenge Dungeon ones as one had to remember both those things were only available to C-grades and werent present in later versions of Nevermore.

Outside of these special C-grade titles, everyone would gain a title just based on floors cleared and overall performance, granting Records as well as sometimes even a few stats. Most people did it for the Records, though, as the stats were often inconsequential.

One such person who was just in Nevermore for the levels was Miranda. She wasnt someone who cared much about the fifty-year limit or trying to optimize how many floors she could clear. She was just there for the experience and nothing else. If possible, she didnt even want to engage with anything that had to do with the Leaderboards and Jake because, as she put it this was her only damn holiday in years.

The group the Court Witch had gone with wasnt what one expected, though. She had ended up going with some individuals from the Order of the Malefic Viper to get a good party going and also because she wanted to disconnect a bit from her usual daily life. She wanted to fully dedicate herself to her Path as a witch, at least for a little while. Besides, it wasnt as if her decision to not go with other people from Earth was out of the ordinary.

Sultan had teamed up with a group of mercenaries working for the Golden Road Emporium, who were pretty much hired to help him gain more levels than he usually would. Based on what the merchant had said, this was apparently partly a reward for his great performance in preparations for Jakes Chosen Ceremony.

Many other groups from Earth had also teamed up with people outside of the planet. Needless to say, quite a few also teamed up with fellow Earthlings or some of the newly integrated slaves. Earth as a whole was getting a huge power-up during this period in preparation for the Prima Guardian, as quite a big portion of Earths C-grades had gone.

As mentioned, none of these people were there to compete on any Leaderboards. They were not there to engage in the competition yet many still paid attention to the Leaderboards. Not to see their own names anywhere but with hope and expectations of seeing their World Leaders there.