

Hunter 861

Chapter 861: Nevermore: One Last Floor

Jake had no idea how many of the damn imps he had killed before they stopped coming. The demon captains who had once led the army of small-winged casters had long been slain, but that didn't mean the swarm didn't prove a challenge simply due to their sheer numbers.

His body was covered in burns and wounds by the time they were all dead, as it had simply been impossible to avoid every attack. His party members weren't in a much better condition, as they had been fighting at other entrances to the large cavern they found themselves within.

Luckily, before more demons could arrive, Dina made her way over. A soothing green aura washed over him as several small plants grew in his vicinity, making Jake nod at her in recognition. Thanks.

No problem, she responded with a smile. Are there more coming from this way?

Doesn't look like it, Jake responded as he released a Pulse of Perception. Not from any of the other tunnels either.

Alright, we should be safe to regroup, then, Dina said. You may also need to have your Golden Mark reapplied in case something does happen.

True, Jake nodded with a sigh. These demons had been a bloody nightmare in that regard. They kept using dispelling magic and disrupting mana, which resulted in them removing the Golden Marks over and over again.

When they made it back to the center of the cavern, Jake also finally dropped his boosting skill as he sat down exhausted. The other three were already there, also recovering from the ongoing fight. Entering meditation, Jake felt Dina reestablish her restorative domain around them. This made Jake not only recover his resources and heal faster, but it also allowed the period of weakness to go away faster.

Which was needed in case more demons came back. Jake had quite a few complaints about floor seventy-nine, but a lack of enemies most certainly wasn't one of them. In fact, it was nearly the opposite, as there were pretty much only enemies who stuck together in huge swarms.

The fact that the last objective of this floor was to defend the giant crystal within this particular mountain didn't help either, as it just resulted in all the enemies funneling to them. The only semi-good part was that the long and narrow tunnels allowed their party to not get easily surrounded.

While meditating, Jake checked his system notifications, pleased to see he had gained another level from the fight. The first in a while, as the period of faster leveling from the Challenge Dungeons was well and truly done already, at least when it came to his class. Not that Jake was complaining. The gains had been pretty damn good over the last few years, and he was even getting pretty close to yet another skill selection.

DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizons Edge] has reached level 284 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 273 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

It had been a bit over ten years since they were all done with their Challenge Dungeons, and Jake had evidently gained quite a few levels during this period if he said so himself. In fact, it had been even faster than after he just reached C-grade. The reason for this was primarily the fact that they had met rather strong enemies on every single floor, unlike when they first entered and had to grind through a lot of easy floors. Especially the bosses had been tough, and on floor seventy-five, they had faced one of those event bosses. That had been the strongest opponent they had encountered throughout Nevermore thus far, being a level 325 variant with respectable power.

The fight had been pretty damn long, but it did help that Jake had significantly weakened it with his opening shot from stealth. In the end, the Sword Saint ended up using two Glimpses of Spring, leaving him weakened for a while, with both Sylphie and Jake also overusing their boosting skills. Dina and the Fallen King had been a bit better off, but that was mainly because the fucker had ignored the Fallen King for the most part, as it had been borderline immune to soul attacks, making the Unique Lifeform the smallest threat.

Dina had been fine just because of her many defensive means. She was naturally still tired afterward, having used her most powerful skills too, but as a healer, she was naturally good at making sure she wouldn't be the one in most need of healing and recovery after a long fight.

In summary, the event boss on floor seventy-five had been strong to the level where they had to use everything in their arsenal, save for their most powerful trump cards that would leave them incapacitated for a longer period, with potentially permanent consequences. That is to say, the Sword

Saint didn't have to fully use his transcendence, the Fallen King didn't have to use his unique skill, and Jake didn't have to pull out some weird Bloodline bullshit out of his ass. But it had gotten a bit close to comfort.

Anyway, from there, the next few floors had been pretty straightforward, with just a lot of fighting and a lot of levels.

Having cleared nine floors he counted this one as pretty much already completed in just around ten years was pretty fucking good if Jake said so himself. But it had come at the sacrifice of some things. They had taken no breaks and even purposefully avoided the city floor after floor seventy-five. For some reason, Jake had a feeling going there wouldn't be a good idea, and his party had no reason to disagree as they hurried onwards.

The lack of breaks also resulted in a lack of focus on professions. As they kept up a constant tempo, Jake barely did any alchemy at all during this last decade. He did do a bit to keep them restocked on potions, elixirs, and his own poisons, but a lot of it had taken place within time dilation as the Sword Saint sometimes set up small time chambers for them to more quickly get through timed events.

Due to this, despite the boost in momentum from the Challenge Dungeons, Jake had only gained a total of three levels in his profession in an entire decade. That was less than one every three years and just around a third of the levels he had gained from popping in and saying hello to a bunch of Primordials having a streaming party. Looking back at his notifications, it wasn't even as if he was close to another level, as his last one was half a year ago.

DING! Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 262 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

Still, levels were levels. And at level 260, Jake had naturally unlocked another skill selection. All in all, it had actually been a pretty damn interesting selection, if utterly inconsequential for now, the reason of which would be clear when one knew of the skill he selected. Ah, but the two first ones offered had been just a bit too basic, to put it nicely.

[Fortifying Curse Toxin Theory (Uncommon)]

[Acid Chemistry Theory (Rare)]

To clarify, these skills were purely related to knowledge, and they didn't really have any effects when crafting. At least not anything Jake didn't feel confident doing with freeform magic or, more importantly, through Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. Sagacity already had Records related to these two knowledge skills he just hadn't fully unlocked yet, so selecting either would only be done with the intent of merging it with Sagacity down the line. Something Jake thought was a waste of a skill selection. Not to say the third skill offered was that much better.

[Advanced Arcane Sealing (Ancient)] Protect what is yours, and should anyone try to rob you, leave them with nothing. Allows the alchemist to create a seal of arcane magic to cover an object or several objects at once. While the object is sealed, energy leakage is nearly entirely eliminated due to the stable arcane mana. The sealed object will be hidden from nearly all senses and be unaffected by all outside sources. Should anyone try to forcibly destroy the seal, the arcane mana will turn destructive and damage or destroy the sealed object as well as itself. Sealed items can only be unsealed by those possessing the arcane affinity of the hunter. The effectiveness of Advanced Arcane Sealing is improved by Wisdom, Intelligence, and Willpower.

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Jake did still like this one, though, not because he wanted it as a skill, but because of what it represented. This skill much like the two before was clearly based on what he had done in House of the Architect. For Jake to be offered an ancient rarity skill just for sealing an item in his arcane mana was honestly bonkers. Sure, some of the obscuration features in the skill probably weren't fully innate concepts spawned from just placing a barrier around an object, but he reckoned some of them were.

This told him that the simple act of sealing something in mana was roughly equivalent to, at the very least, an epic skill through pure conceptual power from his arcane affinity. So, yeah, this skill offering was damn great to see, but he didn't select it because the two next ones were more interesting.

Jake had naturally looked at them individually back during the actual skill selection, but in truth, it made a lot more sense to see them as a set, considering the two skills were effectively identical.

[Chosen Offering of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] To deliver an offering to your Patron and gain recognition in kind is the greatest honor. Allows the alchemist to make an offer to the Malefic Viper and be granted an Offering Fragment. Based on the value of the Records and energy in the offering, you will be rewarded with a better Offering Fragment. The Offering Fragment contains Records and energy related to the Malefic Viper and can help empower other sources of Records and energy related to the

Malefic Viper. All offerings must surpass a certain threshold to be submittable, and out of respect to the Malefic One, there is an internal cooldown of the skill dependent on the value of the Offering Fragment received. Whenever an offering is made, your connection to the Malefic Viper as his Chosen grows.

[Heretics Offering of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] To infringe upon the domain of the Malefic Viper and rob the Primordials Records is a great achievement. Allows the alchemist to make an offer to the Malefic Viper and be granted an Offering Fragment. Based on the value of the Records and energy in the offering, you will be rewarded with a better Offering Fragment. The Offering Fragment contains Records and energy related to the Malefic Viper and can help empower other sources of Records and energy related to the Malefic Viper. All offerings must surpass a certain threshold to be submittable, and to hide your heretical actions from the Malefic One, there is an internal cooldown of the skill dependent on the value of the Offering Fragment received. Whenever an offering is made, your status as a Heretic of the Malefic Viper grows.

These two skills, as mentioned, did effectively the exact same thing. They allowed Jake to make an offering and get an Offering Fragment in return. An Offering Fragment that could then be used while crafting to infuse Records from the Malefic Viper into the creation, functioning a bit like a light version of when Malefic Vipers Poison activated. Jake sure as hell didnt doubt that using an Offering Fragment as a catalyst during crafting would prove highly effective.

In addition to this, each of the skills also served to push Jake further down either the Path of a Heretic or the Path of a Chosen. This was just a small note at the end of each skill, and it probably wasnt something that would bother them if others saw either of these skills. Why would a heretic care about becoming more heretical, or a Chosen care about being closer to his Patron? They naturally wouldnt. In fact, walking further down either Path was just purely positive, as it would solidify their Paths.

However Jake wasnt either of those. He was the Heretic-Chosen, someone who walked straight down the middle between being a Chosen and a Heretic. He was both at once. A living paradox. That was why alarm bells instantly went off when Jake read that last part of the two skills.

For the system to directly push him down either Path couldnt end well. Jakes instincts also warned him about both of them, yet the longer he looked at them, the more he also got the feeling they could be really good which was when Jake had a little thought.

See, Jake felt pretty confident using either of those skills would prove detrimental, but what if, ya know he just picked both. If he could offer both Heretical and Chosen Offerings at once, wasnt that a Heretic-Chosen offering right there? At least, that was Jakes logic.

And now for the real genius: in order to not trigger this effect, Jake would just never use the legendary skill, ever.

The only downside to this ingenious plan was that Jake would select a legendary skill he would purposefully avoid using or even thinking about for the next thirty levels. Then there was also the slight risk that picking one of them would lock him out of the other, making Jake end up pretty damn screwed. Oh yeah, and then there was also the fact that skills innately contained Records, so did he fuck up just by picking one? Who knows? But hey, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

So, with that in mind, Jake had asked the Sword Saint to flip a coin for him to determine which one he would go with first. It had resulted in Jake picking Chosens Offering, so worst case scenario, Jake would just have to fully lean into being a subservient and ass-licking Chosen or just never use the skill until he one day found a way to get rid of it or merge it with something else.

Returning his attention to the present, Jake opened his eyes and stretched a bit, having meditated for a bit over two hours to heal up. Drinking a potion, he also used a Pulse of Perception and saw that the attacks were pretty much over. Sylphie was down one of the tunnels, shredding a few stragglers, but that was it. The other large entrance was guarded by a floating Unique Lifeform, watching out if anything was coming while Jake recovered.

Dina had gone over to the crystal and infused the small domain she had established around it to make it mature faster. The Sword Saint had also joined her, and while he couldn't use time magic as that would screw up the maturation process, he could at least help provide some mana and even water the dryads plants, assuming that even did anything.

Soon enough, the crystal fully matured as a light beam shot into the air. The entire mountain began to break apart as all its mana was sucked in, and they witnessed the birth of a powerful natural treasure. It was an impressive one for sure, not that their party was sticking around to admire it. They couldn't even steal it, so what was the point?

A few seconds passed before two elementals teleported down to them, both of them powerful B-grade variants with sapience. They thanked the party for defending the crystal before taking it away, and with that done and dusted, a few notifications popped up.

Seventy-ninth floor completed. 15800 Nevermore Points earned.

With the notifications also came a door, standing right where the crystal had been. There was no need to delay as they all entered the in-between room, and just as they did, Jake turned to the old man.

How long do we have left? Jake asked him. As someone Blessed by Aeon, he was surely the best at keeping track of time, right?

The Sword Saint considered for a moment before answering. Can you allow me to fully Identify you?

Sure? Jake said as he let the old man use his identity on Jake. He clearly used it on all the others, too, before answering.

Ten months, twenty-three days, and twenty-two hours, the Sword Saint said after a bit. That is when Sylphie will be forced out of Nevermore. The rest of us are all within a day of that. This discrepancy is likely caused by the Challenge Dungeons and how the time distortion in those may vary slightly.

Jake stared at the old man a bit, wondering how the hell he hadn't known the old man could see time stuff when using Identify. Then again, maybe it was something new? In either case, Jake decided to do as the Sword Saint had done, as he identified everyone in the party. Jake himself was level 273, which was pretty good, in his opinion, but his leveling speed looked horrible compared to both the Fallen King and Sylphie.

[Fallen King lvl 281]

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk lvl 287]

As monsters, they were natural cheats and tended to level faster than enlightened races. Sylphie was even more of a special case as she was still naturally growing. Still, it sucked to lose to them. But hey, at least Jake did beat both Dina and the Sword Saint when it came to leveling.

[Dryad lvl 270]

[Human lvl 272]

Alright, the margin with the Sword Saint was a bit low with only one level, but a level was a level. Dina was the slowest of them, which wasn't that surprising. Her race levels were slow because she was a Dryad, a long-lived creature who also grew naturally, albeit at a far slower pace. One of her racial skills literally allowed her to merge with a powerful tree and sleep within it for potentially thousands of years to get a few levels. It wasn't something she planned on doing, but that it was an option at all felt silly to Jake, even if Dina was half-plant.

Ten months and change is not a long time the Fallen King commented.

Neither is it a little, the Sword Saint said.

It should be enough, Dina said with confidence.

Ree! Sylphie agreed.

Jake also nodded. They should have enough for one more floor, though that would definitely be their last. Jake's mission wouldn't just be to beat it, though.

We're going for the event boss, right? Jake just wanted to make sure.

His party looked at him as if his question wasn't even worth answering, making Jake smile. Then let's get a move on already. One more floor of Nevermore to go so let's make it a real banger.

Chapter 862: Nevermore: Floor Eighty

Jake and company appeared on what would more likely than not be the final floor of Nevermore. Their spawning location was on top of a large ruined tower, giving them a clear view of the surrounding area. However, before Jake had a good chance to look around, he noticed the mana in the air and how it was filled with death.

Luckily, he didn't have to speculate long why this was as the floor description popped up right then.

Welcome to the Eightieth floor of Nevermore: Plateau of the Twin Emperors

In a vast land ruled by two tyrants in constant conflict, you are tasked with ending it. These two tyrants are at constant war, with their armies clashing in war zones between the two empires of the land known simply as the Vast Plateau.

You find yourself standing in a long-abandoned war zone where remnants of battle still remain. Due to the nature of these wars, cursed lands and vast areas have appeared that are considered inaccessible due to the accumulation of death-affinity mana, resulting in the appearance of many undead. This is one such land you now find yourself in.

To end the deterioration of the Vast Plateau, the war must come to an end. Decide your next course of action. Will you join either side of the conflict? Will you attempt to negotiate peace by making them realize the doomed Path they are walking down? Or will you be the enemy of both, as you become a danger so significant you force the two warring emperors to come together? Another option altogether?

The choice is yours.

Main objective: End the conflict.

Bonus objectives: Join either side of the conflict or choose to remain as a third party.

Current progress: Conflict ended (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 1,953,950

Jake and the others read the long description of the floor as they got a general gist of the place. It was a pretty basic setup, basically just giving them an excuse to fight in a war if they wanted. There was probably more to it, but their goal wasn't to figure out who was right or wrong but what decision would give them the most excuses to fight and gain levels while unlocking the event boss.

Addressing the Nevermore Points, Jake did feel pretty fucking good about how many he had racked up in the last ten years or so after the Challenge Dungeons. It was just about seven hundred thousand, with every floor giving more than the last except for floor seventy-five being a bit of an outlier due to the event boss.

For reference, floor seventy-nine had rewarded just under a hundred thousand Nevermore Points, which was a bit less than double what floor seventy-one had rewarded. It was a big increase, but not that out of pocket, especially not when one considered how much the difficulty also spiked. Jake and his party, straight out of the Challenge Dungeons, would have gotten their asses handed to them against the event boss on floor seventy-five and also had serious trouble with the floors after that.

Jake sure as hell doubted many, if any, of the Leaderboard groups were capable of challenging anything above the lower floors in the eighties, assuming they even had the time. That still was a lot of potential Nevermore Points one could earn. He knew ElHakan had been ahead of him time-wise with all the Challenge Dungeons, with approximately a full year extra to do floors, so assuming they matched Jake and companys speed, they would end up doing one more floor than them. It wasnt a lot, but it was something.

All of this is to say that things could get a bit hairy here toward the end. Alas, the only thing Jake should focus on was himself and clearing this floor. He would disappoint himself if he didnt at least beat that orange fucker, but beating him still wasnt Jakes primary objective.

You notice anything? Outside of the environmental mana clearly communicating that we are in undead territory, the Sword Saint asked. Asking Jake about his thoughts at the beginning of every floor was pretty much standard by now, as he often could either see something with his adequate Perception stat or had some gut feeling. In other cases, primarily in worlds filled with nature, they also asked Dina for some insight from the local fauna. Not that there was any living thing for her to ask on this tower or anywhere nearby.

Jake looked around and saw dead land spreading in all directions. The ground was gray and dry, with some movement here and there from undead. Skeleton creatures, ghosts, zombies, large abominations all the good stuff. Their levels were also all around level 290, with some of the larger undead just around 300.

Looking beyond the undead lands, Jake saw a few watchpoints established, likely to contain the undead. Further back than those, Jake saw plains, wilderness, some forests, and even some cities. It was very much the same in both directions, though he did also spot another contained land, and even from this distance, Jake felt the power of a powerful curse lingering there.

One might wonder how Jake could see this many things. It wasn't because all these locations were bunched up or anything, but due to the peculiar layout of this world because they sure as fuck weren't on a planet. There was absolutely zero curvature anywhere, and the land was surprisingly flat, with not a single mountain of any kind in sight. Even with massive planets Jake could usually notice the ever-so-slightest curvature if he went far enough up, but here, there truly was none at all. A fact he shared with the party.

Hm, so it's a bit like the land the Endless Empire knows as the Great Plains. Massive landmasses just floating in space. The largest of which nearly matches the overall surface of a Great Planet, with the Heartlands of the Endless Empire placed primarily on these Great Plains. I have only seen some pictures from Grandpa, as getting to visit the Great Plains is quite difficult though I don't think Jake would have any problems, Dina said, gladly sharing some more great multiversal knowledge.

Let us hope this place is not that big, the Fallen King commented with displeasure.

Doesn't look like it is based on what I've seen so far, Jake shook his head. Anyway, what's the plan?

Going by prior floors, if we want the event boss, we have to take the hardest path possible, which I would reckon is not teaming up with any of these factions, the Sword Saint said.

Ree, ree, Sylphie added helpfully, making Jake nod.

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Yeah, not making any allies will also give us the most potential enemies to hunt.

Before we make a final decision, we should become more familiar with the world. If these Twin Emperors are B-grades or above, we may be forced to at least act like we are allied with one of them, Dina said cautiously.

I doubt they are, Jake shook his head. I think it's way more likely at least one of them is the event boss. But you do have a point; learning more about this floor would be a good start.

So they went and did just that as they headed toward one of the cities Jake had spotted. On the way, they learned a bit about what kind of races they were dealing with. Unsurprisingly, it was a mix of many different enlightened races, but it did surprise them to see that most were orcs of different kinds. Orcs weren't a rare race in the multiverse, but they were often looked down on compared to other enlightened races, primarily because they tended to be on the... simpler side. However, from the looks of it, the orcs in this world were a variant race of some kind.

With orcs also came a lot of goblins. Why these two were often grouped together, Jake had no idea, but a theory was that goblins tended to have strong mental stats, while orcs were more on the physical side, making the two races compliment each other.

These two races made up over seventy percent of the enlightened, with the rest being a mixture of the usual dwarves, elves, humans, beastfolk, and all that.

Anyway, having not sided with anyone yet, they believed it would be possible to enter cities and study the place a bit, but yeah, things didn't work out like that.

Stop! a guard said as the party approached a large stone city gate. Identify yourselves immediately!

Jake looked at the guard, who wore simple leather armor while wielding a halberd. He looked like a common low-level grunt, but his level said otherwise.

[Orc lvl 284]

Then again, it was also entirely possible the standard for fighters was just really high on this floor. The few enlightened Jake had seen on the way were also all at least mid-tier C-grade, even the damn farmers.

As usual, the most diplomatic person in their party stepped forward, and luckily, they had discussed what they would do if they got into a situation like this beforehand. The Sword Saint smiled as he bowed politely to the orc. Greetings, we are a but a group of adventurers who have just returned from fighting the nearby undead, and-

Before he could say more, mana flashed beneath their feet as a magic circle appeared. On the tall walls, some goblin mages who had been listening in stood and had raised their staves the moment the old man mentioned fighting the undead.

Bunch of fucking morons, the guard swore as he shook his head and looked at Jake and company with pity. Either you are incompetent spies or even worse adventurers, walking up to a guard and outright admitting to a severe crime.

The Sword Saint admirably tried to save the situation as he looked taken aback. We we were not aware we had broken any laws. Could you-

Save your words for the mayor, the guard said, as Jake noted the magic circle below them growing in intensity. Now, try to stop acting stupid for just a second and surrender. Who knows, maybe the upper brass will be nice and spare you from execution. We could use some more war slaves.

So yeah, negotiations broke down.

Jake wasn't even the first one to act. The Sword Saint simply nodded, and before the orc had a chance to open his mouth again, his head flew into the air. This clearly surprised the goblin mages on the wall, who prepared to activate the magic circle, but before they could, the Fallen King erupted with energy. A golden wave spread from his body, utterly dismantling the magic circle, as Jake drew his bow, and Sylphie shot toward the wall like a bullet.

Siding with whatever Twin Emperor was in charge of this city definitely wasn't an option anymore. Especially not after their group effectively leveled the place, killing everyone who didn't flee in terror from the five newcomers. Jake asked if he should pick off those who ran, but the group decided against it. Which Jake honestly preferred, as he didn't like shooting a bunch of crafters who were just fleeing.

The city did have a mini-boss of sorts in the form of the mayor. A level 310 orc wearing heavy armor and a battlehammer, who definitely did not look like some official who spent most of his time in the office. In fact, barely anyone they encountered looked like they belonged outside of a battlefield. Even the average citizens were C-grade and took to weapons without hesitation. The population of the city was also way lower than Jake had first assumed. It was large enough to house at least ten thousand, but only about eight hundred had lived there.

Killing the mayor was easy enough, and based on records found in the city's rubble as well as some captured survivors - they learned more about the Vast Plateau. There was a lot of boring history, but to summarize, two powerful, nearly peak C-grades appeared less than a hundred years ago, calling themselves emperors after uniting a bunch of smaller factions. Smaller factions were already enemies with the factions that the other emperor brought together, which made making them go to war quite easy.

From there, they began to constantly fight as many battlefields were created. At first, only E-grades fought with the excuse of wanting to preserve power, but soon, it was D-grades, and now, there were barely any D-grades left outside of some crafters. Even low-tier C-grades were scarce; the battlefields now filled with C-grades.

At least a few billion had died within a single century, all concentrated on big battlefields. Battlefields that both emperors had made it illegal to enter, much less hunt undead within. Instead, they were treated more like conservations.

After listening to everything, Jake couldn't help but reach a conclusion.

They are cultivating these areas of curse energy and death. Working together to do so, Jake said as the others looked at him.

Why? Dina questioned. What would the purpose of that even be?

I know, like at least seven rituals that use curse energy in an area. I reckon that at least one of these Twin Emperors has something similar for the undead areas. As for why, I'm just gonna take a shot in the dark here and guess it's about trying to gain more power, Jake shrugged.

The endless folly of those too untalented to progress without cheap shortcuts, the Fallen King scoffed.

Yeah, not a fan of it either, assuming I'm correct, Jake sighed.

Aren't alchemists from the Order of the Malefic Viper known to sometimes wipe out entire civilizations during their experiments just to try and get a level or two? the Sword Saint said, being very judgemental towards poor alchemists just trying their best. He was entirely correct, sure, but still a bit judgemental.

I wouldn't know anything about acting haphazardly, my actions ultimately ending in the destruction of a planet, Jake defended himself.

Ree? Sylphie asked with a tilted head.

We aren't talking about that one, Jake quickly shut the bird up. Why had he decided to share all the things about Temlat with her again?

Anyway, going by Jake's theory, how would it function if we joined either faction when they are working together? the Sword Saint got the discussion back on track.

Even if they are in symbiosis right now, it doesn't mean either isn't trying to reap all the rewards, Dina said with a frown. It may be that they are both benefitting from the creation of these death and curse-filled domains and that our interference can tip the balance of power, resulting in the death of one Twin Emperor.

Ree, Sylphie also added, making a good point.

The name Twin Emperors does indeed communicate they are connected to one another and not merely competitors. That they appeared at the same time is also highly suspicious, the Fallen King agreed.

So what you're saying is Jake hinted.

We already discussed not choosing a side, so let us indeed not, the Fallen King spoke. They attacked us first. We are now merely retaliating and defending ourselves as we march toward the Twin Emperor.

Ree?

I am pretty sure using disproportionate force to pretty much slaughter an entire country or two would be considered a war crime, Jake commented. Actually, never mind, let's not think about that.

To summarize, were all in agreement we will be a third force who just fights everyone? the Sword Saint asked clarifyingly.

That is indeed the way to get the most experience, Jake agreed.

In that case, lets not dally, the old man nodded. Rather than ravage more cities, how about we check out one of the active battlefields instead?

You want us to just show up to an ongoing battle and put ourselves right in the middle to fight everyone at once? the Fallen King asked.

Precisely.

See, were all in agreement! Jake grinned. Now lets go to war.

Chapter 863: Nevermore: Wartime

War...

War never changes...

Except for when a group of five extremely powerful beings decide to just fuck shit up. In cases like that, war would very much change, and not for the better. At least not for those already involved in the war.

Floating far above one of the smaller battlefields of the Vast Plateau, this group of five appeared as the fighting was ongoing. There were only a few hundred on both sides at this point, primarily because most of the weaker C-grades were already dead. The fighting also didn't happen as one would usually expect from a war like this in the multiverse, which, for reference, was quite a bit different compared to wars on Earth before the system.

Usually, based on what Jake had read, even if an all-out war did happen at the beginning of a conflict, it would often devolve into a standstill. The most powerful beings on both sides would be hesitant to enter the fray out of fear that they would be teamed up on by the most powerful people on the opposing side.

This resulted in the weaker C-grades fighting in a big skirmish, with the stronger ones standing back for the most part. Only when it was clear one side would win the stronger people would step in, and even then, it was done with caution.

To become a C-grade, one had to have walked far on one's Path. C-grades were not weak in even the context of the multiverse, and only a scarce few of the enlightened races would ever manage to reach it. It was only natural that someone would be careful after making it that far and not want to die needlessly in some big war just because thirty people decided to attack them at once.

Due to all this, what usually happened in big wars after the slaughter of those on the weak side was that the strong ones would only do smaller skirmishes. If one side sent out three fighters, the other side would respond with three in kind. If one died, the one with a death would send out another. If it could be avoided, neither side wanted to send out a fourth to get a numerical advantage because all that would result in the other side doing the same, making it a four versus four now.

If more was sent out, it could quickly become a five versus five, then six, seven... until suddenly everyone was fighting at once, and none of them wanted that. Big wars like that were simply horrible for the individual. As a C-grade, everyone had a strong sense of self-preservation, and entering a conflict where you could get unlucky and have a hundred people decide to attack you at once was not fun for anyone involved.

Even if one side did have a numerical advantage, such as having six hundred fighters while the other only had five hundred, the larger group wouldn't just rush in. Sure, they would more likely than not win, but how many of them would die? Half? To the individual, the danger was simply too large, resulting in an all-out fight pretty much never happening.

This was also how war and just single battles during the war could last for extreme lengths of time. It was more akin to a sequence of duels between fighters from opposing factions, with neither side ever running out as they kept up getting new fighters to join them. At least, this is what Jake read as part of the explanation why factions like the Risen and Holy Church could have ongoing battlefields for thousands of years. This entire structure of war was also far more beneficial, as it allowed those fighting to improve more and gain Records without risking just getting unlucky and dying during a massive skirmish.

All this had to be clarified to understand why the wars on this floor were... off. When Jake and company arrived at this first battlefield, expecting things to be pretty calm, with things proceeding as usual, they instead found around a thousand total C-grades in a massive skirmish, just trying to tear each other apart.

There was no structure, no caution, just reckless fighting. Jake was really taken aback until he felt something, and he wasn't the only one, either.

"Their souls are... polluted," the Fallen King noted.

"I sense a negative energy inflicting them, affecting their mental states," Dina also added.

"It's a curse," Jake finally said. "And a pretty damn powerful one at that. I can't say for sure, but I get the feeling it's there to amplify hatred for the other empire. At least that would explain what we're seeing right now."

"The picture is coming together, huh," the Sword Saint said. "This entire conflict is truly manufactured. But, this does make me wonder... if these Twin Emperors want everyone to kill each other during these battlefields, won't we just be helping them by interfering?"

"Isn't that the plan?" Jake grinned. "To let them do whatever they plan on doing and let them get as powerful as possible... to then have a proper damn fight to finish out Nevermore."

The old man smiled. "I just wanted to make sure we were all on the same page."

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"Yeah, I think it's time to put an end to this war once and for all," Jake smiled.

"By leaving no fighters alive on either side," the Fallen King agreed.

"And then kill whoever is behind it all," Dina nodded.

Without further ado, Jake pulled out his bow as the others also prepared to enter the battlefield.

The C-grades fighting were all around level 290 to 310, meaning the guard they faced had been on the weaker side of this world. At least of the remaining survivors after the Twin Emperors had borderline wiped out the population of the Vast Plateau with their scheme.

Spells were flying as the air repeatedly exploded with magic. Melee fighters clashed as they flew through the sky, sometimes crashing into each other as groups spiraled toward the ground. Whenever someone seemed to have a flash of clarity from the curse and tried to escape, they were hunted down. Jake watched all this as he nocked an arrow and concluded that without any interference, everyone would be dead within the next couple of hours.

Jake and company would cut that time down by a lot. Releasing an Arcane Powershot, Jake took down one C-grade before he even had a chance to react. The Sword Saint dove in from the side to pick off some of the ranged fighters, while the Fallen King and Sylphie dove straight into the middle of it all and unleashed their skills. Dina had the unfortunate job of watching out that the two of them didn't mess up and got ganged up on.

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Even as their party interfered, the two warring groups didn't team up or anything. Jake and the others just become more fighters of the enemy side for both factions. The entire situation was also so damn chaotic that even if some of the C-grades did notice Jake and company weren't part of either faction, they didn't exactly have the opportunity to voice this insight.

Thus the slaughter continued, but after ten or so minutes, the situation did change. Hundreds had died at this point, many of them easy kills due to their existing injuries. However, as numbers reduced, some stability did return to the situation, and the surviving C-grades had their level of bloodlust subside as more and more gained clarity.

More tight groups were formed on both sides, as everyone backed off a little, regrouping with their own factions. Jake and the others tried to incite more fighting, but soon enough, they noticed a clear target on their backs. Not necessarily because they were a third party interfering in the battle but because of the small size of their group. In a battle where two groups had over a hundred each and a third group only had five, they would definitely stick out as the weaker prey, right?

Just not in this case.

“Seems like the real fighting starts now,” Jake said through the Golden Mark.

“Leave them no quarter,” the Sword Saint also said without hesitation. “Focus on the left group and get behind them.”

They all did as the Sword Saint said as their group began to retreat and circle around to get behind the group on the left, putting them between their party and the other faction. Sylphie helped as a wind tunnel was created, and while their movements weren’t quite teleportation, it was nevertheless damn fast.

The moment they appeared there, they all attacked as arrows, crescent blades of water, and wind, along with golden shockwaves, rolled onto the army in front of them. Jake instantly knew what the Sword Saint wanted as the opposing faction noticed their sworn enemies suddenly under attack and decided this was a great time to restart the battle.

“Avoid using boosting skills and do not tire yourself out, but fight with longevity in mind,” the Sword Saint reiterated, as they were very much taking this first battle as a trial session for the many more fights to come. “Simply watch the fires burn across the river as we wait at leisure while the enemy labors.”

“For those who forgot, he is telling us to chill while the enemies tire themselves out before we attack and wipe them all out,” Jake made sure to explain as he already saw Sylphie look confused from the old man talking like an old man.

Following the Sword Saint’s elementary plan, one group was rapidly wiped out as they were attacked from both sides. When desperation set in, some did break completely free from the curse, but at that point, it was too late. Jake and company made sure to not advance too much during this fight, resulting in many from the other faction also dying. Those who managed to survive till the very end were also well and truly tired out, making them easy picking as Jake’s party let loose and cleaned up the rest of the battlefield.

After they were done, they quickly moved on toward another battlefield. On the way, they also ran into some smaller groups of soldiers and groups coming as reinforcement to other battlefields spread throughout the Vast Plateau. One of them even had a map detailing the few closest battlefields. Through some extrapolation, in total, there were at least thirty active battlefields, with even more now-abandoned areas filled with only undead and curse energy.

The Vast Plateau was truly vast, but as they traveled, Jake did notice how odd things were in regard to the placements of these battlefields. They weren't in a line as expected if two factions with borders fought but were far too spread out throughout the Vast Plateau. Jake began to consider if they were maybe placed purposefully to set up some form of large magic circle, but he couldn't make that fit either with any of the knowledge he had.

Things were weird until they reached the two-month mark since arriving on floor eighty. On one of the battlefields, where more curse and death energy than usual had already begun to appear, Jake questioned how it happened so fast. He and Dina had already talked about it plenty during their travels and how it felt off, but after reaching this particular battlefield, they understood.

Jake landed on the ground as he inspected the soil in the process of turning gray, and right as he did, he felt something from his boots. A natural treasure of some kind, hidden in the middle of the battlefield, pretty deep underground. With the help of Dina, they quickly dug it up as a sphere of bones attached together appeared before them.

Unsure what it was, Jake inspected the sphere as, surprisingly enough, it was the King who had some insight. "This is a soul-sealing hex-trap created from collecting all the ancient bones long-buried here. Bones that are connected to the land. It creates a field that seals in the soul energy of those who die in a ruthless way... which often results in the birth of curses or undead in the land where one is deployed. Based on the runes on it, I believe it even serves to amplify the curse."

"You have come across one before?" Jake asked.

"No, I learned about things like this from the witch on the World Council. And while this Totem Bone Sphere, as they are called, is not witch magic, it isn't far off. Whoever made this is a powerful witch doctor or shaman," the Fallen King responded.

"Likely one of the Twin Emperors," Jake said with a frown. "Can any of you use Identify on it? Mine isn't doing anything."

Everyone shook their heads as the Fallen King added. "It has protection against such things placed on it. In fact, it should have been hidden from most forms of detection. Something that doesn't seem to matter to you."

Jake shrugged, not going to deny that one.

“What are we going to do with it?” Dina asked. “Destroy it now?”

“Hm,” the Sword Saint hummed, and Jake felt everyone glance at him.

“I got nothing,” Jake shrugged. “I could absorb the curse energy in the sphere with Eternal Hunger, but it doesn’t really have much in it yet.”

“I would reckon it has the function to absorb all the energy in the domain,” the Fallen King shared. “Doing so will complete the item. In most cases, these totems are made to cultivate curse and death energy, likely to be used in some form of ritual at a later time.”

“In that case, we probably shouldn’t mess with it,” Jake said after thinking a bit. “Destroying it may mess up unlocking the event boss. Maybe a bit like how you needed the Demon Lord to have all its artifacts intact for the fight.”

“It’s possible, if not probable,” the Sword Saint agreed. “Let us do that then.”

“Alright,” Dina didn’t argue as she put the sphere back underground, and they buried it again, trying to act as if they had never been there.

Knowing what was going on now helped a lot as they continued their crusade. Their objective was clear: end the fighting on every battlefield and complete all the preparations for the Twin Emperors to come and extract them. Or, at least one of the Twin Emperors. They still needed to figure out what was up with them and how the two were connected. It could just be the same person acting like both, but that was something they had to confirm.

Perhaps by going to actually see one of the two leaders of the Vast Plateau.

On a particularly large battlefield at the five-month mark, Jake and company had to be careful as they often had to retreat and reenter the fight again later. Each side had commanders who were effectively

mini-bosses around level 320, and that forced their party to be very careful, as both had at least five commanders. While killing a single commander wasn't that difficult, killing several at the same time sure as hell wasn't.

And this is kind of what happened. Sylphie and the Fallen King messed up and got overwhelmed with enemies from all sides, forcing Dina to go all-out and use one of her trump cards to bail them out. While she succeeded, this did leave Dina in a weakened state for at least several days, making them hesitate if they should keep fighting or maybe take some time to recover.

Ultimately, they decided to recover, but in order to not waste time, they agreed on at least still doing something productive. A job for Jake and the best bird.

"Getting to the capital shouldn't take more than a week, especially not with Sylphie assisting you," the Sword Saint said as he looked at a map, showing this battlefield pretty close to one of the capitals. "Remember, the job is not to fight anyone but to get a feeling for who or what one of these Twin Emperors is."

That's right... it was time to finally figure out the true identities of the Twin Emperors. Or at least one of them.

Chapter 864: Nevermore: Twin Emperor Identified

For the longest time, Jake had found Sylphie's version of stealth very endearing and silly while also naturally being utterly useless. She believed that by simply making a giant tornado and hiding within it, no one would notice anything was amiss and just ignore it. She thought the same when it came to hiding sound: just make so much noise no one can hear anything, and you're good.

Well... it turns out Sylphie had kind of been correct all along? The problem all along had just been that Sylphie didn't do her stealth technique on a big enough scale.

If a small tornado was ripping apart an area, someone would notice it. However, if a giant gust of wind flew by, while people would surely notice it, few would instantly connect it to a small green hawk. Especially not when said small green hawk was merged with the wind itself, effectively making her a natural phenomenon. At least it did work on this planet, as no one bothered Jake and Sylphie during their travels.

Jake could already imagine the horrors of Sylphie's stealth technique when she got even stronger. Giant hurricanes would wash across planets just in her attempts to hide within.

Of course, Sylphie's stealth did have the issue of not really working when not traveling swiftly, as a giant gust of wind not moving or just flying in circles creating a tornado was definitely suspicious. The giant gust did have some advantages unforeseen advantages, though, such as allowing Jake to ride alongside it.

Even with all Jake's improvements to One Step, Thousand Miles, he was still not as fast as Sylphie, so having her adjust her speed to boost Jake was a big help. It allowed the two of them to travel across the Vast Plateau swiftly as they headed for the capital closest to the battlefield while the Sword Saint and Fallen King stayed back with Dina to protect her.

Jake didn't doubt the two of them would still mess a bit with the battlefields, but they would definitely show restraint. The reason the two hadn't come along for this scouting mission was partly because someone needed to stay with Dina and simply because they were both too slow. Plus, neither had good stealth skills, and if they did end up getting into conflict during their travels, Jake and Sylphie were the two best people in their party at escaping.

Alright, maybe Dina was equal to Jake, as they both had trump card escape skills, but Sylphie was second to none with her incredible speed and elusiveness. In either case, Jake was the king of stealth and was thus the best at trying to get a good look at this Twin Emperor to figure out what they were dealing with.

As Jake was the best at stealth, Sylphie sadly had to hang back when they got close to the capital. They found a small forest not far from the capital where Sylphie found a nice branch to sit on while Jake headed to the capital itself to check things out and learn more about the Twin Emperor. Who knows, maybe he could even manage to sneak into wherever the emperor lived and have a look around.

Setting off, Jake flew into the air with his stealth skill already active. He wanted to get some height first to get a good look at one of the two capital cities of the Vast Plateau, and when he did... honestly, he felt a bit disappointed.

It was so damn small.

Alright, it was still pretty big, probably large enough to house around fifty thousand, but compared to what Jake had come to expect from capital cities in the multiverse, it was pathetic. The Fort part of Haven was way bigger than this small capital, and when compared to some of the cities they had seen even on prior floors – or especially the Neverending Journey Challenge Dungeon – it barely looked like a town.

However, as Jake scouted it from afar, he did notice one thing. After using Identify more than fifty times, Jake had yet to see a single individual below level 280. And there were a lot of people in the city, most of them crafters, though. The weapon industry was definitely in full swing, as well as large alchemy labs and others who worked on supplies for the war efforts. The city was clearly still underpopulated for its already smallish size, but he reckoned a few thousand should be living there, which also truly attested to how many were already on the battlefields.

In the center of the capital was a large burly tower, only about ten stories tall but damn wide. Jake wasn't even sure if he could call it a tower, as it pretty much had the shape of a cake. He didn't hold any doubt this would be where the Twin Emperor could be found, and not just because it was the largest central building in the capital, but due to the magical runes covering the entire thing.

Jake even felt a faintly familiar energy to the one in the bone spheres, making him certain this emperor was indeed involved.

Entering the city, Jake covertly made his way toward the large building. If the emperor was home, he wanted to avoid entering the building if he could. If the Fallen King was correct and they were dealing with a witch doctor or something similar, things could quickly get hairy if Jake entered. Casters like that were very similar to witches like Miranda and liked their well-established magical domains a bit too much.

Luckily, he didn't enter before confirming the emperor was home. After circling the building a few times and sitting watch, he saw a figure at a window. There was a barrier to make one unable to look inside, but Jake didn't face many issues to Perception-check it as he saw the full form of one of the two floor bosses.

His frame was large and burly, the Twin Emperor standing nearly four and a half meters tall. He wore simple robes, with tattoos covering almost every piece of skin visible, and on his forehead was a small horn. He had the muscles of a warrior but the clothing and demeanor of a mage. His race was also a bit of a surprise, as Jake had fully expected to see an orc, considering they were the most commonly seen race in the Vast Plateau. Not that he was overly surprised at seeing an ogre, as there had also been quite a lot of those here and there.

It was a bit risky, but Jake still decided to go for an Identify, partly to confirm he was indeed looking at the right boss, and sure enough, it was one of them.

[Twin Emperor – lvl 330

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Level 330 was honestly just about expected. The event boss on floor seventy-five had been level 325, so this one had to be stronger. One also had to remember that level wasn't everything. This Twin Emperor was clearly a powerful variant, making it incredibly strong for its level.

Not that this Twin Emperor was the event boss... because he definitely felt weaker than the event boss from five floors prior. In fact, Jake felt he could fight this boss in a one-versus-one, and even if it would be a damn difficult fight, Jake gave himself at least a sixty-forty chance. With Sylphie also joining in, they had better than a three-to-one, and with the entire party, they could definitely do it.

Jake's still felt certain this boss related to the event boss, though. At least his gut told him so. Moreover, when Jake used Identify before, he felt as if something was off. His Identify hadn't been detected by the Twin Emperor, but something had still interfered with it.

He did have a skill that messed with the bone sphere, so it wouldn't be odd if he could also hide his own status, Jake mentally noted.

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Refocusing, Jake narrowed his eyes. This was far more risky than the Identify he had done before, but he was certain that a successful Identify would offer very valuable information. Primal Gaze partly activated as his eyes began to glow, and ever-so-vaguely, Jake felt as if he saw some kind of veil around the Twin Emperor. Something obscured his sight, making him see false information, almost like a shroud that was way shitter than Jake's Shroud.

Forcefully, Jake pierced the veil. The moment he did, the boss noticed his presence as the ogre whipped his head around and peered out the window straight at where Jake was standing using stealth. Due to

the nature of Unseen Hunter, the ogre now saw Jake very clearly as the two of them momentarily made eye contact.

Well, shit.

Jake didn't have time to hesitate as the entire cake-shaped tower lit up with runes as the ogre barged out his own window, breaking it in the process. A staff appeared in his hand as Jake summoned his wings and quickly used One Step to try and get away, but he felt space around him begin to get suppressed.

Dodging to the side, Jake narrowly avoided a descending lighting bolt aimed straight at where he had been standing. A massive explosion from the impact sent him tumbling through the air as he continued trying to get away.

The ground itself began to warp beneath him as a giant hand of stone rose and tried to grab him, and it didn't help when he realized that it wasn't truly space itself around him getting suppressed but the air actively working against him. Moreover, Jake felt as if his body was beginning to get heavy as even more concepts came into play. Far more than Jake wanted to try and deal with.

Arcane Awakening activated at the stable 30% as Jake lifted his foot and stepped down. Despite half a dozen concepts and elemental magics closing in on Jake, he still felt everything around him stabilize as his foot found solid ground, allowing him to teleport safely, courtesy of the best boots in the multiverse.

He appeared over two kilometers away, avoiding all the attacks coming for him. Even if Jake kind of wanted to strike back, he avoided doing anything, as this was no time or place to fight. He was still in the capital city, and all over, he felt auras begin to spike up. Even if it was nearly only crafters present, Jake didn't want to try and deal with a few thousand of them.

Fleeing, he dodged several attacks as he felt the pressure on him lessen. The ogre behind him was preparing something big, and Jake sure as hell wasn't going to stay back to experience it.

Picking up speed, Jake quickly saw that the boss had stopped chasing, though he was still casting something. For a moment, he felt relieved until something impacted his Shroud of the Primordial, as well as his soul in general. Energy had somehow appeared in his body that tried to invade his soul. It wasn't a curse, nor was it death magic, but something odd Jake remembered seeing Miranda using.

A hex...

Luckily, the energy didn't seem capable of finding anywhere to settle due to Shroud obscuring his soul. With a rush of destructive arcane energy, Jake managed to get rid of the energy from the hex, purging himself while feeling very happy he had been the one to go and not Sylphie or any of the others, as they would have had a way harder time dealing with the high level hex.

Far behind him in the capital, Jake saw a massive thunderstorm erupt as a roar of anger echoed out. Jake could only breathe a sigh of relief as he got further and further away. He didn't dare head only to where Sylphie was hiding as he sent her a quick message.

"We're bailing out of here. Fly back toward the party immediately, and keep a steady pace till I catch up," Jake warned the small hawk.

"Ree," Sylphie responded, screeching telepathically into Jake's head.

Jake kept flying for a good while longer, as he did have some pursuers, but they quickly gave up. While still flying, Jake deactivated his boosting skill, happy he didn't have to use it above 30% so he could avoid the period of weakness. After reactivating his stealth skill, he sent a message to Sylphie for them to meet back up as he had a telepathic virtual meeting with the party.

"So, some good and some bad news," Jake told the four others. "What do you want first?"

"Bad news," the King responded without hesitation.

"I didn't manage to infiltrate the main building controlled by the Twin Emperor, and I ended up getting chased away when he noticed my presence. So, still not entirely sure exactly what his plans are, and I doubt I can try and sneak back in now."

"Alright, and what is the good news?" the Sword Saint asked.

“The Twin Emperor was level 330 and pretty strong on his own, which must mean the event boss is even stronger, so we’ll have a good fight ahead of us!” Jake sent with a smile.

“... and what else?” the Sword Saint sighed.

“Oh yeah, and I figured out what’s up with the Twin Emperor... or should I call him one part of the Twinhead Emperor,” Jake said as he referred to the successful Identify he managed to sneak through just as he was found.

[Left Twinhead Emperor – lvl 330]

Jake would lie if he said he wasn’t excited at what he saw... because what they were dealing with was an insanely rare variant of ogre. One he had seen quite a bit about, as one of the more powerful gods who once worked with the Order had been one and had even authored quite a few books Jake had read.

“Are you saying it’s a...?” Dina began.

“Yep, we got a genuine Twinhead Ogre on our hands,” Jake said with glee.

“What is this Twinhead Ogre you speak of?” the Sword Saint questioned.

“Oh man, they are quite something...” Jake said as he began explaining this fascinating race.

Twinhead Ogres were as rare as they were interesting in the multiverse. For creatures to have more than one head wasn’t actually that rare – see hydras as one example – but those heads were just natural parts of the main creature. They were more like extra arms or something. It wasn’t as if every head was its own living entity.

A Twinhead Ogre legitimately had two heads and two minds. Mind you, they still shared the same Truesoul, but the rest of the soul was split in two. Each could have entirely independent thoughts and act entirely on their own. This meant that one Twinhead Ogre could also do two things at once and research two topics at the same time, far more effectively than borderline any other race. In combat,

they could also do two things at once, making them formidable foes... when the two heads got along, that is.

Because Twinhead Ogres also had quite the disadvantages. First of all, as each head was its own, but they shared one body, there could be a lack of unity, especially when it came to combat. They had to be in agreement, or they could often fight very sloppily. Growth-wise, they were also facing some challenges. They were a bit like Jake and his Anomalous Soul in this regard. Their souls were very different from usual creatures, making them require more experience per level and evolutions a lot harder, resulting in most Twinhead ogres never making it to B-grade despite being naturally born C-grades.

The biggest downside of this race was, by far, the lack of independence for each head and the Twinhead Ogre being two people forced to share one body. This resulted in a phenomenon where many Twinhead Ogres ended up actively plotting to take full control. They would work to completely kill off their counterpart and either make them mindless slaves no different from a powerful Virtual Mind skill or even cut off the head entirely and evolve into a race with only one head.

Of course, some Twinhead Ogres also tried to find another solution... which was what Jake thought this Twinhead Ogre was doing. He had managed to split himself in two and was now working on a grand ritual, perhaps with the purpose of making it a permanent thing, allowing the two of them to exist independently.

To clarify, this was impossible.

They only had one Truesoul. Which also gave Jake another thought.

"If they are a split Twinhead Ogre, they will have to meet up once in a while. Seeing as the Twinhead Ogre is level 330, they will probably have to meet up physically every month to a month and a half to maintain their split state," Jake shared with their party. "Oh, and also, while the split doesn't halve their power but allows each to maintain most of the main body, the combined version of the two will be even more powerful than them separate, even if they fight together."

"So we think the event boss of this floor is the merged Twinhead Ogre?" the Sword Saint asked clarifyingly.

“Sure as hell fits the criteria,” Jake answered. “Now, killing just one of them would result in the permanent deaths of both in their current state, so that would be the easy way to beat this floor. To unlock the event boss, we likely need them to merge, but I think the two of them are legitimately competing in some way to kill the other and absorb their twin permanently.”

“I assume that means-“

“Yep, Sylphie and I are headed to the other capital city to confirm... and this time, I’m not gonna give myself away too soon but find some actual evidence to this theory.”

Chapter 865: Nevermore: Different Points of View

So, there were a few things to address.

First of all, the second Twin Emperor turned out to be quite a bit different from the first one. Rather than carrying around a staff and wearing robes, he had on durable metal armor and carried around a massive two-handed sword on his back at all times. While Jake avoided the guy, he was confident that this second half of the Twin Emperor was a far more physical fighter.

Secondly, this entire war was indeed a plot by the Twinhead Ogre. In traditional Nevermore fashion, information could be found just out in the open within the main residence of the second Twinhead Emperor, which Jake had managed to sneak successfully into after the boss left the capital – likely to meet up with his other counterpart.

In the home of the boss, Jake found written records, as well as some books and even communications from the other Twin Emperor, where they discussed what they were doing. To summarize, the Twinhead Ogre wasn’t natively from the Vast Plateau but had ended up there after his own homeworld was invaded, and he used an ancient teleportation circle to try and get away. After arriving on the Plateau, he quickly came to realize there was a severe lack of enemies that would allow him to continue progressing and reach B-grade.

Without evolving, the Twinhead Ogre believed he had a low chance of being able to leave the Plateau to explore the rest of the multiverse, so the two heads hatched a plan of using all the enlightened life in the Vast Plains to fuel their own evolution. At that time, they had clearly been unified in their goal, but when Jake read the notes of the Twin Emperor now, he saw that things had changed.

Jake had been off when he theorized the ritual was to permanently split up. That had never been the plan at all. However, after the split, the Twin Emperors both experienced independence for the first time in their lives, and it turns out they both quite liked it. At least the warrior Twin Emperor also suspected the mage variant also preferred their split state.

Researching more, Jake discovered that even if the warrior variant looked like a pure warrior, he was more akin to a death knight. He was capable of quite powerful death magic, and the bone spheres had been created back when the two of them were still merged into one body, using both of their powers.

Meanwhile, the mage variant was something called a hex shaman. He was capable of using shamanistic magic along with hexes, wherein curses were a sub-category. So, one head focused on physical combat and death magic, while the other focused on shamanistic magic and hexes. A pretty damn strong combo when combined, Jake would reckon.

The problem now was that the two of them didn't want to fully recombine, which was a bit of a problem if their party wanted to fight a recombined version. Jake even found evidence of the warrior making plans to use his death magic to "kill" off his counterpart when they did the grand ritual to re-merge and hopefully gain enough Records to reach B-grade. At the same time, Jake didn't doubt the mage was making similar plans to also get rid of the warrior in a similar fashion, something this warrior version already suspected.

So, yeah, things were a bit of a mess, which spelled problems for Jake and company. If the event boss was the re-merged version of the Twinhead Ogre, they couldn't make do with one of them "dying" during the re-merging, as that would undoubtedly weaken the final product. Something this Twin Emperor also fully recognized, but his desire to remain independent made the lower overall power worth it in his head.

Interestingly enough, Jake also found out that the two ogres recognized the presence of Jake and company. There were several correspondences related to their party and how a third party had appeared, but so far, the two Twin Emperors did not seem overly concerned. In fact, they were almost thankful that their party sped up the process of killing everyone, doing such a good job on every battlefield by leaving no one alive. For some reason, the two ogres also felt the need to insult their party for not realizing they were just helping the ritual along, but Jake wasn't going to get angry about that. He would get even in time.

Jake ended up spending half a day or so going through all the information the warrior Twinhead Ogre had just left spread throughout his home. Some of it was sealed away and hidden, sure, but Jake easily found everything using Sphere.

One could ask why all of these plans and correspondences between the two Twin Emperors were just left all around the place and not destroyed once the warrior had memorized everything, but Jake wasn't going to question the flawless logic of a Nevermore floor. It hadn't made sense on any of the prior floors either, so why suddenly get all up in arms over this one?

He managed to sneak out of the second Twin Emperor's residence before anyone caught him, as Jake moved to meet up with his other party members once more. Sylphie had already rejoined them after helping Jake get most of the way to this other capital, and the four of them were busy making a mess on more of the battlefields.

Time-wise, they were still good. They still had a few months left to finish off this floor and defeat the re-merged Twinhead Ogre. The plan was to fight the strongest version of the Twinhead Ogre possible, and to do that, they reached a conclusion.

"To summarize, firstly, we will clear up all the battlefields to ensure all the Totem Bone Spheres are fully charged. Then, we will allow the two Twin Emperors to collect them, but before or perhaps in the middle of their ritual, we need to make the two of them realize that they need to merge with one another fully to stand a chance against the five of us. If all goes well, we will end up with a Twinhead Ogre fully put back together, further empowered by the ritual. It's risky, and we may be biting off more than we can chew, but this is the plan," the Sword Saint nicely explained their plan for finishing off the final Nevermore floor.

A simple plan where a lot could go wrong, with the end result potentially being an event boss far too powerful for them to beat. Yep, Jake was definitely going to enjoy this final floor, especially what would happen over the next few months... because it was time to wipe out all the battlefields and get just a few more levels under his belt.

Azal cursed under his breath as he looked out at the vast plains in front of him. It did not get better when his party member, the Dungeon Engineer, shook his head as he opened in eyes, having finished his analysis.

"Nope, no way to do it in time," Casper said with a sigh. "This floor got two main bosses from what I can sense, and in order to get the best reward, we need to do something with the two of them. Not just kill them both, but something more complicated... and time-consuming."

"The essence of death is powerful in this world... it's one suitable for us. However, it has an artificial feeling... as if it's cultivated. Do we need to finish this cultivation to ensure a perfect victory?" the ghostly bride asked as a few ghosts returned to her, having scouted their immediate surroundings.

"Right... I sense a lot of focus points where both death and curse energy are gathered. As you said, it's all happening in a rather artificial fashion, so probably someone that's being done by one of those Twin Emperors," Casper shook his head again as he looked at Azal. "Sorry boss, no way to do everything in time."

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Azal couldn't fault the Dungeon Engineer. They had simply been too slow at passing the prior floors and even made some major mistakes along the way. Especially their attempts to do the event boss on floor seventy-five had been overly ambitious, resulting in the death of one of their comrades and Maltrax having to overuse a certain boosting skill, making her weakened for more than a year afterward. Luckily, the Risen had sent a replacement from one of the other elite teams for their dead party member. This meant another team was crippled by losing a member, but there had simply been no other choice. Azal had been prioritized by the higher-ups; that was the end of it.

My score should still be acceptable in the eyes of the Blightfather, Azal thought. No, hoped. If not, he could potentially lose his title of Ghost King.

As he was standing there considering the situation, his party kept discussing.

"Can't we just kill these two Twin Emperors and quickly pass the floor that way?" Maltrax, the beastfolk Risen, asked.

"Look at the objective of the floor again. It says to end the conflict, something I doubt just killing one or both of the two Twin Emperors will do," Casper said. "It would also just be too easy from a design perspective."

"Well, fuck," Maltrax cursed out loud. "What then? We got a month and a bit left or something like that, right?"

"Right," Casper confirmed. "In my opinion, the best way to optimize points would probably be to hunt down at least one of these bosses. While it won't be as good as clearing the floor, hopefully, it will give us a few achievements. We can also try and do a few bonus objectives, but yeah, the best thing is probably to just kill a Twin Emperor or two. I would assume that's also the best for levels."

"Let us do that then," Azal said with determination. Even if he doubted he would be able to take the top spot of the Leaderboards as his Patron had hoped, he would, at the very least, do his best till the very end.

Jacob relaxed on the fourteenth City Floor, sitting and drinking tea with Bertram as he waited for more members of the Holy Church to come to see him. His former bodyguard and current Guardian had a tentative look on his face as he looked at the teacup in front of him.

"You're really satisfied with this?" he asked after a bit.

"It was for the best," Jacob sighed, having had a similar conversation like this before. "We can do more good here, helping those who have questions or are beginning to doubt if their Path needs improvement. Especially as most finish all the Challenge Dungeons on this floor, it's the best place to have these conversations."

"Hmph," Bertram just grunted, not entirely satisfied with the answer.

Jacob understood... Bertram was a fighter. However, Jacob wasn't. While the two of them were bound by the unique bond between a Guardian and an Augur, they were still two separate people with their own Truesouls. This meant they took up two spots in the Nevermore party, and that sadly made them burdens.

In the earlier floors, this wasn't really a problem, as Jacob's abilities as an Augur were highly valuable, allowing them to often skip many time-consuming steps. Back then, the true difficulty had been in pure navigation and figuring out the floors. Now, the difficulty was in the actual fights.

Bertram and Jacob could pull off some interesting moves, considering Bertram's near-immortality and ability to be resurrected repeatedly. He could use boosting skills far beyond where one would die and wield powerful weapons such as a Holy Sword to be a true pinnacle fighter for difficult fights.

The problem arose when every fight was a dangerous one. In his basic state, Bertram was only a good warrior. He was skilled for sure and was considered an elite, but compared to the others they had in their party, Jacob and Bertram simply fell too far behind.

That's why it had been decided that Jacob and Bertram's Nevermore journey would end here, not going to floor seventy-one. Instead, they had been replaced by two others from the Holy Church. In fact, the Church had split up their entire party and made one with the five best prospects to go as far as they could during the final decade or so. It would be the very best the Holy Church could muster for this early era of Nevermore, and hopefully, it would be enough.

Meanwhile, Jacob would stay back and help guide people until this decade expired and it was time for him to leave. One could question why he didn't try and do some more floors to at least gain a few more levels, but to someone like Jacob, staying back on the City Floor was better even for that. He would gain more experience acting like an Augur for a decade compared to doing more floors.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the higher-ups believed it best Jacob didn't take more risks. On floor sixty-eight, he had triggered his One More Light skill, which had resurrected him once after death. The skill gave him one charge per grade, and while he did have one more left as he didn't die in D-grade, the Church believed it too risky for him to continue. His death back then had come when they pulled off one of their special strategies with Bertram, leaving Jacob defenseless as he was killed by a regular monster no one had seen coming.

"Hey, at least I have some positive news," Jacob said with a smile. "I have ensured we will be able to go back to Earth when the Prima Guardian arrives. I didn't even have to act like this would be my compromise for not making a fuss over being told to stay on the City Floor."

"Oh?" Bertram said with surprise. "That is good news... I hope everyone is doing well back home."

"Based on what I heard, things are just fine," Jacob answered. "My father is even part of their World Council running things in place of Jake having to actually do any work as a World Leader."

"Definitely for the best. Not the thing about your father, but that Jake isn't running things all on his own. Doubt that would end well."

"For sure," Jacob said with a look of nostalgia.

The two of them tended to avoid talking about Earth as it was a sore subject for both of them. Jacob didn't like how he had borderline been fooled into leaving before Ell'Hakan had made his invasion, much less that the Holy Church had taken advantage of this invasion to force the Risen off the planet.

At least he had learned that the Holy Church had expected to be able to remain and still have some presence, even if it wouldn't be prominent or displayed openly. Efforts Miranda had managed to crush, as the planet was nearly entirely dark to the eyes of the Holy Church now after almost all of the people affiliated with them were removed.

Perhaps for the better. No matter how involved Jacob got with the Holy Church, he still cared about his home planet and the people from it, and he genuinely hoped they were all doing well.

Carmen didn't like being forced to spend time with more people she didn't know, but at least the three of them were more skilled than their former party members. Plus, at least they were doing fun group activities.

Davion, their party leader, rushed forward as the four others followed into the battlefield, where they became a machine of death. While clearing all of floor eighty would be a stretch, they sure as hell should be able to get in quite a few good fights.

Moving swiftly, Carmen took the frontal position as they were noticed by a group of enemies. A few dozen spells flew toward them, Carmen just smiling as she took the magic head-on. It didn't even manage to leave a mark on her body as she punched a particularly large fireball apart before continuing to pummel the mage who had cast it.

Two warriors attack from behind as their blades hit her back. The large clang of metal hitting something tougher than itself sounded out as Carmen turned with a grin and punched one of them in the throat before kicking the other in the stomach, sending him tumbling back into the two-handed blade of Davion, who cut him in two.

Flashing him a grin, Carmen turned to face more as she took every hit without a care in the world, the level 300 foes far from capable of piercing her natural resistance. Especially not the casters. Ah, but there were a few who could maybe nick her a bit here and there so she could still have some fun.

Her three other party members also went hard. A shaman with a dozen or so summoned fire and earth elementals was practically a one-woman army, as she wielded her own staff to shoot out torrents of lava to burn her enemies. A caster that didn't really fit into the usual Valhal archetype cast spirit magic to buff their party members up and act as a healer, while a third guy wielded a massive great bow to shoot devastating arrows. He wasn't as good as Jake, but he was decent enough.

Their party had been shuffled up a bit after doing all the Challenge Dungeons, resulting in only Davion and Carmen continuing in the "elite" group. While Carmen hadn't been a fan of this shuffle initially, she had to recognize it was probably for the better, as there was no fucking way they would have made it to floor eighty with their old group.

Not that they would beat it... but at least Carmen would have a good time until the very end of Nevermore by punching her way through a few dozen active battlefields.

Chapter 866: Nevermore: Lord of Hunger

Jake stood back along with the three others as they allowed the Sword Saint to do his thing. More than seventy combatants remained, and despite being on opposing sides, they had teamed up to face this one swordsman. Nevertheless, the outcome was clear.

Rain fell from the sky, every droplet piercing into their barriers and shields. The swordsman himself fought them in a simplistic fashion as he moved swiftly between foes, never giving them any chance to surround him or catch him out in a vulnerable position.

Even when his sword swings didn't manage to leave injuries, the piercing rain did. These tens of thousands of small piercing droplets fell every second, making them simply impossible to block. The water itself, even when blocked, also contained the concept of time, weighing and slowing down everyone the more soaked they got. Moreover, Jake knew this was only the first part of the old man's mythical skill, an extremely powerful move for sure.

The only big downside was that to use this skill, the old man had to be fighting alone... not because it was a requirement, but because it would strike everything and everyone in the area indiscriminately.

When about sixty enemies remained, the Sword Saint used the next move. The rain began to slow down before stopping in mid-air while the old man floated backwards as he took a stance, pointing the blade toward the ground and grasping it with both hands as he knelt. With a slow movement, he began to move the blade upwards, the floating droplets doing the same.

“Rain of Time: Reversal.”

Instantly, he swung upwards, the raindrops following along. The ground below was torn up as every single droplet reversed in time and pierced toward the sky, as it looked like the old man had just swung a blade dozens of kilometers long and wide.

Every single person caught in it was cut up, many of them ripped apart altogether by the powerful strike. Only about twenty of the most powerful C-grades remained, all having used powerful defensive skills or hidden items to survive.

It was the same skill the old man had already shown off quite a number of times before. It had been the mythical skill he gained in D-grade that had downgraded to legendary when he evolved... a downgrade that had now been reversed. Because the old man had upgraded it back up to mythical once more, as the skill was no longer finished even after this move.

Rather than use the skill to restore a bit of the used resources, he activated a second part. Pointing his blade toward the clouds above made of pure water, he spoke once more.

“Rain of Time: Thousand Blades Descent.”

All of the rain that had fallen coalesced into blades far up in the sky as the Sword Saint swung down once more. Every single blade of water descended with his strike, and rather than simply flying straight down, they each aimed for the still-living combatants.

The poor twenty or so survivors tried to defend themselves but were unable to as each was already injured. Limbs were sent flying as every single one of them was cut apart, and many of the blades of water were colored red with blood as they continued down and pierced into the ground, penetrating the rocky ground for dozens of meters as the terrain itself began to look like swiss cheese. Definitely not a good sight for anyone with trypophobia.

Breathing heavily, the old man sheathed his sword before flying back toward the group, looking pretty damn tired. As he got closer, Jake couldn't help but yell:

“Six hundred and thirty-seven!”

“What?” the Sword Saint responded as he soon reached them, looking quite confused.

“You said there were a thousand blades, but I only counted six hundred and thirty-seven,” Jake said as he shook his head in disappointment. “That’s just false advertising right there.”

“Really?” the old man responded with a tired sigh.

“I call it as I see it,” Jake shrugged and smirked.

“Don’t you have a skill called One Step, Thousand Miles? I’m positively confident I have yet to see you ever travel even a hundred miles in a single step using that skill, much less a thousand,” the Sword Saint shot back.

“In my defense, I use the skill with a focus on quick activation over range... plus, I didn’t make that skill; it’s a set upgrade path. You made that skill, so the name should at least be accurate. Also, all of my other skills do as advertised,” Jake said with confidence, as all of his arcane arrow skills were indeed made of arcane arrows.

“Do you not possess a skill called Sagacity of the Malefic Viper? That, too, is a lie, as I see no sage before me,” the Fallen King decided to team up with the old man to attack Jake.

“Of the Malefic Viper. He is the sage, not me,” Jake said, deciding to change the subject, considering he was getting mercilessly attacked from two directions at once. Looking at the Sword Saint, he asked what they were all thinking. “Anyway, did you get the level?”

“I did indeed,” the old man politely accepted the change of subject as he nodded.

The reason the old man had handled this small battlefield alone was for him to get one more level before the final fight with the Twinhead Ogre. He had been level 289 in his class and, with this level, had gotten a new skill selection.

A few of the others had also gotten over this breakpoint, but sadly for Jake, he was still a bit behind. Not to say he hadn't also made some good progress.

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 285 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

...

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 287 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 274 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

This was for the entire floor, mind you. Getting three levels was good for sure, but he had gotten less than the others simply because this particular floor didn't suit his Path that well. Jake wasn't made for big wars or conflicts; he was instead far more specialized in hunting down powerful singular individuals. In truth, Jake's Path also wasn't super well-suited for group combat in general but was better made for lone hunting.

"Any update on the Twin Emperors?" Dina asked as the Sword Saint went off to the side to focus on his skill selection.

"They are collecting their bone spheres pretty quickly," Jake answered with a smile as he stopped thinking sad thoughts about his own relative lack of levels. "At least, I guess that's what they're doing when they go to all the different battlefields."

"Ree?" Sylphie inquired.

"Yeah, we should have time. If they keep up this speed, collecting them all will take two weeks more at most," Jake responded as he focused on the two Hunter's Marks he had placed on the bosses.

In preparation for the final fight, they naturally needed to know where this ritual would be taking place. Finding this location had once more been tasked to Jake as he was the scout of the party and, quite frankly, just the best at it.

Stolen novel; please report.

He had marked one of the Twin Emperors and followed him to the meeting place of the two bosses. This meeting point was in the middle of nowhere, but when Jake used a Pulse, he understood. A massive magic circle was put there, hidden beneath the ground itself, likely buried using the earth-bending powers of the shaman Twin Emperor.

Watching the two of them meet up had been pretty damn boring, but he did notice something interesting. When the two Twin Emperors were close to one another, both their bodies seemed to warp a bit, and as he had a Mark on them, he saw their Soulshapes shudder ever-so-slightly. Their very souls wanted to merge back together, but the two ogres did some simple-looking magic, stabilizing their souls before the two exchanged some words Jake couldn't hear before they both went home again.

As they left, Jake made sure to refresh his Hunter's Mark on both. Partly to check how long the marks would last and to keep track of the two ogres. Well, Jake turned out to be pretty lucky, as his mark lasted more than an entire month, which coincidentally was also the time between the ogres meeting up. It was a bit annoying that he had to go re-mark them every month, but luckily, he only had to do it a few times before the floor would be over. There hadn't been that many months left, after all.

Marking them turned out to be a great idea, as when they cleared one of the last few battlefields, both Twin Emperors started to make their move. They began to go to all the old and abandoned battlefields one by one, sometimes even returning to where the giant ritual circle was in between gathering a bunch.

By now, pretty much all the bone spheres were gathered. Jake and company had also just cleared out the final active battlefield, which meant it was time for the next step in their plan.

"Let's make our way toward the ritual circle so we can begin to set things up there," the Sword Saint said with a nod.

"How far was it again?" the Fallen King questioned.

“Just four days with Sylphie assisting us,” the old man responded.

“Ree!” Sylphie said, always happy to help as the wind began to gather around them. The Sword Saint was a bit worse for wear after using his flashy and powerful mythical skill that Jake totally wasn’t jealous of. He could only reverse rain and create a torrent of falling swords; how was that even impressive? Jake could stare at people really menacingly, which was definitely way cooler.

Flying toward the ritual site, the five of them spoke a bit and went over their plans once more as the Sword Saint also shared a bit about the new skill he had unlocked. It was a defensive one that allowed him to shift his location in space back a second or two while summoning a water clone where he had been standing prior, allowing him to dodge attacks...

So, yeah, a shittier version of Eternal Shadow. Jake’s skill was definitely better there, especially considering the old man’s skill was only of ancient rarity.

As expected, they arrived at the ritual site just a bit under four days later. Jake released a pulse to inspect the place, and as expected, he found over a hundred totem bone spheres sealed beneath the ground at different focus points of the magic circle. Using his knowledge of ritual magic, he could also see that the two ogres needed just twenty more spheres, and they should be good to go.

“How much time left till we’re kicked out of Nevermore?” Jake asked the Sword Saint, wanting to make sure they indeed had enough time.

“A bit less than a month.” The Sword Saint answered. “As long as the Twin Emperors are as fast as you expected, we should have at least two weeks left when they get here. That should give us time for them to finish whatever preparations they need to begin the ritual.”

“There aren’t any further preparations, not really,” Jake said after he was done looking at the ritual circle. “It’s fully complete already... has been for a long time. It just needed its batteries to get powered up.”

“Hm,” the Sword Saint frowned. “Do we still have time to-“

“Yeah, I already got it all planned out in my head,” Jake grinned as he looked at the old man. “I will need your help, of course.”

“Alright, then let’s get to work,” the Sword Saint nodded in agreement as the two of them went down toward the ritual circle that the Twinhead Ogre had totally forgotten to put a “don’t touch” sign on.

Meanwhile, Dina began her preparations as she spread seeds throughout the surrounding plains. The Fallen King also made sure he had all his weird golden spheres for recovery. In truth, he and Sylphie didn’t have many things to prepare, as they just made sure to be in absolute peak condition for when Twinhead Ogre appeared... because if one thing was sure, then it was that the following fight wouldn’t be easy.

The two ogres arrived at the ritual site at approximately the same time. They spotted each other from afar and gave knowing looks before they began depositing the Totem Bone Spheres in their assigned spots. Getting everything in place only took about half an hour, a bit quicker than usual, as this time, they didn’t have to be careful and keep everything hidden.

In fact, they began to unearth the entire formation as the soil was turned over, revealing the complex magic circle the two of them had carved into the ground before they had split into two. It was the final thing the two of them had done before splitting up; their final joint project.

Now... now they would never work together again. As the final preparations were made, the two of them came together in the center of the circle. The place where they would absorb all the death and curse energy from the ritual to uplift their existence, hopefully getting enough Records to evolve to B-grade and finally get off the Vast Plateau.

“So, it has finally come to this,” the Left Twin Emperor said as he stood there with his staff, staring at his counterpart. The person whom he had once been one with... and now wished to get rid of permanently.

“It’s the only way. Neither of us wishes to become one again, and without unity, we would never be capable of evolving anyway,” the Right Twin Emperor said, as he already had a hand on his sword, which he rested on his shoulder.

There could only be one ending... and they both knew it. One of them had to perish, and each had plans to rid themselves of the other. They also both knew what the other one planned, as the closer they both

got to the end of this ordeal, the harder it became to hide their true intentions. So, rather than try and plan behind the other's back, everything was now out in the open.

One would use a cursed seal to remove the consciousness and free will of his former second half, while the other would simply kill part of the soul of the other Twin Emperor. Both were cruel methods, but neither blamed the other... to do so would simply be too hypocritical.

Besides, neither of them truly hated one another. This was simply their fate. They had tasted the forbidden fruit of independence, and this was the price they had to pay if they wished to ever continue progressing. It would weaken the winner significantly compared to if they simply fully merged once more, but that was a sacrifice that had to be made.

"May the best one win," the Left Twin Emperor said as his aura began to spike.

"And the loser never forgotten," the Right Twin Emperor responded, as he also pushed his aura.

Their two presences clashed with one another as they began to enter a battle of wills. An actual fight would only result in destroying the surrounding magic circle while weakening the eventual winner, making pulling off the ritual more difficult.

Instead, they would battle it out with their souls. They were both already at an identical wavelength and power level, meaning neither had any innate advantage. The winner would instead be the one with the great will to win and live on as his own entity – and likely also the one with the highest chances of evolving afterward.

The presences clashed and intertwined, as neither got an advantage. Around them, the ritual began to activate as planned, empowering both of them at the same time with both the power of curses and death. The end result of the ritual would be that only one remained, as everything would be decided soon. Their souls were already half-merged, the process no longer able to be stopped.

Yet, just then, something unplanned happened. Something unexpected.

Another aura entered the mix. A third presence made itself known, seemingly appearing out of nowhere as the sky above was covered in an unfamiliar yet recognizable energy. The energy of curses... but one far more powerful than anything their ritual was dealing with.

For a moment, their clash stopped as both looked up. A shadowy figure had appeared, floating in the sky surrounded by rolling clouds of pure curse energy, staring down at them and the ritual circle with pure hunger.

"I knew I smelled something... delicious," the being said, as a voice echoed.

The pure hunger intensified as the two Twin Emperors both used Identify at the same time, and their eyes opened wide when they saw the creature that had appeared.

[Lord of Hunger – lvl 345]

Neither knew how this had happened and in their state of clashing souls and intertwined existences, they both knew what the other one was thinking. They had somehow attracted a powerful creature none of them had known about... perhaps they even had a hand in giving birth to it.

"A worthy feast," the being spoke once more as a shadowy hand was raised.

Both Twin Emperors felt the bone spheres begin to react. The creature was trying to absorb the curse energy within them, devouring everything they had worked for. What's more, they both also experienced pure bloodlust and knew that the being was not going to stop at simply reaping the fruits of their labor. As soon as it had eaten the spheres, they would be next.

As they were in the middle of the ritual circle already, and their state was that of being half-merged, the Twin Emperors faced a choice... and for the first time in a long time, neither held any doubt what the best decision would be. Stopping the merging could not be done, and what did it matter to obtain independence if they would die anyway?

Better to try and find another solution and not die facing this cursed creature. And to do that, they would need to be at their most powerful state. With determination, their unity was restored as their souls came together, rebirthing the Twinhead Emperor once more.

Chapter 867: Nevermore: Twinhead Emperor

Jake deserved a goddamn award for his performance as the mysterious yet powerful Lord of Hunger. Ah, not those awards given for good acting, but those reserved for extremely shitty performances because hot damn had Jake felt embarrassed while saying his lines.

He could at least partly excuse how horrible it was by blaming Sim-Jake a little. In order to really sell it, Jake had infused his body with curse energy and even sent it emanating out of Eternal Hunger while mixing it with his presence. Shit, he went as far as to summon his Eternal Shadow to overlap with his own body during the entire thing.

This did inadvertently result in Jake being affected by his own curse energy. No way around it. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Jake to feel like he could blame the remnants of cringe on Sim-Jake. At least his party members were kind enough to not say anything during or after his speech.

Not that they had much to complain about... because their plan had worked. Without them even having to use any of their two backups in case Jake's acting had failed.

The ritual created by the Twinhead Emperor was in full swing as the curse and death energy exploded out of it. Over a hundred pillars of pure energy shot toward the sky as the two Twin Emperors merged into one being as their body was infused with energy all the meanwhile.

The energy pouring out of the many Totem Bone Spheres was the impurities, as the Twinhead Ogre only absorbed the cleanest of energy and Records. More than ninety-nine percent of this energy would not be used by the ogre as this ritual was never meant to raise their power, just their future potential. In all honesty, it was a damn impressive ritual, if also flawed in many ways, as it was rather forceful. Perhaps it would allow the Twinhead Ogre to reach B-grade, but akin to someone absorbing a fragment of the Viper and instantly evolving a few grades, B-grade would be the end of the Twinhead Ogre's Path.

Well, if he ever did manage to evolve... something Jake and company were going to make sure that wasn't gonna happen. As the ritual was winding down, a system message appeared before Jake and the others.

Event unlocked: Return of the Twinhead Emperor.

The culprits behind the war on the Vast Plateau were moments away from having their wish come true at the sacrifice of most enlightened beings on the Plateau. Their ritual was complete, everything ready, all factors accounted for... except for the appearance of five unknown entities.

Despite their prior plans, the Twin Emperors have decided to once more merge with one another, rebirthing the Twinhead Emperor in a state more powerful than ever. They viewed it as their only choice to face this threat, even if it ruined all they had been preparing for.

Now, with all hopes of evolution squashed, they seek only their own survival and revenge on those for forced them into this state.

End the Path of the Twinhead Emperor once and for all, thus ending not only the conflict on the Vast Plateau but the cause of it. Do so that it may never happen again.

New Bonus Objective gained: Do not allow a single party member to be slain during the battle while fully slaying the Twinhead Emperor for good.

It was a message saying something borderline identical to what was on floor seventy-five with the event boss here, except it now even had an added bonus objective. Jake and company had completed all of the bonus objectives on this floor already, so to get a new one was a bit of a surprise... plus it communicated that the difficulty of this fight was high, as the only other time Jake remembered seeing a bonus objective like that was during their fight with Minaga.

Jake stared down at the Twinhead Ogre as the ritual fully came to an end. The whole thing had only taken ten or so seconds, as the ritual had already been well underway by the time Jake appeared and interfered. As all the energy began to die down, the ritual kept humming with energy as the two figures standing at the center turned into one.

The ogre had gotten slightly taller and was the same bundle of muscle as before. His armor had changed quite a bit, as it was now a mix of the two Twin Emperor's prior equipment. All the most important places were protected by metal, while the rest was just cloth. The only mostly visible flesh was on the ogre's arms, legs, and face, with a kilt the only thing defending his legs, with even the feet wide open as the boss wore some sandal-looking footwear.

As expected, the biggest change by far was what could be found above the neck... or necks, as it should be called now. Two heads rested side by side, each having the face of one of the Twin Emperors. On the

respective sides of their heads, they also wielded the weapons of each Twin Emperor, with the right side having a giant sword and the left side a staff.

Using Identity, Jake confirmed the result.

[Twinhead Emperor – lvl 335]

Even if the ritual had not been done to gain more power, getting a few levels was still inevitable. In fact, Jake found it a bit lucky the boss had not risen in level further... because if the Twinhead Emperor had, this would have gotten even harder than it already was going to be.

The aura of the ogre had entirely transformed after the two had merged into one. Before, they had both been incomplete, while now, reunited, the Twinhead Ogre could show their full power once more. In pure power, it was by far the strongest creature Jake had ever faced on Nevermore, outside of the B-grade he had tried to fight in Minaga's Labyrinth.

Powerful for sure... but compared to a B-grade, this ogre was still manageable.

"Lord of Hunger! You have forced me into this, so be prepared to face the consequences!" One of the heads of the Twinhead Emperor yelled, infusing his voice with mana. Jake felt like this was his queue to continue their plan.

"Consequences? No, thank you... I'd rather not deal with you at all," Jake said, acting as much like a being born of a curse as he could.

"That is not your choice to-"

Before the ogre could finish the sentence, the attacks arrived. A massive drill of wind descended from above as hundreds of spear-like roots shot up from underneath. At the same time, a thin, piercing blade of water shot at the Twinhead Emperor from one side as a golden beam arrived from the other. Jake didn't use any direct attack but instead simply stared at the boss as his eyes glowed orange, using Primal Gaze.

He felt a powerful impact on his soul, making Jake flinch in pain, but he still continued doing his part. A shadowy version of himself also flew out of his body, barreling down toward the ogre with a katar in hand as the real Jake prepared to use the cover of curse energy to fly upward.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

The many attacks arrived at the Twinhead Emperor, and they momentarily froze. Right as they did, the eyes of one of the heads began to glow as something entirely unexpected happened. The soul attack Jake had made was entirely taken on by only one of the heads, allowing the other one to control the body and energy fully.

Slamming their staff into the ground, the roots were crushed down as the earth erupted. Massive spikes hundreds of meters tall shot up all around him, weakening the attacks coming from the side, as a barrier of swirling wind also appeared around the boss. The barrier did not look powerful enough to block the attack, but Jake understood when he saw the barrier slightly reflect the trajectory of the drill of wind from above, making it crash into the golden beam from the Fallen King. At the same time, the sword in the right arm was raised and blocked the Sword Saint's attack fully, as the ogre's arm barely moved from the impact.

The only one unblocked was Jake's Eternal Shadow, but that was because the Twin Emperor had chosen an offensive option for that one. The glowing eyes of the ogre that had taken on the soul attack intensified as two burning beams blasted out. Rather than get hit, the Eternal Shadow dodged the blow as the beam turned in mid-air to strike from behind.

This one, the Eternal Shadow, didn't even bother to dodge as it threw its weapon. It wasn't even close to hitting the ogre but pierced through several layers of rock before embedding itself in the ground. The ogre's attack did hit, though, as the Eternal Shadow dispersed into energy, making the ogre temporarily look confused.

They didn't have much time to ponder, though, as more attacks arrived. Jake's party – except Sylphie, who had been flying far up in the air - had all taken up hidden positions Jake had made using stable barriers of arcane mana around the ritual circle, Dina helping to further hide them using her nature magic. Now, they were all out of hiding and went for the boss.

As for where Jake, the Lord of Hunger, was? Well, he was already "dead," or at least gone, right? At least it looked like he had disappeared as the true Jake rapidly ascended upwards, hidden by the remnant curse energy he had filled the sky with. He even felt that the Twinhead Emperor was no longer fully

aware of him, allowing him to once more begin to enter stealth while flying upwards. In his quiver on his back, an arrow was also being created as Jake began making all of his preparations.

While ascending, he turned parts of his attention to the battle below as he hoped the other four could also handle their role until it was time for Jake to make his reentrance.

The Sword Saint went straight for the Twinhead Emperor, blade already in hand. He was the only true melee fighter of their party, making him alone in close combat more often than not, at least when the boss in question didn't try to avoid fighting him directly. This was undoubtedly a risky role, but he was more than up for it.

Staring at the boss, Miyamoto knew the merged ogre was powerful. He did not have Jake's ability to judge others' power extremely accurately, but he had been in plenty of fights himself and had acceptable insight when measuring a foe... and this Emperor was powerful. Very powerful.

Due to that, he also didn't dare hold back as the Sword Saint activated his boosting skill immediately. He would need it no matter what, and out of everyone, his was the one that could be used for the longest. It was based on water and time, both concepts rather gentle in nature, though it did come at the sacrifice of not making the power gained as explosive.

Closing in on the Twinhead Emperor, the ogre noticed him as one of the heads turned. He had approached from the right side, which, in retrospect, was perhaps not the best, as he found himself confronted with a massive sword. One that would usually be wielded in two hands, but the ogre wielded it with ease as he swung for the approaching swordsman.

Blocking was not an option as the Sword Saint momentarily delayed his step, allowing the blade to swing down in front of him, missing entirely. The blade struck the ground, making it erupt as an explosion of death mana washed over the old man, but he wasn't deterred, as he went for a light slash, not wanting to overcommit to any attack.

Moving quickly, the ogre pulled back the arm the Sword Saint was going for, but a small cut was still left. Without waiting for a full response, the old man retreated slightly, which proved a good idea as the ogre ripped up the blade embedded in the ground, making it erupt and sending black rot shards infused with death energy flying toward Miyamoto.

Deflecting those he couldn't dodge, he tried to launch a crescent blade of water to keep the ogre engaged and focused on him. However, clearly, the boss wasn't taking him overly seriously yet. Miyamoto was, in effect, only fighting one of the heads, as the left one focused entirely on being prepared for the three other attacks.

Attacks that arrived soon after as Sylphie descended from above. She pierced down, aiming straight for the left head. Unfortunately, the ogre had been prepared as he raised his staff toward the sky and released a torrent of fire and rock, blasting upwards and lighting up the sky.

Right as the ogre did this, a blast of force arrived from the side, hitting the ogre in the arm, making the blast go slightly off-course. This allowed Sylphie to penetrate through the flames, but she was still forced to abandon fully committing at the very last second when a pillar of rock shot up toward her. Still, she managed to use all her momentum to launch a bullet of air that hit the ogre in the shoulder, drawing blood.

Both the Fallen King and Sylphie continued their many attacks as the Sword Saint stayed in melee range. So far, the ogre had yet to move a single time but had stayed mostly still throughout the entire battle. Yet he was not really losing any ground at all, handling the three of them. It didn't help that the few minor wounds they did leave were healed within seconds, as the boss could even cast healing magic on themselves.

Not that their party was struggling much, either. The Sword Saint kept a primarily defensive style, as he stayed engaged with the right side of the ogre. He dodged all the blade swings and the blasts of death magic as he left minor wound after minor wound. Sometimes, he was a bit too slow to fully dodge an attack, which was where Dina came in with her healing.

A status quo was established, and the Sword Saint believed things were progressing far better than expected. They were buying time for Jake to do his thing without expending many of their resources, and they still had "that" prepared for later, too.

Continuing his attacks, the Sword Saint began to gain more confidence, as the boss was not as dangerous as first believed. The ogre wasn't attacking much, but mostly defending, and when they did attack, it was to blast one of them away. It was almost as if the ogre was also buying time... but for what?

They would get their answer soon after.

The Sword Saint tried to land a deep cut on the arm of the ogre, but suddenly, he found a staff pointed at his head. Quickly, he dodged to the side as a bullet of air shot toward him, and before he could even raise his blade to block, a blade came swinging in from the side.

With alarm, Miyamoto was forced to use his newly gained evasion skill, as his body was replaced with a water clone. At the same time, he was sent back about five meters, where he still suffered from a shockwave of pure death energy released from the blade.

Stumbling, he didn't even have time to stabilize before a shard of stone struck him in the shoulder, sending him flying back as blood splurged out. To make matters worse, he also saw the Fallen King suffer as a massive lighting strike came down right where he was standing, as Sylphie had been entirely pushed back by two summoned snake-like creatures of fire chasing her.

From one second to another, the ogre had entirely changed. Their moves were coordinated, calculated, and perfectly in sync. Retreating, the Sword Saint quickly felt Dina heal him as he ripped out the rock shard, luckily not getting injured too badly despite being taken by surprise. As he made some distance, he heard the ogre speak once more.

"It took a bit," the right head said.

"A century apart was a long time," the left followed up.

"However, I do believe-"

"-I've gotten used to it-"

"-once more-"

"-by now."

That's when the Sword Saint realized why the ogre had seemed so off... the two of them had been living as separate entities for so long it had taken them time to truly synchronize. Frowning, Miyamoto

realized they had missed a great opportunity to strike, and looking at the entirely changed demeanor of the Twinhead Emperor, he hoped it was going to haunt them.

“How long?” he asked Jake.

“Ten seconds... brace for impact,” the hunter answered, the Sword Saint steeling himself as he and the rest of the party knew there was no time to hesitate.

Bending his legs, water condensed on Miyamoto’s blade as he activated Rain Blade and charged forward. From a cloud of smoke also emerged the Fallen King, swinging two large golden hammers on what looked like chains as he rapidly approached the boss. Sylphie also unleashed a blast of wind to push away the flame snakes as their entire party moved to ensure Jake would have his opening.

Chapter 868: Nevermore: Emperor vs. King

The power of every being’s soul varied widely. Levels were far from everything when it came to determining their fragility or susceptibility to manipulation, even if it was a factor. The Fallen King had encountered beings well into the 300s with incredibly malleable souls who fell to the slightest touch and crumbled before the slightest manipulation.

Those of the enlightened races had more powerful souls than the average beast. Unique Lifeforms were naturally in a league far beyond even these. Creatures with no true sapience had weak souls by default, though it was not necessarily a rule.

Making comparisons with anyone in the Fallen King’s party had little meaning, as all of theirs – save for perhaps Sylphie – were not ordinary. Ordinary in the way that they weren’t mutated in some way, either through a Bloodline or a Transcendent skill.

Variants of all races could appear with more powerful souls – even if they were not utter anomalies like his party - and the nature of their magic and affinities also played a huge role. Casters were naturally more resistant to soul magic, with the Willpower stat alone having a huge impact. All in all, there were many factors, but few set rules.

The only true rule was that the power of a soul was heavily related to how powerful the creature was... and if a creature happened to be both a powerful variant, had a Path that naturally resulted in a

powerful soul, high level, and a further mutated soul... they would become an absolute nightmare if the goal was to cause any soul damage to them.

This was the exact type of opponent they faced with the Twinhead Emperor. Never before had the Fallen King seen such a powerful soul in another C-grade. Sure, Jake and the others had strong souls, but their real power lay in the quality of the Truesoul, not the pure quantity and overall power. This event boss was at a whole other level compared to them. It truly was as if they were fighting two souls in one body.

At the beginning of the fight, the oddly mutated soul of the Twinhead Emperor had been... off. It had been unstable as if it didn't really fit fully together, and each segmented part of the soul was in conflict. However, now, everything seemed to have snapped into place, as the Twinhead Emperor had one of the most stable and powerful souls the Fallen King could ever imagine a non-Bloodline-having C-grade possessing...

Besides his own, of course.

While buying time for the hunter to unleash his attack, the job of the four others was to keep the boss busy, but the Fallen King didn't plan on not also doing some damage of his own. Entering semi-close range, the Unique Lifeform summoned two hammers of golden energy as he slammed it into the boss. The shaman side of the ogre raised his now-glowing staff and blocked, as the warrior side swung his blade upwards, unleashing a dark wave of pure death energy to deter Sylphie.

This proved to be a mistake. While a torrent of wind-infused stone shards shot up from the ground toward the human swordsman, he didn't even hesitate as he continued his charge. Right before he was struck, a powerful green barrier appeared around him, deflecting every single stone shard the man couldn't dodge. The swordsman managed to get close as the ogre swung his blade down once more, aiming to crush the swordsman.

The boss swung down with force the Fallen King wouldn't even dare to try and block, yet the swordsman merely met it with his own thin blade. If the Fallen King didn't know this swordsman, he would have expected to see the small blade shatter and the man crushed, but instead, the large blade merely slid down the side of the small one as it struck the ground; the swordsman now having a clear opening as sliced his sword upwards.

Blood mixed with water flew into the air as the Twinhead Ogre had his arm cut halfway through, the swordsman not able to cut fully through it. Not because his blade wasn't sharp enough, but because he

had to retreat as a beam of condensed death energy shot out from the eyes of the warrior ogre, launching him backward, with Dina hurridly coming to his assistance.

Not wanting to be outdone, the Fallen King also got more serious. Swinging his golden hammers again, the shaman kept blocking, not getting distracted by his counterpart in the slightest. The Fallen King kept swinging, as every hit was easily blocked, the shaman even finding time to shoot lighting bolts toward Sylphie in between blocks.

That is, until the Fallen King suddenly mixed things up. A hammer flew for the shaman, and once more, he blocked. However, at the final moment before the hammerhead hit the staff, it unraveled into a net of chains that wrapped around the staff. Before the ogre had much time to react, the Fallen King made the side he was holding into a ball and shot it behind him with a massive wave of force.

The staff was yanked away, but the ogre kept a firm hold, which resulted in him getting lifted off his feet and forced to move for the very first time. With the staff disabled, Sylphie also finally found her opening as a green bullet flew down and flew by the outstretched arm holding the staff. Dozens of large, deep gashes were left across the left arm as the ogre groaned in pain, Sylphie turning in the air to do another fly-by.

Wanting to also attack again, the Fallen King prepared to strike, but suddenly stopped himself. And just in time, too.

A lighting bolt struck down right as the King was about to move, making the ground erupt and sending the Unique Lifeform floating backward while defending himself. Sylphie was more unfortunate, as a torrent of lightning went for her, forcing the bird to scatter her body to avoid taking too much damage.

On the other side of the ogre, the human swordsman had also been pushed back as he fought the large blade with the assistance of the dryad. There was a temporary lull in the battle as the Twinhead Emperor scoffed loudly.

"I do not know who any of you are or why you are here... but I do know that you made the worst and final mistake of your lives when you forced me into this state," the two heads of the ogre said, speaking in perfect unison.

The many tattoos across his body began to glow as he took a new stance and raised the staff into the air. "I have seen enough... now perish."

With those words, the ogre released a burst of magic as he slammed the staff into the ground before he disappeared. The Fallen King was taken by surprise as a warning came through the Golden Mark right as he felt the reappearance of their foe's soul. "Behi-"

Already raising his hands to block, the Fallen King was barely in time as he was struck in the side, the claws on one of his hands cracking from the impact of the large blade clad in death. Sliding across the ground, tearing it up in the process, the Unique Lifeform turned to face the ogre, who had fully shifted his focus to slaying him. Right as they were about to clash again, a message came.

"Arrow incoming... arriving in five..."

The Fallen King blocked again as he was sent flying even further. By now, his boosting skill was already fully active as he was forced to face the full wrath of the boss alone. Magic and physical force both slammed into the Unique Lifeform as he was to fully fend for himself due to the magic the ogre had used just before he teleported.

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The old swordsman found himself within a prison of stone, as the hawk far up in the air was surrounded by black clouds, impeding her movements. The dryad was trying to assist as best she could but was significantly limited as a tornado of deathly wind whirled toward her, forcing her back. For now, he would simply have to handle the Twinhead Emperor on his own.

"Four..."

Raising both his glowing golden hands, the Fallen King faced the ogre as best he could, as the large blade came down with incredible force with every strike. Using his own golden weapons, the Unique Lifeform refused to back down, clashing with the ogre, who was clearly also using some type of buffing skill to make him significantly faster.

The King had parts of his natural armor ripped apart as he simply couldn't block the attacks of what was effectively two people. His bark-like armor was cracked and torn as strike after strike sent him retreating further and further away. He also landed his fair share of counterattacks, but the battle could only be described as one-sided.

"Three..."

His party was still struggling to assist him, as the Fallen King had one of his legs entirely burned off by a powerful torrent of flames. The Unique Lifeform did everything, but his soul attacks proved useless against the effectively two-souled creature.

Finally, as the Fallen King found himself slowed by a blast of cold air mixed with electricity, he was no longer able to fully block as the Twinhead Emperor stabbed the large blade of death forward in a vertical position. Simply unable to resist, the Unique Lifeform was impaled as the power of death spread throughout his body.

"Now die," the two heads of the ogre said as the energy of death intensified even further.

"Two..."

The Fallen King felt the energy invade his body... as he scoffed.

Both claws began glowing with intense light as he struck forward, claspings his claws around each head of the two-headed ogre. Piercing into their skin, the Fallen King taunted the boss.

"Do you believe I fear your energy of death? That my soul is so weak as to crumble before such a pathetic concept?"

The Twinhead Emperor did not use words to respond as all four eyes began glowing with power. Instantly, both golden claws had holes burned through them as the Fallen King was struck by four beams straight at his mask.

"One..."

Despite the two sets of beams burning into his mask, the Fallen King was undeterred as he refused to let go. His claws were damaged, yet they kept piercing deeper and deeper into flesh as destructive soul-destroying force spread through each of them.

The ogre had already let go of his sword, which was piercing through the Fallen King, and didn't even try to use magic as powerful impacts struck the already damaged body of the Unique Lifeform over and over again, the Twinhead Emperor having resorted to punches. Partly because hitting with his staff was difficult at such close range and because focusing on magic while having scorching golden force spreading through one's brain made it difficult.

Golden pressure also began to bear down on them as the Fallen King made sure they weren't moving a single step, even as his body was slowly getting torn further and further apart. The three others had just about broken out of their restraints by now and were making their way over... but not before something else finally arrived.

The Fallen King barely noticed the attack due to how fast it flew. At one moment, he felt the energy in the air above, and the next, it was there. The Twinhead Emperor was even less aware and only reacted right before he was struck. Instinctively, the Twinhead Ogre wanted to move the head that the arrow was coming for, but the Fallen King naturally wouldn't allow such an action as he held it firmly in place with a vice grip.

Watching on, he saw the deathly attack strike as it penetrated through one of the skulls of the Twinhead Emperor before continuing its descent through the ogre's body. However, right before it would exit out the other side, the entire arrow exploded within the body of the Twinhead Emperor.

This was his cue to let go as the Fallen King allowed himself to get blasted away. The destructive arcane energies washed over him, but he felt as if none of it wanted to even harm him. No, it sought only to destroy the ogre. Observing the sheer power in that one arrow as he was sent flying, the Fallen King could barely believe it belonged to a mid-tier C-grade.

After flying backward for a few hundred meters and landing, the Fallen King only now allowed the damage he had sustained to affect him. He barely managed to keep himself upright, not even bothering to try and keep his dignity by floating. He only had one leg to stand on, and looking at his arms, they hung limply down his sides; the energy he had channeled through them too much to handle.

“Are you alright?” the dryad quickly asked, as he felt her soothing presence begin to surround him as plants appeared around him.

“This vessel will need to be rebuilt entirely,” the Fallen King responded. It was truly a mess, inside and out. In many ways, he had been lucky the ogres had decided to strike his mask. Perhaps they knew destroying it would be the one way to ensure his destruction. Sadly for them, they were far from capable of doing such a thing. In fact, besides a few burn marks that could easily be washed off, not a single mark had been left on it. But, again, the same could not be said about the rest of his body. Alas, he had done his job for now and would adopt a more passive role... because he still had a role to play.

The strike unleashed by the hunter had been powerful beyond belief, but as he observed the flayed form of the Twinhead Emperor, he saw not only the vicious injuries inflicted upon him but also the soul. One part had been severely damaged.... however, the other remained stable, making it clear the fight was far from over.

Fuck he’s tough, Jake thought while flying down at top speed to rejoin the fight fully as his arrow struck true. He wasn’t just talking about the Twinhead Emperor, but the Fallen King, who had handled the boss for a good while alone. He had been worried for a little while, but the King had done damn well and allowed his arrow to land as well as it could.

The arrow had torn apart the left head of the ogre, Jake deliberately aiming for the shaman version of the ogre, as he was the one best at healing. Right before his arrow struck, Jake had slightly manipulated its movements to ensure he struck true, the King helping immensely by making sure the boss couldn’t as much as move an inch.

Below, the boss stood with one head nearly entirely destroyed, with a huge hole in his belly from the following arrow explosion. The damage was utterly immense, yet the ogre was far from down. To a C-grade, losing the head wasn’t necessarily fatal, but it did nearly always result in the person losing control of their body, making them easy pickings. This meant that to most, losing the head was still a death sentence... but things were a bit different if you had two.

Despite taking tremendous damage, the ogre didn’t leave a single opening for Sylphie and the Sword Saint, who tried to follow up. Stomping hard on the ground, the Twin Emperor made the ground erupt with blackened rock infused with death as he sought to protect himself by wrapping all the rock around him. At the same time, Jake detected odd movements of energy within the ogre, the Fallen King explaining what was going on a second later.

“One soul is healing the other, sharing the damage,” the Fallen King explained. “Strike now when we have the opening and force them into desperation.”

No one had to be told that twice. Jake began shooting arrows while flying down, as Sylphie, the Sword Saint, and Dina also all went on the offensive. The shell of stone surrounding the ogre was quickly torn through, forcing the boss to defend himself as he retreated from the onslaught.

The left head was rapidly regenerating, and before it was even fully healed, Jake felt the presence of the shaman begin to reappear as elemental magic was unleashed. Seeing the ogre still fit for a fight was a bit discouraging, but Jake knew they had done some serious damage... and things were only about to get even better as the Twin Emperor did something they had hoped would happen.

Retreating back to where the fight had begun, the Twin Emperor landed right in the center of where the ritual had taken place. Despite the ground being torn up several times over and every remnant of the circle itself visually, it was still there... and while the boss had absorbed much of the energy of the many bone spheres, some still remained. Not enough to raise the ogre’s power, but enough to help rejuvenate him.

“That got dangerous for a moment,” the Twin Emperor said as the mouth of the left head had regenerated, speaking even if the top half of the skull was still healing.

“Sadly, you missed your opening!”

Slamming his staff into the ground, the ogre reactivated the ritual one more time... Jake grinning as he did while sending a message to the Sword Saint.

“Our turn, go!”

Chapter 869: Nevermore: One Tanky Bastard

From the very first moment Jake laid eyes on the ritual circle, he knew there was no way the Twinhead Emperor would be capable of absorbing all the energy contained in the bone spheres. Each sphere held the death energy and curse energy of hundreds, if not over a thousand, dead C-grades alone. This wasn’t even mentioning the uncountable D- and E-grades who had also senselessly fallen in the conflict created by the Twin Emperors.

Even if the boss did then filter a lot of energy out to only absorb the pure Records, there was still a lot left over. This energy had all merged into the semi-intangible ritual circle, which remained mostly untouched despite all the physical destruction.

Now, the Twinhead Emperor was going to reclaim this energy as he stood in the center and raised his staff high. In their initial plans, they had expected the Twinhead Emperor to absorb the energy to help heal. This was still part of the boss' plan, but Jake realized they had once again underestimated their opponent.

As the Twinhead Emperor reactivated the ritual, two things happened at once. Firstly, a few new runes appeared on his body as death energy began entering through these runes to heal, while secondly, a massive rune was summoned in the air, drawing in all the curse energy.

"Those runes on his body... they are reversing the concept of death into pure life energy," Dina said, sounding a bit perplexed.

"Even better," Jake grinned... because, in this rare instance, underestimating the boss had come to their advantage.

The boss had erected a barrier just around himself, as he couldn't cover the entire ritual circle. As the Twinhead Emperor had just begun to absorb death energy and he condensed some curse magic, a raindrop fell upon the barrier. Soon, more began to fall all over the ritual circle, each drop containing the energy of time.

It took him a moment too long to notice something was off as Jake mentally activated their little trap. Before the two Twin Emperors had begun their ritual, Jake and the Sword Saint had spent a bit over a week doing some slight modifications to the ritual circle the boss had created. It was very minor ones they had overlaid on the other ritual circle. Without power, it had been borderline undetectable, but now, it was getting fed plenty of time affinity energy, which would be one fuel source.

The other? The power of pure hunger.

In the middle of the ritual circle, forgotten entirely by the boss, was a black piece of metal sticking out - a lone katar thrown by Jake's Eternal Shadow right at the beginning of the fight. Now, this katar suddenly began to hum with power as it became one with the ritual circle.

"What have you-"

The Twinhead Emperor didn't get further as he suddenly stopped, feeling the effects of the ritual. He had merged himself with it to absorb its energy... created a direct connection between himself and anything inside said ritual. And now, there was a very hungry katar, further empowered by the concept of time, that was more than happy to tap into this delicious connection.

"YOU! Lord of Hunger!" the Twinhead Emperor roared, Jake grimacing as he was still descending down from above. He really didn't need to be reminded of that nickname.

Not that the ogre was wrong, as it was the energy of the Sin Curse that was suddenly overwhelming the entire ritual. It was so dominant that black intangible and semi-translucent tendrils rose from all over the circle and sought the Twinhead Emperor with pure hunger.

The tendrils began to latch onto the cursed rune above the ogre as they also pierced into the runes on his body, sucking out energy like leeches. Jake happily controlled it all as best he could, feeling the delight from the mythical weapon as it ate well from not only the ogre but all the remnant energy from the ritual itself.

Realizing he was not winning this fight for control, the Twinhead Emperor made a quick decision. The rune above him promptly exploded, releasing a black wave of energy that was mostly pulled in and absorbed by Eternal Hunger, but Dina did have to block the rest.

"Fine, have it your way," the ogre said with anger as he raised a foot and stomped hard. Jake, flying above, saw cracks spread out from the Twinhead Emperor below. Dozens of them spread in moments from his position, hundreds of kilometers in every direction before he stomped a second time.

The cracks instantly shook and fractured further. A massive earthquake shattered the terrain below, the sheer power enough to finally dismantle the entire ritual circle for good, dispelling all the tendrils. Giant masses of land began to rise, and others fell as the world looked like it split open. Jake also felt Eternal

about to be buried deep beneath the ground, but with a mental command and some focus, it dispersed into black energy before reappearing within his Soulspace a few seconds later.

“Everyone okay?” Jake quickly tried to check in with his party, but before he even got an answer, he pulled his bow back out.

“On me,” the Sword Saint responded, Jake having already spotted them. In the chaos, the Twinhead Emperor had singled out the Sword Saint and was now engaging him in a one-on-one. The two of them were rapidly moving through the deep ravines, the old man clearly at a disadvantage but holding his own pretty well, his new skill definitely getting put to use as water clones were destroyed in spades.

It did help when an arrow suddenly pierced out from one of the ravine’s walls, hitting the ogre in the side. A second arrow shot down from above just after before a third came from yet another unpredictable angle. The boss was already damaged quite a bit, which was part of why he was slowed down, but annoyingly so, he was still healing even if they had stopped the ritual. One thing was for sure, though... the boss was using up his energy damn fast.

Once the three others – maybe except for the King as he was not in the best state – joined them, they should be able to-

“Elementals!” Dina suddenly yelled through the Golden Mark, Jake cursing internally as he released a Pulse of Perception to check out the situation.

Just as she had said, out of the deep walls of the ravines, elementals had begun to crawl out, made up of the stone itself. Jake counted a dozen of them, each more than ten meters tall and made up of pure earth. Using Identify, Jake cursed even more.

[Summoned Earth Elemental – lvl 320]

“Hunter, continue to assist the swordsman, the dryad, and I shall deal with these elementals,” the Fallen King said quickly.

“Ree!” Sylphie also added as she swooped in from above the crevice, crashing into an elemental that was closing in on Dina. The Fallen King also quickly made his way to the dryad, as Dina knelt down and focused while protected.

Jake continued helping the Sword Saint while flying down. Every one of his arrows gave the Twinhead Emperor pause or forced him to take damage, giving the Sword Saint enough space to not be wholly overwhelmed. The pressure on him was still intense, as the ogre used both staff and sword to try and take him down, but the elementals the shaman had summoned seemed to have taken a lot out of him as the magic coming from the staff was limited. It also didn't help that the shaman's head wasn't fully healed yet from Jake's nice opening arrow.

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The poison inside the Twinhead Emperor also only got worse and worse with every arrow, the first one having naturally come with a nice payload. Annoyingly so, his poison didn't work as well as he had hoped. The Heartrot Poison was very rooted in the concept of death, which the ogre had a high natural resistance to. The poison was still working, just not as well as Jake would have liked.

Soon, as Jake was still shooting arrow after arrow, he felt a green aura spread from the deep crevice with Dina in as she was finished with her magic. She, too, had made her preparations before the battle, which took the form of quite literally planting the seeds for a big upcoming spell... one she used now.

A deep thrumming sound came from beneath the ground everywhere as suddenly the ground erupted once more. Thick roots pierced out of the walls and floor of the deep valleys formed from the earthquake, quickly entangling all of the Summoned Earth Elementals at once. The Twinhead Emperor himself also wasn't spared, as he suddenly found himself surrounded by thick roots that began to promptly sprout vines that whipped toward him, entangling both his arms.

Finally, the Sword Saint could get some distance... except he decided to use this chance to attack instead. Barely taking a step back, he raised his sword and took a stance, not allowing the many wounds marring his body to affect him. As he took a deep breath, his body exploded with power, and for a moment, his entire form changed into one of his younger self as he stabbed.

“Glimpse of Spring: Erosion.”

Entangled, the ogre couldn't fully respond as he tried to fire a beam from his eyes at the water stream. The thin stream was too fast, and even as the eyebeam hit, it was simply parted in two as the stab continued forward into the chest of the Twinhead Ogre.

Jake saw the torrent of blood shoot out of the ogre's back as his own arrow rain also arrived, a dozen piercing into the arms and shoulders of the boss. In his chest, a hole big enough to pass a basketball through had opened from the Sword Saint's Glimpse of Spring, dripping with blood and water. Jake quickly charged another Arcane Powershot, aiming to hopefully take the boss down for good or at least blow up one of the heads again.

Yet, right as Jake began to charge his powershot, a sigh echoed in his ears, the ogre's aura changing once more. Below, he saw the Sword Saint rapidly retreat as Dina sent yet another message.

"Watch out... I feel a powerful energy of death. Make distance."

Jake still kept flying down despite the warning but wouldn't go all the way. He saw the Sword Saint quickly make his way back toward Dina and the others, who were quickly finishing off the Summoned Earth Elementals, which were still entangled in dense and powerful roots.

Right then, the roots began to decay. It started from the ones surrounding the Twinhead Emperor but quickly spread from there, soon making the entire huge root network rot from within. A dark mist spread from the boss, one that gave Jake a powerful response from Sense of the Malefic Viper...

It was poison mist. A natural poison of pure death, born from decay, further infused with a powerful curse. The form of the Twinhead Emperor had turned gray within the dense mist as the ground itself began to lose all color, and with heavy steps, the ogre began to walk toward Dina and company. With every step, the mist grew stronger, the Twinhead Emperor walking with his thick blade over one shoulder.

Then, the ogre suddenly shot forward as he sprinted toward Dina. The staff was gone... which was also when Jake noticed. The head of the shaman looked as if he was knocked out. His eyes were closed, and he didn't do anything. Jake was confused, but luckily, his confusion didn't last long.

“One soul... is purely assisting the other,” the Fallen King warned. “We face only the warrior as of this moment, limiting the diversity of skill for power. A temporary empowered state, we should aim to buy time.”

The message was instant, courtesy of telepathy. Jake saw the Twinhead Emperor close in on his party, the Sword Saint having just made it back to them, pretty injured, along with the Fallen King. For them to enter this domain of death wouldn't be good, and in their injured states, they were simply too slow... so he made a split-second decision.

“Dina, focus on fixing up the two oldies, Sylphie, make sure the poison doesn't reach them... I'll keep the big guy busy,” Jake said as he focused while stepping down, Pushing One Step to its limits. As a minor fuck you to the Fallen King, Jake also finally passed a barrier as he, with a single step, traveled more than a hundred miles. He appeared on the ground, right between the charging ogre and his party, who were still making some good distance.

“You...”

the voice of the Twinhead Emperor spoke. “Deceitful rat. You are no Lord of Hunger!”

“That,” Jake said, getting into a stance with katars drawn, “we agree on.”

In the very next moment, the wave of pure, deathly mist washed over his body. Jake hid his smile as he took a deep breath through his nose, really experiencing the poison. To breathe a naturally born poison, mixed with curse energy like this... was actually surprisingly tasty.

Honestly, poison and curses... yeah, it was quite an unlucky matchup for the Twinhead Emperor.

Jake charged toward his opponent, too, Arcane Awakening already fully activated as no matter how good the matchup, he could not afford to hold back in the slightest. The two of them clashed in the middle of the deep gorge, the large two-handed blade swinging with the intent to cut Jake in two.

With a light jump, Jake dodged the blow as he stepped down while just above the blade, double-jumping in the air to get behind the large ogre. The Twinhead Emperor quickly spun around, trying to backhand Jake, but he was faster as the fist of the ogre met an outstretched katar that pierced into his flesh.

Groaning once more, the ogre continued his blow, sending Jake sliding back from the impact with his wrist hurting. Without pause, the Twinhead Emperor continued his attack, aggressively swinging while making sure to keep Jake close. The curse and poison were being subtly controlled throughout the fight to congregate around where Jake was to affect him more... something he truly didn't mind. In fact, he found it kind of nice to have increased resource regeneration from Palate working overtime, with even Eternal Hunger getting in a good dessert after the ritual.

Jake tried not to let this slip as he attempted to fight in an almost desperate fashion, constantly staying on the offensive. In truth, he was very much playing things safe, never overcommitting or going too far, as he battled the far more powerful opponent. The punches alone were enough to send him flying, and he definitely didn't want to take a blade head-on like the Fallen King had done a few dozen times, so he stuck to dodging and weaving in between the swings.

It ended up taking over a minute before the Twinhead Emperor noticed something was wrong. Jake had tried to fake being affected by the poison, but he simply couldn't do it convincingly enough while also staying fast enough to not lose a limb.

"I understand now," the Twinhead Emperor said as he suddenly stopped attacking. "You are the Lord of Hunger... or at least the one who pretended to be. I do not know which trickery you used or how you knew of that old forgotten legend, but you truthfully had me fooled."

Jake was staring blankly at the boss after hearing those words. What the fuck kind of old forgotten legend was he walking about? Jake had just picked a generic name he thought sounded kinda cool and rolled with it. Well, not like he was going to complain about tapping into some old legend to sell the story more convincingly.

"Perhaps you are our trial to reach beyond... a lesson by the multiverse for the two of us to realize our foolishness in trying to no longer stay as one," the ogre said with a thoughtful voice.

"You got it mixed up... you're our challenge to reach beyond," Jake shot back, happy to keep the boss talking for a moment.

"I do not believe those two statements to be contradictory," the Twinhead Emperor shook his head – the one who was actually awake. "But I do find it questionable of you five ... to have chosen a challenge you cannot hope to overcome is truly foolish."

As he said this, the poison mist began to fade as it flew toward the boss. The runes that had tried to absorb energy from the ritual earlier appeared again, sucking in all of the mist and infusing the ogre's body with energy.

Jake cursed under his breath as he once more saw the boss heal, the hole in his chest even regenerating at visual speeds. Sure, he was using up his resources, but due to his soul mutation, the boss had way more than could be considered normal, and he was also absorbing energy from the environment at an unnatural pace.

It truly made for one tanky bastard that was ridiculously hard to put down for good. Jake just hoped he didn't have too many more tricks up his-

Slamming the two-handed blade into the ground, the Twin Emperor's body exploded with power as a pillar of black light fell upon him.

"Arise, cursed spirits of the fallen."

Oh, you gotta be bloody kidding me...

Chapter 870: Nevermore: Independence Achieved...

How many phases and different abilities can a single event boss have?

The Twinhead Emperor's answer to that was apparently just a "yes," as he always had more to show off. From what Jake and the others had gathered, the Twinhead Emperor primarily had the warrior move the body while the shaman stood for magic and energy control. This also proved true, even as death magic was unleashed, except the shaman head wasn't even fully awake. Instead, the soul was wholly focused on controlling the magic, truly functioning as a second extremely powerful Virtual Mind.

As for the magic itself... it was rather basic, if extremely powerful in scope. Clearly, the Twinhead Emperor had absorbed a shitload of death and curse energy into the blade from all the different battlefields and was now unleashing it upon their group. Usually, this wouldn't be that huge of a problem, as a bunch of undead filled with curse energy would just attack everything indiscriminately... except for one minor detail.

Jake and company had been the cause of many of their deaths and clearly the target of their resentment.

From where the ogre had stabbed down his sword, a deep pitch-black pit opened up, and within seconds, Jake heard screams coming from beyond the grave. Spirits began to pour up from the hole all around the ogre, screeching with anguish and anger as the boss opened up what looked like a portal to the underworld.

Gritting his teeth, Jake quickly pulled out his bow and shot an Arcane Powershot at the Twinhead Emperor, who was protected by the beam of death surrounding him. The arrow pierced through the death energy but was severely weakened by the time it hit the boss. Not letting up, Jake kept shooting, landing several on the boss, who focused on protecting his heads while doing the summoning magic.

He continued loosing arrows until he was forced to stop as the summoned spirits began to close in on him. Checking them out, he saw their levels weren't super impressive, pretty much mirroring the soldiers they had killed on the battlefields.

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 302]

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 306]

[Cursed Battlefield Ghost – lvl 311]

Each of these spirits was a mix of black and white ethereal energies in a humanoid shape. Their eyes were hollow, and while they did look like the many different enlightened races they had slain, many of them looked very disturbing. Especially the beastfolk, who did not have a single trace of hair on their ghostly bodies, looked off.

Retreating, Jake focused on getting some distance. Jake counted around a hundred total ghosts already summoned, with a few still exiting the abyss every second or so, but it was clear the boss was running out of ghosts to summon. Every ghost wasn't really a single dead individual, but more the gathering of energy from several. Most of the energy had also been absorbed by the bone spheres, and this felt more like the leftovers.

All of these ghosts were coming straight for Jake, seemingly ignoring his entire party. Something that proved pretty damn unwise as soon it started to rain. Jake responded by empowering the small stable arcane barrier covering his body to not get infected by the rainfall as he knew what the Sword Saint was doing. At the same time, he also stopped retreating, as he instead circled around and began taking potshots at the boss.

By now, the Twinhead Emperor was finished with his summoning and stood back up and used his blade to block Jake's attacks. However, he didn't move as he instead seemed to be focused on controlling his legion of ghosts. The boss naturally also felt the rain infused with time magic as he commanded his ghosts to spread out and head toward the rest of his party - something that would prove more difficult than he liked.

A few ghosts were flying away but were suddenly rebuffed and sent flying back toward the boss. A powerful wind swept through as a tornado formed around this entire section of the battle. Far up in the sky, Sylphie was flying in circles, making the tornado even stronger and effectively creating a barrier, forcing all the ghosts to stay within the somehow unaffected rainfall.

Turning to look at Jake, the Twinhead Emperor flashed a smile. "Abandoned, huh? Or do they believe you are enough on your own? Very well, you can die first, then."

Remember what Jake said about the ogre not moving because he was too busy controlling the ghosts? Yeah, that was out the window as the Twinhead Emperor charged with his army of ghosts rapidly surrounding Jake. Wings sprung on his back as Jake tried to dodge as best as he could, but even he had his limits.

The ghosts were relatively limited in their methods of attack, but they were far from harmless. Every ghost could summon tangible long white claws to try and cut him, release blasts of pure death energy, and even just charge straight through his body, dealing significant damage in the process.

In order to make some space for himself, Jake repeatedly made arcane explosions around himself, making the ghosts, at the very least, hesitate to charge through him. Still, Jake was not in a good spot as several ghosts managed to land blows, with the Twinhead Emperor getting too close for comfort quite a few times. At least he was only capable of swinging his sword while also controlling the ghosts, but that was still a lot considering the vast difference in stats between the ogre and Jake.

As things were starting to get a bit too hairy, Jake finally got the message he had been waiting for.

“Now.”

Without hesitation, Jake’s wings began to glow with energy as his entire body turned dark green, and in the blink of an eye, he disappeared. Only for half a second, everything warped, as Jake appeared a good fifty kilometers away, his wings burning away from using his escape skill, just in time to see the old man stand at a small hole in the tornado and execute his move.

“Rain of Time: Reversal.”

The entire terrain was torn up, and the tornado began to unravel. All the ghosts were ripped up, some of them scattering from the attack alone, as even the Twinhead Emperor was caught in the mythical skill. Only a dozen or so ghosts died from the initial activation of the skill, but the Sword Saint quickly did the follow-up.

“Rain of Time: Thousand Blades Descent.”

Blades of rain collected in the sky above before rapidly descending toward the ogre and the many ghosts. There still weren’t quite a thousand blades... but the old man had gotten closer this time around.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Nearly a thousand blades fell, each aimed toward the ghosts and the Twinhead Emperor himself. Dozens more undead were slain as they were stabbed through, but a bit over a third still remained even after the mythical skill had been used. Partly because the Sword Saint had focused more than half of the falling blades on the big boss himself.

The Twinhead Emperor had hunkered down as all the blades came, trying to defend himself. Even so, he was still stabbed more than a hundred times, leaving his back even more damaged than before. He didn’t really seem to bleed in his grey semi-undead form, and while the ogre did begin to heal once more, it was clear he was starting to not have as much energy left in the tank.

Things got even worse, as Sylphie wasn't done doing her part either. The tornado had far from fully scattered, and now Sylphie regathered all of the wind as she made it close around the many ghosts with the Twinhead Emperor still in the middle, creating a massive cutting windgrinder.

Even more ghosts were torn apart as the boss finally roared. A torrent of death energy erupted from him, the boss standing back up with a furious look on his face. Swinging, he sent out a wave of pure death, creating a hole in the tornado that he quickly passed through, followed by the twenty or so surviving ghosts. Two did end up getting caught as the tornado reclosed, but he still had eighteen left.

The Sword Saint was the closest, as the ogre quickly locked in on him. The old man was breathing heavily from using his mythical skill after already using Glimpse of Spring and being heavily injured early on. Both he and the Fallen King were in pretty shitty states, to put it lightly.

Charging forward, with ghosts flying alongside him, the Sword Saint was far from ready to meet the ogre in combat as the boss roared. "If you thought I would fall this easily, you are--"

He didn't get further as his eyes opened wide. Jake smiled to himself as he saw Dina had decided it was her turn to show off a bit. A green aura exploded out from where the dryad was standing as her entire body began to transform. Her antlers grew, her dress changed, and she even grew a bit taller. It was naturally her ultimate boosting skill, showing Dina was done messing around.

The still-charging ogre suddenly found himself surrounded by thick bark-covered vines as the ground erupted. At the same time, Dina's aura washed over both the boss and the many ghosts, the dryad purposefully controlling and amplifying it.

Slamming her staff into the ground, a massive tree formed from all the aura, seemingly taking root right on top of the boss. The ethereal summoned tree stood nearly ten kilometers tall, as its thick trunk covered the Twinhead Ogre, Sword Saint, and all the undead.

While the Sword Saint's injuries began to heal at a rapid pace, the experience was not the same for the undead. It turned out that infusing death with life resulted in a rather... explosive outcome.

All of the remaining ghosts screeched as they blew up one by one, the grey body of the Twinhead Ogre also beginning to rapidly break down. His skin cracked open as life mixed with death, Dina not letting up as her entire form began glowing more brightly as the tree became more and more tangible.

More roots also began to shoot up and stab at the ogre, tearing apart his skin further. The boss tried to resist but was quickly forced down on one knee as a vine wrapped around the neck of the sleeping head, thorns growing on it.

Without any hesitation, the Twinhead Emperor raised his sword as a look of sorrow flashed on his face. Without any further warning, Jake's vision temporarily turned black as the world was covered in darkness. Only a second later did he feel the shockwave and heard the sound of an explosion. Powerful energy of death flew past him, forcing him to raise his arms and summon an arcane barrier to defend himself as he stared at the devastation.

In the distance, he saw the giant ethereal tree rot from within as its leaves scattered like ash. Quickly looking over, he saw Dina down on the ground, propping herself up by her elbows as her transformation had been undone, blood flowing from every orifice due to the backlash of having her transformation forcibly undone. Jake saw the worry in her eyes as he understood what she was afraid of.

Shifting his gaze, Jake spotted the Sword Saint getting dragged away from the epicenter of the explosion by the Fallen King. One of the Unique Lifeform's arms was missing, and Jake saw what looked like black metal fragments sticking out of his frontal armor. The Sword Saint had a few black veins covering his body, but he was still alive and conscious. Jake only now fully realized what the boss had done as he saw those black metal fragments.

Fucker blew up his sword.

As the thick miasma of death began to finally fade, the true destruction was revealed. A large crater had formed where the Twinhead Ogre had blown up the sword, all life more than a kilometer around him entirely wiped out. Not a single trace of anything Dina had done remained save for a few black leaves here and there.

In the middle of this crater was the Twinhead Emperor, standing tall. Yet his aura was different compared to before, showing that his last attack had truly taken a lot out of him. His skin no longer carried the aura of death either, as whatever boosting skill he had used was clearly over.

Jake was already flying over in case the boss attacked again so he could assist his party. All of them besides himself and Sylphie were in pretty rough shape, and while Dina had taken some damage, she wasn't that bad off and could easily still take up a supporting role. It wasn't as if Jake and Sylphie were

uninjured, either. Sylphie was doing the best of all of them, most of her attacks made from range as she had pulled off every role she had been given. Jake had taken a good beating when he was buying time earlier, but he was still more than fit for a fight.

Something Jake really hoped the Twinhead Emperor wasn't... but seeing how many damn tricks the ogre had already pulled out his ass thus far, Jake wouldn't count on him being down for the count. At least he didn't have to wait long to be proven right.

Just as he arrived at his party, a few seconds after the miasma from the explosion had fully subsided, the boss spoke once more, saying some unexpected words.

"I... am sorry..." the Twinhead Emperor said... no... only the warrior head was speaking. He was not speaking to anyone in Jake's party either. Except, he looked over at the second head that began to open his eyes and wake up.

"I... failed... was too weak," the warrior said with a melancholic smile. "I didn't think any of us would want it to end this way... but... you were always the stronger one of us... so let it be you."

Now fully awake, the shaman head looked at his second half. The shaman closed his eyes for a second before nodding in understanding. "Thank you."

Jake was confused about what was going on as suddenly the head of the warrior fell down, limp. Dead. That is when Jake understood, and the boss made everything absolutely clear mere moments later.

An ear-piercing roar sounded out from the ogre as his entire body exploded with power that made the ground below him crack. A staff appeared in his hand and his voice echoed throughout the whole area as his aura soared to a level it had never been at before.

"My second half... killed... I wanted solitude... independence... but not like this." the Twinhead Emperor, who had now been reduced to only one head, said. His energy kept surging as Jake felt the pressure on him intensify. "But luckily, I shall not be alone for much longer..."

"The second soul... merged fully into the first one. It's unsustainable. Won't last for more than a minute or two... but during that time..." the Fallen King warned, a clear sense of trepidation in his voice.

Jake and the others all understood... during this time, the Twinhead Emperor was in an even more empowered state. However, once it was over, so would the fight end, as the sheer backlash of burning away half of your soul couldn't be healthy.

Quickly, Jake responded as he reached out, his hand glowing dark green, not wanting the ogre to make the first move even if he was empowered. While the other head had been alive, his death energy had helped to suppress much of Jake's poison. This had led to much of the death-affinity poison going dormant, but now that the warrior was gone, Jake could truly let it all loose.

It spread throughout the body of the ogre, and Jake felt it do significant damage... but the boss didn't seem to care in the slightest.

"You think your poison matters? I... am already half-dead and have no plans on lasting much longer. Soon, it all will be over. But fret not," the Twinhead Emperor said as he slammed his staff into the ground, and runes lit up all over his body, more intensely than ever before. "You shall join my other half in the grave before my time is up."