

Hunter 871

Chapter 871: Nevermore: Wind

Jake and his party were faced with a choice... run away and drag things out until the Twinhead Emperor's empowered state ended, or try and fight back while buying time. Directly confronting the boss was definitely not advised, something they were all in agreement with. Jake usually wasn't a fan of just running away, but if his party decided to do just that, he wouldn't object.

"We should retreat for now. Fighting directly is too risky," the Sword Saint quickly said as he received some emergency healing from Dina. She couldn't restore his resources and fatigue, but she could get him back in temporary fighting condition... or at least well enough to launch one more good attack.

"I concur," the Fallen King instantly agreed.

"Me too-" Dina tried to say but was cut off by the boss.

"You wish to flee? To drag things out? You all seem to thoroughly misunderstand something," the Twinhead Emperor said as his staff began to light up. Jake felt the entire environment shift as the mana all around took on the aura of the ogre. "It's already far too late to run."

Then, Jake felt the pressure as his body felt far heavier. The ground all around them cracked as everything buckled, even the mana in the air itself getting pushed down. It wasn't suppression of aura or anything like that, but something far more tangible. Gravity magic...

A fucking complicated school of magic that was, needless to say, pretty damn strong. What's more, the shaman clearly wasn't done as he pointed his staff toward Jake and the three others around him. A massive flamethrower flew out, unaffected by the increased gravity that weighed everything else down.

Reacting quickly, four barriers appeared. One golden, one green, one of water, and one of stable arcane mana. The flames washed over the four attempts to block the attack, as each was burned through in moments before finally the flame shattered the final one and sent all four of them scattering in four different directions to dodge the attack.

The Twinhead Emperor wanted to follow up, but just then, a blast of wind descended from above, making the staff's head smash into the ground, resulting in an explosion that sent the boss stumbling back. It was naturally Sylphie who went on the offensive.

Several more bullets of wind shot down, the boss raising a hand to block them with his own barrier of wind – only to then have an arrow strike him in the shoulder, as Jake took the chance to launch an attack of his own.

A long, thin blade of water also struck the boss mere moments later, followed by a blast of force that pushed Jake's arrow further into the ogre's shoulder. These attacks were not done with the intent to try and deal damage to the Twinhead Emperor but to try and limit his mobility and disrupt his attacks at least a little bit. Plus, dealing damage should help hasten his demise still.

Sadly, their attacks proved to have little effect as the ogre stomped down, making the ground erupt as ten large boulders flew up, and with a hand motion, each condensed into small stones. Pointing his staff once more, the stones all began to glow molten as cracks formed all over them before he sent them flying toward the four non-birds in Sylphie's party.

Jake quickly reacted as he shot down three of the approaching boulders that were aimed for the Sword Saint and Fallen King. When he hit them, all three exploded, sending sharp obsidian shards flying everywhere. This gave them some early warning as to the nature of the attack, so when the remaining seven arrived, everyone was ready as they erected barriers and made good distance.

Even so, the Sword Saint failed to deflect every obsidian shard, as one tore straight through his stomach and another through his thigh, while the Fallen King had over a dozen join the black metal shards already sticking out of him.

Bobo, Dina's living armor, managed to block every single one of them while Jake dodged and prepared to continue his own counterattacks. He shot several arrows that were all sent flying by a blast of wind as the ogre swept his free hand upwards.

A large plate of earth was lifted and flipped over right on top of Jake and his party, but before it could crush them, a tree sprouted from the ground smashed into it, and tore it in two. Dina was back for a bit of action as she channeled mana into the otherwise dead ground, making it explode with life as hundreds of vines shot up.

However, the boss easily responded with a scoff as the gravity around him increased, crushing all the vines back into the ground. Raising his staff toward the sky, the shaman mumbled something silently as a single bolt of lightning shot upwards.

Once it got high enough, it exploded into a massive black thundercloud that instantly began rumbling. During this magic, Jake managed to land a single arrow, as he found himself struggling with the increased gravity, but luckily, Unblemished Arrows made things easier as it made his arrows less affected. The Sword Saint and Fallen King also shot their ranged attack, but all to little effect.

Someone who was luckily not struggling at all was the lightest and smallest person in their party of five. A barrage of wind blades fell upon the shaman, making him groan in pain as he tried to use his staff to block. Using his staff, he shot several large blasts of fire toward the hawk, trying to hit her, but Sylphie simply transformed her body into wind time and time again to avoid taking any noticeable damage.

Having realized her plants couldn't do much, Dina had also shifted her attention to helping Jake and Sylphie with buffs and defensive barriers whenever necessary. She was also still helping the two oldies recover, allowing the Fallen King to not be entirely out of commission as he soon landed a barrage of golden beams and blasts of force, making the ogre stumble and for Sylphie to land another good attack, sending blood flying.

The problem was that the Twinhead Emperor didn't care about taking damage, simply tanking everything. He was fully on the offensive, as he quickly stopped bothering to deal with Sylphie and went after the slowest people in their party.

Dina was prepared, but she could only do so much. Fireballs began raining toward her, the ogre lifting a hand as cold energy began to condense. A massive spear of ice was summoned and thrown, Dina barely managing to make a tree shoot up and block in time. Meanwhile, Sylphie and Jake continued trying to attack the boss, but all they could do was slightly delay his casting at times.

Things were getting bad... and Dina knew it.

"Jake and Sylphie..."

"I got it," Jake assured her, giving her the go-ahead.

“Ree!” Sylphie also agreed.

Without further hesitation, Dina did her thing. Pushing herself, she once more entered her empowered form as trees began shooting up all around her, each of them bending and surrounding herself and the Sword Saint and Fallen King. Just before the entire thing fully closed, the two of them sent out a final goodbye.

A large golden beam shot out toward the boss, hitting the ogre before he could react. For a moment, he stopped, and using Mark, Jake saw the Soulshape of the Twin Emperor temporarily look as if it was wrapped in golden chains. Not for long, but enough for the next attack to arrive, as the Sword Saint exhausted the final energy he had.

“Glimpse of Spring: Erosion.”

His second use of a Glimpse of Spring instantly made him cough up blood, but his attack was not weakened. The stream of water soared toward the head of the Twinhead Emperor, and Jake decided to also lend a hand as he tried to use Gaze.

Sadly, even if the boss was frozen for a moment, the gravity magic in his immediate surroundings proved too strong, and their ability to stop the ogre too weak. He managed to move right before he was struck as he jumped. Combined with the gravity, the ogre managed to dodge a potentially fatal blow, but he couldn’t avoid the attack entirely.

The beam of water struck him in the right knee, blasting off the entire leg beneath it. Landing on the ground again, the shaman used earth magic to form a new temporary leg quickly before turning toward his attackers.

With an enraged gaze, the boss looked toward Dina and the two with her but found a dense dome of wood had formed to protect them. Taking out his anger, he pointed his staff as a torrent of lightning descended upon it, along with a flamethrower from the staff. Taking advantage, Jake released a Powershot, striking the Twin Emperor in the arm, making him nearly drop his staff, as Sylphie did a quick fly-by and left a deep cut on his shoulder, the ogre barely avoiding getting a nasty neck wound.

This narrative has been purloined without the author's approval. Report any appearances on Amazon.

The shaman's attacks had all washed over the wooden dome, but once the smoke cleared, the Twinhead Emperor grimaced as he saw a burnt wooden dome that was rapidly mending itself.

Unfortunately for the boss, even in his empowered state, he couldn't pierce Dina's powerful defensive technique. At least not within a few seconds only, and while he could likely get through it within a minute, he couldn't do much with Jake and Sylphie actively attacking him. The problem with this technique was that Dina couldn't do anything else when using it, nor let anyone out. Something the shaman quickly realized as he didn't bother attacking the dome again. Instead, he turned his attention to the two people remaining outside still with him.

"And then there were two..."the Twinhead Emperor said as he regarded Sylphie, who had returned to the sky, and Jake standing a few hundred meters away, an arrow already nocked. The ogre wasn't wrong either that it was only the two of them left... because Jake felt that the Sword Saint was practically unconscious, while the Fallen King could barely maintain himself with all the damage he had taken. Once the dome expired or was destroyed, and if the boss still lived, things wouldn't be good, and unless the Sword Saint wanted to take the massive risk of using his full Transcendence in his current state, the three of them had little other choice than using the escape tokens they still had saved from Minaga's Labyrinth... so things were up to Jake and Sylphie now.

"Well, you're down to just one. Heads, that is. At least ones that aren't just for decoration at this point," Jake taunted the boss, trying to get an emotional reaction and drag out time with banter while charging his Arcane Powershot further.

The Twin Emperor didn't respond with words but shot a flamethrower toward him instead, making Jake release the string of his bow. The Arcane Powershot pierced through the flames before finally getting deflected by the staff. The ogre had not attacked with explosive anger but more a seething hatred as he proceeded to launch several more attacks.

Sylphie dove down and mimicked him, attacking plenty on her own. Erecting an ice barrier, the boss blocked the wind attacks while continuing to launch spells toward a quite frankly struggling Jake. Under normal circumstances, he would be able to dodge something like this... but the gravity magic was really fucking with his movements, making everything he did slower and more cumbersome.

Small cuts, frost burns, and seared flesh soon began to cover his body, but nothing lethal ever landed. Jake's senses were focused like never before as he kept track of every single shift of mana in the atmosphere, moving before the magic even manifested. As his read on the ogre got better, he even began to launch a few counterattacks here and there, especially when he chose to use Eternal Shadow to also dodge a big blow.

Throughout, Sylphie also kept attacking the Twinhead Emperor, avoiding all the lightning strikes he tried using to keep her in check. Her assistance was one of the reasons Jake could still manage dealing with the constant assault.

Seconds ticked by, and Jake saw the shaman's Soulshape seem to almost shrink in density. It was odd to describe, but Jake felt as if he could effectively see the soul slowly fall apart. With the poison and accumulated damage, the ogre would die soon no matter what happened... so all the hunter and the bird had to do was hold on.

Also, realizing he wasn't going to achieve his goal of revenge in time if things continued like this, the Twinhead Emperor seemingly made a decision.

Without any warning, the ogre suddenly flew over toward Jake, seemingly wanting to get in melee combat now. Jake naturally retreated as an answer, making sure not to get caught by any attack... which was when the shaman did something entirely unexpected. With a flick of his wrist, the staff he had been holding flew toward Jake, who dodged away, only for it to suddenly slam into the ground just beside him.

As it slammed down, the ground dented, and Jake felt the pressure instantly as he smashed straight into the ground from the gravity field suddenly increasing in power several times over. The ogre was still holding out a hand as it glowed with magic, holding down Jake and the staff.

"Killing you in time... does not seem feasible," the ogre said while blood poured out his mouth as he turned his head and raised his other hand toward Sylphie in the sky. "But the odd elemental... I have experience killing elementals."

"Ree!" Sylphie responded by pushing down a dense wave of wind. The Twin Emperor looked at it as his hand began to glow with power. At the same time, his entire body began to shine as every single set of runes enveloped him in light. His body practically burned as his soul was set aflame, blood dripping from his eyes.

"Wind, bend before my will!"

Jake felt the sudden rush of power as the atmosphere changed. The blast of wind Sylphie had shot down toward the boss was somehow caught in his hand as if Sylphie had lost control of it. At the same time, the thunderclouds above suddenly became hyperactive, as all the lighting was shot down within mere moments, Sylphie dodging by spreading out her body into wind as she normally did.

Seeing the smile on the shaman's face, Jake got a bad feeling.

The raised hand of the ogre began to slowly clench into a fist as the sky above moved. Wind began to gather as a giant spinning sphere of dense wind magic condensed. The stormcloud was already gone, scattered by the wind, as the sphere began to grow smaller.

Sylphie, who was caught within the sphere still in her pure wind form, began to shoot out wind blades to cut it open, but all her magic was simply absorbed by the wind sphere. Jake saw her try to control the wind around her, but it looked as if it no longer responded to her.

The sphere kept growing smaller and smaller as it condensed the air further and further. Sylphie struggled, and Jake tried to stand as he looked up, and his eyes opened wide. Somehow, the wind was getting so condensed that Sylphie began to forcibly reenter her beast form.

Jake saw her struggle, the ogre grinning as his hand closed tighter and tighter. Sylphie was soon entirely forced back into her physical hawk form as Jake saw something he never thought he would. The wind began to cut her, slicing through her feathers. Flashes of red began to appear as blood was drawn, Sylphie having no way to escape or avoid the attacks.

Trying to help, Jake used Touch of the Malefic Viper to intensify the poison, exploded his Mark to try and deal some more damage, and even used Gaze... but all it did was make the boss pause for a fraction of a second, barely giving Sylphie any respite.

Everyone in their party knew what was going on, and Jake's mind temporarily blanked as he heard Dina say something through her Golden Mark. He heard her mention his name, but he could only stare as the small hawk struggled in vain, slowly getting sliced apart as the sphere of wind was still getting smaller and smaller, crushing her... killing her.

She... she did have the Phoenix Feather gifted to her, but it was risky to use... maybe... no, he shouldn't tell her to, but... Jake didn't want to know what could happen if she didn't get out. He finally stopped doubting what had to be done as he yelled through the Golden Mark. "Sylphie, use your escape token!"

He yelled... but nothing happened. "Sylphie! Now!"

Jake tried again, as did the others, but all they got in return was a rush of feelings from her. Fear... indignation... confusion...

Gritting his teeth, Jake resolved himself. He didn't have much after Valdemar, but Jake had regenerated some of that special energy over the last many years, and even if it wasn't his life in danger, he would-

Sylphie's desperate mix of emotions suddenly stopped... paused... and an overwhelming sense of fury rushed through the Golden Mark, washing away everything else, as an ear-piercing screech echoed out... sounding almost scolding in nature.

As Sylphie found herself surrounded by the wind, forced into her physical form, and unable to fight back... she didn't understand what she had done wrong or why this was happening.

Sylphie fought well, at least, she thought she did. She had done everything Uncle and the others had told her to do. Sylphie was really good at doing that! Maybe Sylphie was even the best at doing what she was told to do because Sylphie knew how important it was to listen.

She had learned that back when Uncle had to save herself, Mom, and Dad from the bad sun bird. Learned to listen to what her parents told her. When she left on adventure with him, her parents had told her to always listen to Uncle, because even if Uncle could be very dumb, he was still pretty smart sometimes.

So, she did what she was told. Even if Sylphie was her own hawk, she did what her Uncle and her parents told her to do. That's just how things were and how they should be.

But... in the fight with the two-headed big bad ogre, things weren't as they should be. It was a super hard fight, but Sylphie had been in many super hard fights before, so it wasn't that. No, it was that something acted like it shouldn't. Things were wrong.

In the same vein as how Sylphie did as Uncle or her parents told her, the wind always did what Sylphie told it to do. That's how things were and how they should be. But now, against the big bad ogre... the wind stopped listening to her.

It ignored her, no matter how much Sylphie tried to tell it what to do.

The wind... her wind attacked her from all sides. Trapped her, cut her, injured her. It closed in on her as she struggled but couldn't do anything.

Why wasn't the wind listening to her? Why did it do as the big bad ogre said? Why was what he wanted more important than what Sylphie asked?

That was just... wrong. Not how the world worked. The wind was supposed to listen to her. It was hers and not anyone else's.

For the wind to act like this, refusing to do anything she said, and even attacking her just because someone else told it to was just... just...

So rude!

Sylphie had always been nice and always asked the wind to help, and it had always listened... but now, it seemed like that wasn't enough anymore. It was rebelling, so she did as her Mom had done when Sylphie acted up.

She got angry and channeled that anger toward the indignant wind, acting up like a rebellious child. If it didn't want to play nice, fine. No more niceties at all, and definitely no more asking politely if this was how the stupid wind was going to act!

From now on, Sylphie was going to make it very clear how the world was supposed to work and who was in charge here. Make it clear this was a world where the wind did exactly what Sylphie told it to do, without any complaint or talking back. To put it nicely, she was no longer making a request as she opened her beak, and with the wind attacking her from all sides, the injuries rapidly accumulating,

Sylphie focused on nothing else as she screeched out her first direct command, leaving no room for disagreement.

"REE!"

And as her order came, the wind responded as it rightfully should when the Sylphian Hawk exerted her authority.

Skill Upgraded: [Sylph Wind Whispering (Legendary)] --> [Sylphian Authority (Mythical)]

Chapter 872: Nevermore: Winds of Change

Jake stared toward the sky as the spinning sphere of wind had stopped in its tracks. The ogre's eyes opened wide as his clenching hand began to glow even brighter than before, but he couldn't close it any more, no matter how hard he tried. Instead, the opposite happened.

The Twinhead Emperor's fingers were forced apart as the shift happened. The sphere of wind scattered as Jake felt the atmosphere change entirely, and he saw the sky almost vibrate as the wind began to gather from all around. Jake also felt the pressure from the ogre lessen as he saw the clear look of shock on the Twin Emperor's face.

Clouds were torn apart far up in the sky and in the horizon as more and more wind blew toward Sylphie from all over the Vast Plateau. Every single iota of environmental wind mana no longer felt as if it was just that: environmental. Instead, it had the clear aura of the hawk in the sky, who was gathering more power than Jake had ever seen her control before.

Then, everything suddenly stopped.

The wind was still, and Jake saw the Twinhead Emperor stare as Sylphie beat her wings a single time, making it move once more.

A soft wind swept down, making Jake's clothes flap a bit as he saw the attack descend. There were no fancy colors and no real sound, as all that arrived was a stream of wind headed straight for the boss with speed rivaling Jake's fastest arrows.

Right before it hit, Jake saw the expression of confusion and hint of fear on the Twinhead Emperor's face.

"Authority... how can-"

Jake didn't hear the final words as the attack arrived. A pillar of wind descended upon the Twinhead Emperor as Jake was pushed backward from the wind that spilled over from the sides of the constant stream of wind.

While sliding back, Jake observed as the ogre got hit. Immediately, the skin of his face was cut, and he was forced to close his eyes and raise his arms to defend himself. The ogre's arms were cut up next, skin and flesh tearing off from the sheer pressure and cutting nature of the wind. The boss tried to use some magic to summon a barrier of stone, but the mana didn't have the slightest chance to gather before it was blown away by the constant wind.

It was like a small localized jetstream of pressured and intense air, smashing down on the boss and the boss alone. What's more, it wasn't stopping but rather only seemed to grow stronger. Moreover was the impressive effect on the surroundings. The wind blew harmlessly past everything, not even cutting into the ground, with the only one feeling the pressure being the ogre, whose leg and stump were already halfway forced into the ground, and the parts of his body that were hit directly by the wind stream weren't doing good.

Bones were showing on the Twinhead Emperor's arms, and barely any skin remained. It was death by a million cuts, as the jetstream somehow only seemed to intensify with every passing second, shearing off more and more flesh as the ogre roared.

"I... will... not... fall... alone!" the Twinhead Emperor roared loudly as his body exploded with a second wind of energy as he attempted to-

"REE!" Sylphie screeched with anger as the rising energy was smashed right back down; the stream of wind further empowered as it took on a light green glow from being infused further with Sylphie's sylphian concepts.

With a new desperate roar, the boss tried to reach out toward his staff, only to find Jake holding onto it with a vice grip and a few chains of stable arcane mana. For a moment, Jake saw the Twinhead Ogre open an eye and glare toward him in anger before the eye was hit by the wind, the pupil and eyeball cut apart.

The ogre's arms fell limply to his side soon after, no longer protecting him as the wind bore down fully on his face and body; his entire face getting sheared off as his torso began to suffer the same treatment, the second head that had belonged to the warrior already unrecognizable.

It didn't come as a surprise when Jake heard the system messages a second later as the seemingly impossible to finally put down boss finally succumbed to his countless injuries.

You have slain [Twinhead Emperor – lvl 335] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 288 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 289 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 275 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Even after the boss died, the wind didn't stop as the Twinhead Emperor's energy left his body, leaving it defenseless as the wind had a field day. Only a few seconds later did Sylphie stop as the jet stream subsided, and Jake felt the atmospheric wind return to normal, as the little hawk no longer exerted control.

All that was left of the Twinhead Emperor was a ruined corpse, with half of its flesh sheared right off the bones, with even these bones covered in thousands of small cuts. A dozen or so meters off to the side, Jake saw a door had popped into existence, the one leading to the next city floor, making it clear the floor was now complete.

Looking up, Jake saw Sylphie descend, just gliding on the wind slowly. Without any hesitation, Jake flew up to her as he felt just how exhausted she was. It was not as if Jake was in peak condition himself, but from the looks of it, Sylphie was in an even worse state.

Once he reached her, he let the small hawk glide into his arms as he caught her. Sylphie was covered in wounds all over and even missed a lot of her feathers, making Jake's heart hurt as he gave her a light squeeze.

"Ree?" Sylphie let out a low screech as she looked up at him.

Jake shook his head in response. "No, just relieved you're okay."

Floating down, Jake went toward the wooden dome. On the way, he saw the sheer devastation their battle had wrought, as it looked like a natural disaster had hit the Vast Plateau. It wasn't unexpected, considering it was a fight between powerful C-grades, but Jake still felt this one had been particularly rough... and it had definitely been a close call toward the end.

As Jake and Sylphie approached the wooden dome, it soon began to unravel. Once it did, Jake laid eyes on the Sword Saint leaning against a rock while the Fallen King sat on the ground, not able to stand easily due to the lack of an arm and a leg. Dina was the one who looked the best, but Jake knew her resources were quite spent. Who knew that healing wounds inflicted by intense death energy would be difficult?

Well, Jake did. That's why he liked to use it in his poisons. But Dina definitely also knew.

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

"Good job, team," Jake said as he saw them, flashing a smile. "You all look like shit."

"All the hair on the left side of your head is burnt off," the Sword Saint shot back, having recovered quite a lot from Dina's healing while in the dome, though it was clear the old man wasn't going to be fighting any time soon, as he looked barely able to lift a sword.

"I never argued I am not also in the category of people currently looking like shit," Jake grinned as he sat down with Sylphie, all of them taking a rest as no one talked for a moment. He reflected on the fight as he scratched Sylphie somewhere she wasn't injured, the bird happy using the space between his legs as a nest.

There were definitely things that could have gone better, and they had probably not prepared enough or spent enough time learning about the skills of the Twinhead Emperor before they chose to fight him. If they had had a small bout with each of the Twin Emperors individually, they would have learned quite a lot, Jake reckoned. But they hadn't. Partly because they were pressured for time and partly because they had overestimated themselves a bit.

In many areas, they also got lucky, and Jake estimated there had been a good chance one of them would have had to use their escape tokens if just one small thing had gone wrong. Luckily, it hadn't, and when things did look like they were about to take a turn for the worse, Sylphie had come through as she had done... something. Jake still didn't know exactly what that something was, and he wasn't going to begin interrogating her here and now.

"I would set up a restoration circle, but..." Dina muttered as she frowned.

"Relax, dryad. There is no rush, so simply relax and recover," the Fallen King said.

"Yeah," Jake said with a reassuring smile. "Everyone, just chug a potion when you can, I still got plenty."

The others nodded as they all relaxed for the next hour, barely any words being exchanged during this time as most meditated. Everyone had consumed a potion at some point during the fight, Jake himself taking his after the solo fight to buy time when the warrior head had taken full control.

As they rested, Jake also decided to finally check out the system messages he had received upon completing the floor... and things were a lot better than expected.

Eightieth floor completed. 16,000 Nevermore Points earned.

Bonus Objective Completed: Do not allow a single party member to be slain during the battle. 30,000 Nevermore Points Earned.

Grand Achievement earned: Slay the Twinhead Emperor after fully allowing the two Twin Emperors to merge in an exemplary manner, thus ending the conflict of the Vast Plateau for good. 100,000
Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

First of all, that was a lot of Nevermore Points. Secondly, getting another 10% multiplier had not at all been expected. The only other event boss they had gotten a percentage bonus for was when they beat Minaga, and that had been a 25% multiplier. Jake did kind of feel like the Minaga reward had been a bit too much, but then again, that fight had been a lot harder overall.

Checking his Nevermore Points, Jake saw he had finally broken the two million mark and then some.

Current Nevermore Points: 2,120,950

Besides the Nevermore Points that he and the others had just gotten, the rest of the floor had only rewarded 21,000 more, coming from a few bonus objectives and achievements. This was a lot less than on other floors, but that was to be expected. It had been very similar on floor seventy-five and the event boss there. All of the achievements and objectives more or less got boiled into doing the event, resulting in just getting a whole bunch of points from that alone.

Time passed, and with potions and Dina eventually setting up a restoration circle, they all quickly began to recover. The backlashes from boosting skills and overusing certain skills – such as the Sword Saint's Transcendence – would take a while longer to shake off, but after only a few hours, they could all move about just fine. Jake even had all his hair back.

The door leading to the city floor was not far away, but they weren't going to enter it yet... because while it would be nice to head there right away to relax on the city floor, they all knew there wouldn't actually be any relaxation going on, at least not mentally.

While the fighting was most certainly finished, there was still a bit of politics left to go and some important decisions to be made. One of which was to figure out the order of who they believed would end up with the most Nevermore Points, so they could have those with less fully finish Nevermore first.

This was all for the Leaderboards... because during this time in the World Wonder, they had confirmed how the rewards worked, and Jake did think parts of it were a bit dumb. But, to make a quick summary, it mattered a lot when someone got on the Leaderboards... because just holding a spot for a mere moment would reward one the same as if they held it for thousands of years. There were potential rewards if one held a spot for the rest of the era, but all of that was way too far off for Jake to even think about.

Anyway, this all meant that their plan was to finish Nevermore one after another, having each person finish faster using time dilation... with Jake naturally being the last to go because, to the surprise of no one, he would definitely end up with the highest final evaluation. At least from their group... though Jake hoped he would just be the highest. Period.

But he had a feeling there were quite a few people who wouldn't like that much.

El'Hakan nodded, satisfied that they had managed to accomplish their goal, and just in time, too. The large beast lay dead before them, with the others now scattered, having lost their will to fight after their leader had died, ending the life of the final of the Mad Beast Kings.

A door appeared not far away as he turned to his party members while skimming the floor completion notice.

Eighty-second floor completed. 16,400 Nevermore Points earned.

Completing these two last floors had been done quickly, with little regard to bonus objectives or achievements, but the Nevermore Points gained had still been more than worth it. It was a bit sad they did not encounter more opportunities for Grand Achievements because the one from floor eighty had most certainly been a welcome addition.

Grand Achievement earned: Make the Twin Emperors fully merge once more and bring harmony to their Path as the Twinhead Emperor, ending the conflict of the Vast Plateau for good. 80,000 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

It had taken quite a bit of... Bloodline Therapy to get the two halves of one whole to agree on things and merge once more, but it hadn't been something he couldn't handle. El'hakan just felt fortunate he

didn't have to fight that monster, as he doubted they could have beaten the Twinhead Emperor without having to resort to things he would prefer to avoid, and even then, it wasn't an assured victory.

In fact, he doubted many could beat that boss... but he did see the party of the Malefic's Chosen doing it. They had a lot of trump cards to throw in, and Ell'hakan knew not to underestimate the hidden cards of someone who had managed to not only fight but defeat the absolute monster that had been Valdemar's image in the Colosseum of Mortals.

"We must hurry and finish before too many others have a chance to do so before us," the Saintess of the Holy Church reminded him as she stood with his two remaining party members, one of their comrades sadly having fallen during this final floor.

Ell'Hakan regarded the Saintess before nodding and walking the door with her. She had been far more helpful than he had ever expected, truly earning her recognition as one of the ten most talented C-grades of this generation in the Holy Church. He most certainly did not regret the deal he had struck to get her and the Church as a whole on board to support him.

To allow the Holy Church to obtain his Bloodline was but a small price to pay for their cooperation. Ah, but nothing would happen with the Saintess; Ell'Hakan wouldn't want too much to do with her after Nevermore if he could avoid it. He liked people he could influence, and absolute fanatics were quite difficult to sway in any way. He was also fully aware she had no positive feelings toward him and had her own Path to walk.

Anyway, his decision to enter talks with the Holy Church had been quite a good decision if he said so himself, especially when one considered the further implications of their deal... because to obtain his Bloodline, he naturally had to be alive, and for the best results, they wanted him to get as strong as possible before he would pass on the Bloodline.

This naturally meant they had a vested interest in keeping him alive, earning him quite a good ally... and a backup plan in case the winds of change did not favor his current Patron and Yip of Yore failed his grand plan.

Pushing down these thoughts and focusing on the present, he walked through the door to the city floor, Ell'Hakan refocusing and straightening his back. Soon, it would be time for his final score and placement on the Leaderboards to be revealed, and needless to say, he was more than confident in his placement... and not just on the two publicly known Leaderboards, but the third hidden one.

The All-Star Leaderboards.

Chapter 873: Nevermore: The Final Stretch

To a C-grade, while fifty years wasn't considered a very long time, it was definitely still a significant part of their lives, especially for those from the new universe, who were all very young by multiversal standards. For many, it was even a majority of their lives, truly highlighting the pure momentum of the natives in a new universe.

For another group who had also been heavily involved in Nevermore, fifty years was but the blink of an eye. The gods who kept an eye on everything that was happening – both from inside of Nevermore and those outside using messengers they sent in – a fifty-year period was barely ever of any consequence. At least not usually... but when a new universe was integrated, things always got exciting.

The Records were flowing freely, as the system was more active than ever, throwing events and special happenings around everywhere, not just for those in the new universe, even if the majority were for the newly integrated.

To the gods, this was a prime opportunity to grasp power for themselves and to expand their factions... Nevermore being a huge aspect in this. The Leaderboards were perhaps the best advertisement, not just for the groups with powerful people on it, but for the geniuses of the new era who had yet to fully integrate themselves with a faction.

Few would dare aim to recruit those who were in the top spots, and most of them were already in big factions anyway... but the ones who would have ranked in the top thousands were still more than worth it to recruit. For these geniuses who were close to the pinnacle, the best thing they could do personally was to get closer to the peak while also aligning themselves with the factions capable of nurturing these other peak C-grades who did top the Leaderboards.

Perhaps the luckiest of all wasn't the newly integrated mortals or the gods who could now finally progress once more but the young talents who had been born in other universes before the new integration and could now partake in the festivities. They had the advantage of growth before the integration and tended to be older with far more stable foundations than the newly integrated Nevermore Attendees... yet no one expected any of them to actually take the top spot, at least not right away.

History had proven that it was always newly integrated people who disproportionally dominated the Era Leaderboards, at least in the beginning. Each era was a few billion years at least, so many records would be broken during that time, but it did happen on occasion that a record set in the initial stages held strong for an entire era. Yip of Yore was one such happening.

When he had done Nevermore back in the day, he had taken the top spot, with his rival at the time, Altius, taking the second spot. Over time, Altius was pushed down to number four – still showing he had been an absolute pinnacle talent – but Yip had managed to maintain his rank, even as all the geniuses of an entire era competed with him, truly proving himself the pinnacle talent of the ninety-second era. He had been alive during the integration and set an unbeatable record... and now the question was if that feat would repeat itself as the next generation began to appear on the Leaderboards.

“Any spoilers?” Minaga asked the Wyrmgod, who was sitting silently and watching a myriad of livestreams and timers with the other gods.

“No,” the Primordial shook his head. “But I do believe most can infer some things.”

“Alright, alright... thoughts from the room how their factions did?” Minaga asked loudly, even calling out to the large gathering of gods observing from the back.

Yet it was the Blightfather who spoke up first. “Can’t say I’m particularly disappointed or overjoyed. There were some pleasant surprises and some who underperformed, but that is all to be expected. Overall, while Nevermore is certainly an important step in the Paths of C-grades and an excellent recruitment tool to find worthwhile talents, it isn’t that important in the grand scheme of things.”

“While I will not disagree with your main point, we shouldn’t downplay the most well-known World Wonder of the multiverse either, now should we? Also, let us not pretend this iteration hasn’t been a bit out of the ordinary... our very presences in this room here is proof of that,” the Holy Mother countered.

Vilastromoz just sat back, once more seeing no reason to get involved when the two of them got into it. He also knew that the reason the Holy Mother wanted to put more emphasis on Nevermore was due to how well the Holy Church always did. They were a faction focused on working together and the single-largest faction in the multiverse, after all, so for them to be displayed prominently on the Leaderboards was only to be expected.

Overall, they were definitely the ones doing the best simply due to their sheer numbers, but if one looked at the factions with the highest average placement, they were far behind. This space was instead dominated by the most elite factions, such as the Order of the Malefic Viper and Court of Shadows. Ones that didn't solely care about making a big organization, but that every member part of it had to be worthy.

Of course, there was one faction that dominated here more than any other when one still looked at major factions... one that was focused nearly solely on combat: Valhal.

Valdemar also did seem pretty happy with how things had gone. Even if their average placements were high, they tended to not have anyone at the top either. It did happen from time to time, but their members tended not to really focus enough on their professions or crafting in general to place that high.

As for the factions that did the absolute best, it was the incredibly small ones that had very strict requirements. Organizations such as the Crimson Flame, led by Gwyndyr. Even that archer from Earth affiliated with him had done pretty well for herself. Not to the level of beating any of the true top contenders, but a respectable performance, a bit like Jake's brother from the Court of Shadows. Pretty good but not outstanding.

The discussion of how each faction would do had quickly filled the hall as the gods talked openly, some even making subtle bets here and there. This was a rare chance for many of these representative gods to talk to a Primordial, something they were both open to in this forum. Didn't hurt that it was primarily just them being rained with praise while bragging, but that was neither here nor there.

Talks continued for a while until quickly, the topic moved toward what most of them ultimately cared about. The most interesting part of this period in Nevermore. It was a time where, more likely than not, the top spots of the Leaderboards would be switched out several times a day as more and more pinnacle geniuses finished until finally, the dust would settle, and only one name would remain atop as the Era's Pinnacle.

And while there was much discussion about who could take the top ten and even top five slots in the end, there was no doubt only two people were truly in contention for the top two:

One of the most spoken of Chosen of this generation, primarily because of the stuff one of them had pulled off recently and because these two had gods on open conflict:

Ell'hakan, Chosen of Yip, the former Era's Pinnacle and top genius of the last era.

And naturally the absolutely most spoken up, the Harbinger of Primeval Origins, and Villy's own drinking buddy, Jake.

They would soon know who would take the top spot as both were about to finish the World Wonder, and it was certain one of them would finish before the other, potentially blocking the other from holding the Era's Pinnacle title for even a moment.

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

--

"We should quickly sort our order and get going," the Sword Saint suggested after they had been talking for a while. "Also to put additional pressure on other factions who may be dallying too much."

"It isn't like we will finish immediately either way," the Fallen King also added. "It will take some time, even with our respective time chambers. Does the Order of the Malefic Viper have some prepared already?"

The final part was naturally to Jake, who confidently shrugged. "I have no idea."

"No cause for concern in that area," the Sword Saint shook his head. "Someone affiliated with my Patron shall be there and have everything ready."

"That's convenient," Jake tilted his head. "Did Aeon contact you or something?"

"No, this was planned before I even entered Nevermore in the first place. Also, let me be clear, this isn't something specifically prepared for us. Others are also very much interested in the services of the best time mage one can find in C-grade," the old man explained.

"Makes sense, I guess," Jake nodded.

“Ree?” Sylphie also asked.

“No, it’s definitely faster to stay inside of Nevermore to take advantage of the compounding time dilation,” the Sword Saint answered.

Sylphie had asked if it wouldn’t be faster to go to Nevermore City – the entrance of Nevermore – and have someone above C-grade set up a time chamber there. One had to remember that even if they left Nevermore and the time expired out there, it would still count. But, as the Sword Saint said, it was better to stay in Nevermore to double-dip on the time dilation.

Even if the C-grade in Nevermore could only do a, let’s say, ten-to-one dilation inside of Nevermore, coupled with the natural dilation of Nevermore, one easily hit a 100x multiplier in Realtime. Or, well, the opposite of a multiplier, as more time would pass inside the chamber than outside.

“Now, let us proceed to decide our order... and as much as it annoys me, I reckon the bird and I are first, considering our performances in the Challenge Dungeons,” the Fallen King said.

“We still need to decide the exact order,” the Sword Saint said. “As in... how many points do each of you have exactly?”

Jake perked up at hearing that. Each of them naturally had a lot of points, but if Sylphie somehow ended up with more, it would be hilarious.

Spoiler.

It was hilarious.

“A measly, not even two thousand points is...” the King said, trying to make excuses.

“Ree.”

“The sheer incompetence in design behind that ridiculous labyrinth...” the Fallen King shifted the blame.

“Ree.”

“No, it was by far the worst of the Challenge Dungeons, of that there is no doubt,” the Unique Lifeform said, now moved onto anger, before finally... acceptance. “Let us not waste time on what has happened. Additionally, the hawk has gained more levels, which will add even more points at the end. So, move on to decide the winner between the dryad and swordsman.”

“Ree,” Sylphie courteously agreed as they moved on indeed.

Jake had kind of forgotten the extra points one would also get from levels and wondered how that worked. It was one of the reasons it was advised to be as close to level 200 as one could when one entered, even if one could compete on the Leaderboards as long as one was below 210. Anyway, he would definitely find out soon.

“There is no need to compare us,” Dina shook her head. “I think it’s best he finishes first. With a 70% multiplier from the Challenge Dungeons, neither of us are getting on the top 10 Leaderboards for the era, but the Sword Saint does have a very good shot at the top ten on the ninety-third universe Leaderboards.”

“We should still decide,” the Sword Saint smiled. “Even if we don’t get top ten, reaching top 100 or top 250 is bound to also have certain rewards, and I want no enmity born from one of us blocking the other.”

“I wouldn’t-“

“1,952,976.”

Dina was silent for a bit before muttering. “Fifty-eight thousand...”

“So, you got me beat,” the old man smiled.

“No... no, you got more levels than me,” Dina shook her head. “While I’m not sure about the details, I am sure that will add even more at the end, making you overtake me.”

The two of them ended up agreeing on the old man going first after a bit more back and forth, which just left Jake.

“Anyone wanna know how many points I got?” he asked with a bright smile.

“I will assume so many that it would be shameful if you failed to reach the top spot of the Era and Universe Leaderboards,” the Fallen King shot back.

“I wouldn’t say shameful... but enough so that I would be disappointed if I didn’t top at least one of them,” Jake shrugged. “And I say that knowing full well that there is a good chance a certain orange fuck is already topping one if not both of them already. Anyway, we’re all good, right? Let’s get moving and finally get done with Nevermore.”

There were no complaints as everyone finally got up, and Dina dispelled the recovery circle. They all at least looked representable now as they moved toward the door and the final city floor. On the way, Dina threw Jake a few glances before finally asking.

“Would... would you really be disappointed if you didn’t get the top spot? Do you expect to get it?” she asked a bit cautiously. “My grandfather said that to take the top spot isn’t easy, and even if getting it doesn’t necessarily mean one is the strongest of a generation... it won’t be far off.”

“I think I would be, yeah,” Jake muttered. “I did my best here in Nevermore, and as you said, the spot is often reserved for the top of a generation, right?”

“Yes,” Dina nodded.

“Well, then I belong there,” Jake shrugged as he grinned. “My goal has always been to be the very best like no one ever was.”

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, still held by Jake as she was still very tired. Or, at the very least, pretended to still be very tired to get carried.

“No, no, you’re in the generation after mine, so you can be the very best of that one,” Jake shook his head while scratching her.

“Does that mean I am from the generation before you?” the Sword Saint asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not,” Jake said, sounding almost offended. “You’re at least three generations before me, if not more.”

“That... isn’t how generations work in the multiverse,” Dina said. “While a generation isn’t a set time, in most instances, especially when talking about C-grades, one considers a single generation at least a few hundred years...”

“That sounds like something I will definitely ignore ever learning,” Jake grinned as the five of them finally entered the door and went to the final city floor they would ever see.

It was... pretty basic and very empty if Jake said so himself. Especially compared to City Floor Fourteen, the one where all the top teams were doing Challenge Dungeons. Still, the ones that were present were either those not competing on the Leaderboards – in other words, those who had entered while already above 210 – or the absolute top teams. And most of those teams wouldn’t be found just wandering about as they were doing exactly what Jake and company were about to do.

Ignoring the system message welcoming them to the city floor, the five of them made their way toward somewhere the Sword Saint felt powerful time energy gathered. Jake also felt it, and using Pulse, he spotted the place the old man was talking about.

Reaching the area, they saw a large set of buildings that looked a bit like one of those motels where the doors opened directly from the outside into the rooms, except the doors, in this case, were heavy enchanted gates, and the rooms were lined up boxes of metal.

“This the place?” Jake asked the Sword Saint as he read the sign above the fence surrounding the weird, motel-looking place... and it did not inspire confidence.

Time Chambers For Rent! Best Rates, Best Service, Best Performance!

"It is indeed," the old man nodded, Jake choosing to believe him as they walked inside. They had barely managed to get in before Jake spotted an approaching figure who raised a hand and waved.

"You're finally here! Damn, I was getting scared you fucked up and got stuck on floor seventy-five or something, as you didn't go to the city floor," the newcomer said. "A fellow follower of the glorious God of Time, too!"

Jake observed the man and used Identify, quickly being told what he already knew... this guy was strong.

[Hobgoblin – lvl 349 – Divine Blessing of Aeon Clok]

"Greetings," the Sword Saint bowed. "I do not believe I need to say why we're here?"

"Of course not," the hobgoblin shook his head. "Seeing as you're a follower of our god, I can even throw in a three percent discount! No, wait, with the Malefic's Chosen also here, I believe I can make it three-point-five percent! The true VIP treatment!"

"How generous..." Jake muttered.

"I know, right?" the hobgoblin said, still smiling. "Now, let's get you all settled, alright? I will naturally need payment up front as you'll all just pop right back to Nevermore City when the timer expires."

"Can I ask, has the Chosen of Yip of Yore also arrived here?" Jake asked.

"Yep, he already got here over a full day ago and will pop out soonish, I reckon," the peak C-grade explained.

"I see..." Jake muttered. "Say... would it be possible to pay a bit extra to maybe do it so his time dilation isn't as effective as it maybe should be, allowing a certain other Chosen to finish first?"

The hobgoblin looked at Jake for a moment as his smile faded entirely. "Are you asking me to divert from my own Path by maliciously breaking my business practices?"

"I would never ask that and simply made a tasteless hypothetical," Jake quickly backtracked quickly as he smiled. "Anyway, five rooms, please."

"Oh, of course, you would never truly ask something preposterous like that," the hobgoblin said with a serious look before he went right back to smiling. "Now, follow me, and I'll show you to your rooms."

Chapter 874: Nevermore: The Calm Before the Leaderboards

One by one, Jake and his party members entered their respective time chambers. They went in the order they had decided, so the Fallen King would finish first, then Sylphie, the Sword Saint, Dina, and finally, Jake would be the last one to appear back in Nevermore City as his fifty years expired.

When Jake was the only one left, standing right in front of his own chamber, the hobgoblin threw him a glance. "So... you gonna win?"

"What?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"Are you gonna beat Yip's Chosen on the Leaderboards? In my mind, it's pretty much down to you two for the top spot as far as I know. There are a few others too who may have a slight chance, but eh... not really," the time mage said.

"Why do you care?" Jake questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"I am a gossip; what can I say? I just like those juicy-"

"There's bets on, huh?" Jake interrupted him.

"Really?" the hobgoblin said, as he tried to look surprised. "I would have never thought that! But say there truly is live betting going on regarding the finishing positions of all the different well-known

Nevermore Attendees competing on the Leaderboards, then surely there would be a lot to be gained on betting for the top spot. Ah, by the way, I am talking about the Era Leaderboards here.”

Jake, not really in that much of a hurry to start his own time chamber, just got a thought. “Whose the top seed right now?”

“El’Hakan, and pretty convincingly, too, so if you beat him on the Era Leaderboards; you should also top the universe one,” the time mage said. “Followed by a demon prince, a young princess from the Regalflight, an elemental of some kind, and, of course, you. A few others in there, too, but I have my personal doubts about these individuals, and I tend to be pretty good at judging situations like these. The thing is, we don’t know your Challenge Dungeon score, and while it can be assumed that it’s good, seeing as you are also an alchemist and should do well even in those focused on crafting, there’s still a lot of question marks. Especially after you didn’t publish your results. Left many to believe you maybe actually did horribly and was embarrassed.”

“That Chosen of Yip is really rated that highly, huh?” Jake muttered, ignoring the last part of what the time mage said. He did know he had gotten a good score from the Challenge Dungeons, but...

“He passed floor eighty-two and did pretty damn well throughout the World Wonder. Only one other group did eighty-two floors, with even the majority of the top groups not managing to complete floor eighty, and even if they did, it wasn’t exactly with flying colors,” the hobgoblin kept readily sharing. “Also, is it surprising for the Chosen of Yip to be rated highly? Based on what I saw when he came here, he is quite an unsettling entity... not that I wouldn’t say the same about you.”

“I see,” Jake nodded, thinking to himself.

“So...?”

“What?” Jake asked, confused.

“You gonna beat him or not? If you tell me, and you’re right, I’ll waive the fee for using the time chambers entirely for your entire party,” the hobgoblin offered.

“Didn’t you make a big deal about offering a discount before...?”

"Alright, I'll even throw in... what do you want?" the time mage asked, seemingly not sure what to offer a Chosen.

Jake thought for a second, and for a second, he considered what he would do after Nevermore and what would be of use then... and one thing instantly popped up.

"Something for a time banana musa... eh a Celerita Musa, ancient rarity," Jake said.

"Musa? I thought bananas grew on trees?"

"A lot of people do," Jake answered, having a very important conversation before it was time to have a multiversal competition on a few Leaderboards. "They're actually not trees, but a type of flowering plant that is often confused for one due to their size and large stem."

"Huh, you learn something new every day," the hobgoblin nodded, sounding genuinely interested. "You really are an alchemist. Either way, I got something I'm sure will be of use to your banana plant... so what'll it be? You gotta take the top spot?"

"If I was the one betting, that is sure where I would place my money... because I wouldn't say Ell'Hakan's Challenge Dungeon run struck me as particularly impressive," Jake smirked and gave a knowing look.

The hobgoblin looked surprised for a moment before he smirked in kind. "I'll trust ya on this one. Cya around, I'll send someone with the stuff for your plant if you make me a rich goblin. Alright, an even richer goblin."

With those words, he shut the door to Jake's time chamber. Seconds later, Jake felt the magic circles activate as time distorted. While time would be warped, he would still need to sit there for at least a few days, giving him plenty of time to have fun as he pulled out his Puzzle Box of the Seeker, an item he had dearly missed playing with.

Before he immersed himself in the puzzles, he briefly reflected on recent happenings and what he had just learned. Jake had surprised himself a bit when he asked the hobgoblin about potentially messing with Ell'Hakan's time chamber to fuck him over on the Leaderboards, as that honestly wasn't like him.

He had just wanted to fuck with the other Chosen, and title-blocking him seemed like a fun way to do that.

But.. letting El'Hakan emerge on his throne for a small while before smashing him down would also be satisfying. Jake also had to admit one other thing... for a moment, he had considered the possibility he would need to finish first. That he wasn't the one with the top score. Jake knew he was strong, people kept telling him that, but it was still hard to imagine he would be the one to take the absolute top spot on the Leaderboards.

If Nevermore had been pure fighting, he would have been more confident. But it was so many other things, and Jake knew there were a myriad of different creatures and people in the multiverse who had their own unique advantages. In many ways, the words of the hobgoblin before he entered the chamber had calmed him. Hearing two groups had beaten two floors more than him wasn't nice, but it told him there wasn't some mega-outlier who had somehow managed to do ninety floors through having five Transcendences or some shit like that.

Again, Jake knew he was strong, but he had seen stronger C-grades. The face of the First Sage flashed in his mind as Jake realized a big part of his reason was due to him. Who is to say someone like that absolute outlier couldn't have appeared again? The chances were really fucking low, but...

Shaking his head, Jake decided to dispel all thoughts about it and began to play with his Puzzle Box to pass the time. All there was left for him to do was wait for the final results to be published. Something he had hated after an exam back in school and sure as hell didn't like more now.

Stolen story; please report.

Jake, immersed in his box to distract his mind, failed to realize the irony of his thoughts... something he would only come to realize later. Because while he was afraid of some mega-outlier coming in and swooping the competition...

He didn't realize that in the eyes of others, he was that mega-outlier.

Nevermore City was busier than ever, even exceeding the time everyone went to enter the World Wonder. The massive city was housing guests from every faction, their many strongholds, and

compounds filled with influential figures from all over the multiverse. Within many, even gods sat, covertly keeping an eye on everything that was happening.

Within the compound belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, Viridia was kneeling before another familiar-looking woman who stood beside two nearly identical copies of herself. It was one of the Witches of the Verdant Lagoon, sidelined by projections of her two sisters.

"The Malefic One informed us his Chosen soon exits Nevermore," the sister there with a physical avatar said. "There are also some others to keep an eye on, like the Malefic Dragonkin, but sadly for them, they are overshadowed by the presence of the Chosen."

"Will we proceed according to the Order's regular procedures?" Viridia asked, a bit unsure. This wasn't her first time going to Nevermore because some highly talented member of the Order was doing the World Wonder, but as an S-grade, it was naturally her first time seeing a true Leaderboards competition like this. In preparations, she had read up on old procedures of the Order... but those had all been written during the Malefic One's absence. So, they very much emphasized not rocking the boat too much.

"I read those, and they are pathetic," the Verdant Witch spat out her words. "Viridia, who are we? We are the Order of the Malefic Viper, loyal servants of the Malefic One. We are subservient or apprehensive toward no one but the Malefic One, and this is our chance to truly show the multiverse we are not afraid."

"Then..."

"Walk forward with pride. Stand alongside the other representatives with a straight back. You represent the Malefic Viper, a Primordial. Do not embarrass him, us, the Chosen, or yourself," one of the other sisters said in a stern tone. "Your job is not to prove you are worthy of that pride. Leave that up to the Malefic One and his Chosen and simply bask in the glory of their shadow."

Viridia listened intently before bowing deeper. "The will of the Malefic One shall be done."

"Good. Now go and show those uptight posers the Order of the Malefic Viper is not to be looked down upon or forgotten."

Standing up, Viridia nodded as she turned, determination in her eyes. As she walked through the compound, she gathered those who would walk alongside her. Among them were a few branch leaders and other S-grades, including Fairleigh, the patriarch of the Nalkar vampires. Something that usually wouldn't be possible.

There were a few reasons for this. The first one was that vampires still didn't have a good reputation in the wider multiverse and were often antagonized simply for existing. Among the influential factions, pretty much only the Order had any vampires, with the rest being solo or with smaller groups. Due to this, the Order usually didn't have vampires with them whenever they participated in any social happenings like this, as that would just be inviting trouble from those who still sought the extermination of the vampire race as a whole.

With the return of the Viper, this would change. No longer did they carry the same fear of making others angry by bringing one. The mere fact they dared bring a vampire was also a way to tell the rest of the multiverse that the Order would do whatever they wanted from now on, with the other factions not able to pressure or tell them what they could and couldn't do. A show of force, if one will, and a declaration that the Order was openly supporting the vampires.

Finally... Fairleigh had wanted to come. He had been incredibly embarrassed that he had been the one to welcome the Chosen and speak to him for a prolonged period when the Chosen was selling off items from the Treasure Hunt system event, all without the Nalkar Patriarch noticing who he was truly dealing with. He just thought Jake was some new recruit with a Blessing. The primary reason Fairleigh had even wanted to speak to the Chosen personally was due to his own personal interest in old vampire memorabilia. Now, he wanted to at least show his respect by showing up like this and being there to observe how the Chosen did in Nevermore.

"Are you nervous?" Viridia asked Fairleigh as they exited the compound and began making their way toward the central square. They were a group of twelve total, most of them old and loyal members of the Order, while some were newer recruits brought along. Calling S-grades new recruits was a bit weird, but many had wanted a closer relationship with the Order and even joined after the Primordial's return.

"What worry could I possibly have, Hall Master?" the vampire patriarch asked with a relaxed smile. "This is the domain of the Wyrmgod, and none would dare insult two Primordials by making a move. I am just happy to finally walk in the light and not be hidden away like should I be ashamed of my heritage."

Viridia slowly nodded. Fairleigh was older than herself, but as the Hall Master, she had seniority. Still, it felt odd that the vampire she remembered first seeing as a C-grade herself spoke so formally. "There truly is no need for shame. You are recognized by the Malefic One, and his recognition is worth more

than that of every other faction combined. I know his Chosen also has no negative emotions toward your race, and from what I heard, there are even vampires living on his home planet.”

Fairleigh smiled as they kept walking in silence for a while longer before the central square entered sight. Compared to when the Chosen and others had entered, things were slightly different now. The entire square had expanded, and not just by a little either. Some serious space magic had been used, so perfect it defied belief, quite literally stretching reality itself to make everything bigger.

This was all done to make space for the many stands and podiums reserved for the different factions who had proven themselves worthy of one. Behind these were even large buildings that were placed in a large ring around the central square, all with a view of the two Leaderboards from large terraces atop their roofs. These were reserved for the top factions only, with the Order of the Malefic Viper naturally having one of these reserved.

The Leaderboards themselves were currently hidden as they both appeared entirely blank. This had been done when the Era Leaderboards unlocked, primarily to build up excitement about who would take the top spot. There was no doubt this was more than just a mere competition among young talents, but a large social happening involving pretty much all of the major factions of the multiverse.

Viridia led her group into the building belonging to them as they soon stood on the rooftop. Quite a few curious gazes had landed on them, especially when they saw the vampire among them. The Risen were only a few rows away, and their representative was throwing some nasty looks, while the Holy Church was luckily on the other side of the square, placed as far away from the Risen as possible.

Looking over at the Risen, Viridia just smiled and nodded in greeting. The other representative clearly wasn't happy but still returned her greeting in kind, professional enough to know that being impolite would gain them nothing.

There were a few dozen of these buildings for top factions, with most of them having already arrived by now. Viridia had been to other social gatherings and was used to mostly being ignored... which was why she was surprised when, soon, they were visited by many guests who wanted to give their greetings. And not just by small factions.

A few of the Dragonflights, the United Tribes, Altmar Empire, demon factions, powerful warbands... factions Viridia usually felt looked down on the Order came to pay their respects and wish them a good performance for their Chosen.

One of the reasons why the larger factions had entire buildings was due to the length of this event. It would take weeks, at the very least, for all of the top performers of this first generation to be revealed. Probably even a few months. So this was also very much a time for political meanings, something the buildings could be used for, as Viridia took this chance to meet with representatives left and right.

It also had to be noted that only mortals participated in this. Mixing gods with mortals simply wasn't feasible, and Viridia didn't doubt some gods didn't also have their own dealings, but the majority of the diplomatic work was left to the mortals.

Days turned to weeks, as they had naturally come in good time, and the Leaderboards had yet to be revealed. Finally, they got a warning one day, as a message was projected into the sky above Nevermore City:

Leaderboards Reveal: 23:59:57

Viridia had gone to their rooftop in preparation as the timer slowly expired. As it reached zero... the sky and square filled with lights, and Viridia heard something she hadn't expected. Music began to blare out from who-knows-where as a being appeared in the sky, hands spread out as she felt the presence of a demi-god.

It was a figure she had read up on and whom she knew was associated with Nevermore. A powerful being that many feared as much as even the Primordials, not necessarily because of power, but the sheer damage this being could cause if pushed. Truly, a creature worthy of respect, as Viridia and all the other mortals knelt before the demi-god they, in truth, knew had already stepped into divinity. Perhaps the only god capable of showing up as a mortal:

The All-God Legion.

Chapter 875: Nevermore: Leaderboards

Lights danced in the sky as the music kept playing while the All-God Legion, better known as Minaga, walked down a pair of invisible stairs right above the two blank Leaderboards. He easily got the attention of everyone, and Viridia had to admit he was perhaps the best creature in the multiverse to do something like this... he was both a mortal, making his aura not overwhelming, and a divine being that

could stand alongside the pinnacle all on his own. This offered him the possibility of absolute confidence.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome! What a great day for all of you to show up and all just to come and see little me!?” Minaga’s voice was projected all throughout Nevermore City, reaching not just the square.

“Oh wait, I read that wrong... you’re here for the Leaderboards, eh?” the Unique Lifeform joked around, not a single person present letting out the slightest laugh.

“Alright, alright, tough crowd, everyone’s so freaking serious, so let’s just stop messing around and get right to it! The great Leaderboards reveal! Okay, I lied; we won’t get right to it. One small intermission first, and I need to make a few clarifications, and as a preamble, I will share some stats!” Minaga said as he summoned a floating screen above himself. “Firstly, I can happily announce the death rate for this year’s Leaderboards-competition groups was 10.3% below the expected amount! That means only about 9.4 out of every 100 Nevermore Attendees competing on the Leaderboards ended up dying, compared to 10.1 out of every 100 last era.”

Viridia looked up at the screen and saw the stats that represented millions of dead at the very least. But it also meant that more than ten times the number of dead had come out of Nevermore, now more powerful than before and with a brighter future ahead of them. She also knew that the members of the Order tended to survive far more than the average due to their far higher average power level.

“The Nevermore Points achieved by the average group is also 3.6% higher than the last era, sitting at a whopping 42.214! Pretty good if I say so myself, and you can all be proud for fostering another great generation... especially now that we’re getting to the juicy part.”

Minaga smiled even more brightly as he dispelled the prior screen and showed a new one. It was just a single number, but Viridia instantly understood what it meant. That’s... impressive.

“10.5%. That’s how many more Nevermore Points the average in the top 1 percentile gained this time around compared to the last era. To clarify, this is the second biggest jump between two eras ever seen, and compared to last time, there is no explanation besides one simple fact: even the average talent of this era vastly surpasses any we’ve ever seen prior.”

For the first time, there was an actual crowd reaction as claps were heard. Viridia also joined in, along with the other S-grades around her. It was an applause for the next generation and what she believed was an outstanding performance. A generation the Chosen of the Order was a representative member of.

“Now, at the very tippidy top we will soon see on the Leaderboards, the disparity is a bit harder to find, showing that those at the Pinnacle Tier, even in prior eras, are still not to be taken lightly. But, fret not, the young talents are a little bit better, but within the margin of error,” Minaga continued once the applause had fully died down, as Viridia heard some low discussion all around.

To see the average rise was a good sign.. but to see the top shift wasn't, especially not after the last era. Yip of Yore had been an outlier who had been praised for surpassing all prior eras, and what he had grown into could only be described as a problem for many divine factions. The many factions had also long learned that many top geniuses would be very difficult to control unless they had an existing connection to a top faction.

Those from the new universe naturally didn't have any pre-existing connections, making them far more unpredictable. So, while seeing the average grow was good, many hoped to not see the top spot once more be taken by someone from the new universe... something that would be difficult to achieve, seeing as quite a few of the top seeds were from the new universe.

“The following clarification is mainly for those who haven't really been paying attention to how the Leaderboards work... but the Leaderboards have naturally been open for quite a while; we just decided not to show them. In fact, they've been open for about a year, but we have naturally kept them hidden, as honestly, quite a few of you are utterly insufferable when it comes to wanting to show off. You are so desperate to have names from your factions shown on a list that is shifting every hour that it's honestly kind of sad. Seriously, how many people have been forced to cut their Nevermore journeys short halfway through for some insecure Holy Church, Risen Altmar Empire, or whatever, to use their lost futures as a brief marketing stunt? Anyway, so, yeah, to stop this pathetic display, we chose to hide the Leaderboards till now, when the rankings are at least semi-stable, and I am certain no one has anything against that, right? We allow people to at least see the Universe Leaderboard a bit in the beginning for you bastards to do your scouting or whatever, and even that's too much, in my opinion...”

Viridia stood and stared blankly as the entire square was silent after the Unique Lifeform's rant. She couldn't help but look over, and she saw a Cardinal from the Holy Church clench his staff tight, holding in his anger after the All-God Legion effectively insulted the entire Holy Church and even the Holy Mother herself. It wouldn't be an understatement to say Minaga had just insulted half of the peak factions with a single rant... and Viridia knew that out of nearly anyone in the multiverse, Minaga was perhaps the only one who could do just that without ever suffering any repercussions.

“Ah, I really needed to get that off my chest, now to get back into it. So, as I said, the Leaderboards have been open for a while, and the listing has sure shifted a lot. For the Era Leaderboard alone, the top 100 has had a total of 351 names on it, quite a few more than usual. As for the top 10, we have had a total of 21 names there. Again, this is for the Era Leaderboard... but we naturally aren’t going to address that first. Instead, let’s keep it a bit more local and discuss the far more volatile Universe Leaderboard.”

Having changed the topic away from insulting peak factions, Minaga shared some more stats. Waving his hand one more time, another screen appeared.

“I call this Leaderboard more volatile because it’s been quite the shuffle! People getting high spots only to be bonked down from the top 50 to below the top 100 within a day happened more than once! The higher average has resulted in far more than usual reaching the minimum Nevermore Points required for Pinnacle Tier to qualify them to even appear on the top 100. This has resulted in a whole new record of the most names ever appearing in not only the top 100 but even the top 10 of the Universe Leaderboards! An all-time record, too!”

The screen floating above Minaga began to be filled with the stats of the Universe Leaderboard. Stats that made Viridia and many others raise an eyebrow.

“1084 have had their name appear in the top 100, with a whopping 76 in the top 10 at some point! That’s a lot of people getting some sweet, sweet titles! However... there have only ever been three names at the very top. Two of which now still dominate the Leaderboards. Yes, Leaderboards, plural.”

This was the first real hint about the actual people on the Leaderboards. No hints as to who they were, just that they were from the ninety-third universe, which instantly made Viridia think that the Chosen of the Malefic One had to be among these two. He had to be.

“Now, for some more interesting miscellaneous stats regarding the Challenge Dungeons and the thought process behind their designs...” Minaga began before smirking and stopping himself. “Relax, I’m just messing with you all. I guess it’s time to get to the real meat of this entire thing.”

With a snap, the screen with stats disappeared as Minaga paced back and forth up in the air.

“Some of you keen-eyed ones may have realized by now I am just dragging time out because I am waiting for something to happen. Or maybe you didn’t realize anything and just assumed I like to ramble on, something you would be entirely correct on, but in this instance, I am also dragging out time purposefully, as we quite frankly started this entire thing at least a few minutes too early. You see, for suspense, we have delayed some arrivals of those who had already finished Nevermore, and we had to make sure everyone was done for maximum dramatic effect to put on a good show and all that. Also, relax; their order of completion is still intact; we just delayed them teleporting to Nevermore City. With all that said... may the young talents descend!”

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

With these words, space began to move as Viridia felt the energy of the Wyrmgod himself at play. All around the huge central square, figures began to appear in rapid succession, either on the stands or on top of the many buildings belonging to top factions.

Viridia quickly looked around, and on one of the buildings, she saw the swordsman who had entered with the Viper’s Chosen appear, standing among followers of Aeon Clok. On another platform with followers of Stormild, she saw the hawk, and on a third belonging to the Pantheon of Life, the dryad. Finally, on their very own platform, a figure appeared, and Viridia was ready to bow as she saw it was not the Chosen but instead the Unique Lifeform who appeared.

She didn’t have time to say anything to this Unique life form before Minaga spoke once more.

“And now for the grand reveal... of one of the Leaderboards!”

Finally, the time had come. Space itself warped around the Universe Leaderboard as words began to appear on it line-by-line before soon showing the top ten. At the same time, beams of white light descended from above, highlighting ten figures who were all standing spread around the square. It didn’t take long to realize who was highlighted... it was naturally the ten top performers... and Viridia saw a real smug Cardinal over at the Holy Church building as two beams had descended on top of them. This light began to change up in the air as projections of these ten figures appeared, allowing all to see them.

Ignoring everything else, Viridia finally gazed upon the Universe Leaderboard... and it didn’t look right. It didn’t look right at all.

“Two did better than anyone else... please join me in applauding the performances of our runner-up, Wintermaul, along with our top dog: Ell’Hakan, Yip of Yore’s Chosen!”

Viridia just stared at the Leaderboard... as things truly didn’t make sense. Where is he?

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 93rd Universe.

1. Ell’Hakan – Pinnacle Tier.

2. Wintermaul – Pinnacle Tier

3. Lopas – Pinnacle Tier

4. Holy Dawn Paladin – Pinnacle Tier

5. Arnold – Pinnacle Tier

6. Eastbound Monk – Pinnacle Tier

7. Disciple of Lucenti – Pinnacle Tier

8. Sword Saint – Pinnacle Tier

9. Immortal Faith – Pinnacle Tier

10. High Templar – Pinnacle Tier

--

Silence filled the entire square as everyone looked as two of the large projections in the air were highlighted more than the others. It was the two atop the Leaderboard, and soon, celebration erupted from several places, and nearly everyone did as Minaga said and gave a round of applause... except for those from the Order.

Viridia looked up and saw the figure of Yip's Chosen projected. He had a light smile on his face, not exactly looking smug, but not like his performance had come as a surprise either. He looked like someone who had just been told something he found rather obvious as he bowed a few times. Yet Viridia also saw something else... doubt and a bit of confusion that seemed to mirror her own.

The other highlighted figure was the one called Wintermaul. It was an ice elemental of some form, looking a bit like a mix between a yeti and a bear, but made entirely of ice. To see an elemental do so well was rare... which had to mean this particular elemental was truly outstanding.

Still... things were wrong, and as everyone else was celebrating and Minaga gave them time and space to do so, Viridia turned to the Unique Lifeform that had been part of the Chosen's party, throwing him a questioning gaze. One he instantly understood.

"I must say, I am pleasantly surprised to at least find myself in the top 100... and to see the small planet I now call home have not just one, but for multiple individuals to be in the top ten..." the Fallen King said. "To see the mechanic with relations to the void outperforming the swordsman does surprise me a smidgen, though. Alas, I can only say it's his fortune."

Frowning, Viridia looked at the Unique Lifeform. "What happened in there? The Chosen..."

"Allow me to make a prediction... my fellow Unique Lifeform by the name of Minaga has been putting on an entire show, which was part of the reason I was held in a white void for a few minutes before I was teleported here."

"The All-God Legion is in charge of this Leaderboards reveal," Viridia nodded.

"Then it makes sense. From all I have learned about Minaga, he is a performer who enjoys making drama and putting on a show more than anything. So do not worry quite yet, and just enjoy the show as the suspense builds, and we await the grand reveal," the Fallen King said.

Viridia instantly realized what the Unique Lifeform was trying to say as she breathed a sigh of relief, and did as he said as they waited for Minaga to continue. A few minutes passed as the celebrations died down, and the congratulations of the top ten came to an end. Until the factions would host larger celebrations at a later time, that is.

“Once more, I want to congratulate all those who placed in the top 10 from the ninety-third universe. You all have done pretty well for yourselves, considering you’ve only been part of the multiverse for just a short amount of time... but what’s perhaps even more impressive is that we still find four names from the Universe Leaderboard also present on the era one! Behold, our top ten of this Era... and the Era’s Pinnacle!”

Space once more moved as the second Leaderboard was revealed, and ten figures were highlighted again as projects appeared; four of these highlights repeated. Along with the highlight of the Era’s Pinnacle... which had gone to the one most people had expected to see there and the top seed according to all the gambling houses.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 93rd Era.

1. Ell’Hakan – Era’s Pinnacle.
2. Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell – Pinnacle Tier
3. Wintermaul – Pinnacle Tier
4. Aishalstromoz Regalflight – Pinnacle Tier
5. Ghost King Azal – Pinnacle Tier
6. Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord – Pinnacle Tier
7. Lopas – Pinnacle Tier

8. Grimclaw Noxmane – Pinnacle Tier

9. Holy Dawn Paladin – Pinnacle Tier

10. Saintess of the Holy Church – Pinnacle Tier

--

Two beams once more highlighted the smug Holy Church, showing that they had impressively maintained two spots in the top ten. Only one of them was a repeat, as someone Viridia recognized as the Saintess who had been part of Ell'Hakan's group was also highlighted.

The newcomers were a demon prince who had made some waves recently, currently shown standing with an arrogant sneer as he gazed toward where Ell'Hakan was standing. Next up was a princess of the Regalflight – the golden dragons – who nearly always had members toward the top due to the extremely high average power of those who managed to become golden dragons. She was standing with a neutral look in her humanoid form, but no matter what, she couldn't hide her innate pride.

Azal, the Ghost King, was also an expected figure to see. The same was true for the Disciple of the Heartsoul Daolord, who was a young girl looking no older than someone who had barely entered adulthood. Then there was Grimclaw Noxmane, a wolf from the United Tribes, who looked like a, well, large wolf.

The creature known as Lopas did strike Viridia as an odd one. This Lopas had appeared on both the Universe Leaderboard and the seventh spot of the Era Leaderboard, gaining the creature quite a bit of attention... which was why it was surprising to see the sleeping sloth-like creature's projection clearly sleeping in mid-air.

All of these top performers got a lot of praise, and even if the Church had two in the top 10, there was no doubt who had the most attention of everyone. Ell'Hakan had repeated the feat of his Patron and claimed the very top spot, proving himself the Era's Pinnacle. Viridia clenched her fists as she threw a glance toward the Fallen King, who looked unbothered, just waiting.

“Truly an impressive display by everyone, and I will say... even if you do not find your name on the top 10, do not be discouraged. Top 100, or even top 1000, is also a feat to celebrate. Even if you don’t find yourselves on any Leaderboards, do not for a second believe this is an evaluation of your entire Path and your potential. To many of you, this will be but a slight blip in your existence and hopefully just a pleasant memory that may or may not have rewarded a sweet title. This is also a warning to the ones who did place well on the Leaderboards to not relax simply because you did well in one World Wonder. This is just a single step on your journey.”

The words of the Unique Lifeform were sobering and encouraging. It was likely something many of those who had either done better or worse than expected needed to hear. Putting too much stock in Nevermore wasn’t wise, after all. Viridia herself hadn’t done that well back in Nevermore, partly because of her Path as a witch not being the best for the World Wonder, yet out of her entire party, she was the only one who ever even reached A-grade.

After Minaga allowed the words to sink in a bit, he spoke once more.

“Just one more thing before we all go our different ways... I’m going to tell you all a bit about a personal grievance of mine. Trust me, It’ll be relevant,” Minaga said as he once more began to pace back and forth. “I’ve been working with the Wyrmgod for quite a few eras now, working on floors, consulting on different projects, working on Challenge Dungeons... with my mainstay creation naturally being my labyrinth. Both the floors and the Challenge Dungeon.”

The ramble seemed entirely irrelevant to everything else that was going on, yet as the All-God Legion began to talk, Viridia saw the Fallen King slump and let out an audible sigh as he let her know his thoughts.

“Here we go again...”

“I worked hard on this, and I try to make them pretty fair so people can’t cheat, yet every single era, there are some individuals who find new ways to “break” stuff, if you will. This is fine. It gives me data to fix the error for the next iteration. Except this time around, this bastard appeared who exploited the hell out of both my labyrinths without a single trace of shame, doing so in a fashion that I can’t even fix for the next era. He even went as far as to set an all-time record in my Challenge Dungeon, and not even by a little, but by so much I felt like he did it only out of spite.”

Viridia frowned as the Unique Lifeform gave her a small nod. A nod that made her smile as the Unique Lifeform continued.

“And wouldn’t you know it... that very same bastard is just about to come out of our precious World Wonder in... three... two... one...”

A beam of light descended right beside Viridia as she felt space warp... and a masked figure appeared as the Leaderboards all shifted in real-time.

Chapter 876: Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore

Nobody liked being interrupted while having a good time, and Jake was no different. He had just been chilling with his Puzzle Box when suddenly he felt the space around him shift, and he was thrown out of the space inside the box. For a brief moment, he saw his surroundings before the entire time chamber disappeared, and Jake found himself standing within an entirely white void reminiscent of those he had been tossed into after doing the Challenge Dungeons.

Just as he appeared, so did a screen pop up in front of him.

Nevermore Leaderboards Challenge successfully completed. Initiating final calculations.

Jake read the message and nodded. Bloody finally.

He waited for more text to appear for a few seconds, but nothing was happening, making him impatiently tap his fingers as he crossed his arms.

“I swear if this messes up any of our timing for finishing...”

“It won’t,” a voice suddenly said as a figure appeared behind him. “While in this space, time is paused, courtesy of the system.”

Turning his head, Jake saw a familiar figure as he smiled. “Didn’t expect the big boss herself to handle these evaluations too.”

“Usually, she doesn’t,” Nevermore answered. “But in some rare cases, I do. Primarily for those who performed well enough for it to be warranted.”

“I guess that’s a way of telling me I did well,” Jake smiled.

“You already know you did well,” Nevermore said. “Now you just need to find out exactly how well.”

The Bound God waved her hand as a screen appeared off to the side, making Jake look over.

“Are you nervous?” Nevermore asked, clearly already knowing the results of everything.

“I feel like I shouldn’t be, but a little bit of nervousness did manage to sneak in. Overall, I wouldn’t say I was, though,” Jake shrugged, pretty sure that was normal.

“Perhaps not for this... but I will give you a courtesy warning that once we are done here, you will be teleported into the Nevermore City square, surrounded by nearly every peak faction of the multiverse, with all eyes on you as Minaga is in charge of announcing the Leaderboards results, making me relatively certain he won’t just allow you to appear without at least a few comments,” she shared kindly.

“... okay, now I might be a little nervous...”

“Good. Now for the part you don’t need to be as nervous about,” the Bound God said as the screen began to be filled with lines of text.

Nevermore Points Leaderboard Calculation:

71 levels gained (204 --> 275). Calculating rewards.

You’ve earned 7100 (100 per level gained) Nevermore Points.

Jake had to jump in here, as 100 points per level just seemed way too low and almost insulting until he remembered how few points the lower floors gave, and with that in mind, maybe this wasn't so bad. Yeah, he also had to consider he had probably gained way fewer levels than some others, so the extra points per level being shit was-

You will receive an additional 35.5% (0.5% per level gained) multiplier of all Nevermore Points.

Alright, never mind. Levels were still pretty damn fucking important, even for those with a lot of points. An extra multiplier per level gained had not been something Jake expected, that's for sure. He knew levels would give something, but a percentage multiplier seemed like a bit much. Not that he was going to say no to it, as it would help make his final number even bigger.

And looking at the next three lines, his number did end up being pretty darn big... with even quite the impressive multiplier.

Current Nevermore Points: 2,128,050

Nevermore Points Multiplier: 185.5%

Total Nevermore Points Earned: 6,075,583

"Six million... that feels like a lot of points," Jake commented as he looked at Nevermore. "Is it a lot of points? Relatively speaking, I mean. I was definitely more confident before I was aware of the multiplier from levels gained. Why is that even so large?"

"Let me start with your final question. The multiplier is as such to even the odds a bit for monsters who are less favored in several of the Challenge Dungeons. Since they tend to gain more levels than the enlightened, this stage benefits them the most, more often than not," the Bound God answered.

"Makes sense, I guess. Say, since we are done... who got the most levels of everyone?" Jake asked curiously, not at all expecting to actually get an answer.

"The record is 149 levels gained by a monster doing the entirety of C-grade in one go," she answered.

Jake's eyes opened wide. "How in the hell..."

"Through means that also result in this very same creature not ever being able to evolve to B-grade. Gaining a lot of levels through ways that destroy one's foundation is not particularly difficult. Or at least so I've been told," the Bound God, who had been born with near omnipotent powers within the World Wonder, answered. "Also, no, this monster is not on any of the Leaderboards."

"Alright, who was the one who gained the most levels while also being on the Leaderboards?" Jake changed his question, surprised Nevermore was even sharing this much, which made it even more surprising when she answered this question, too.

"Someone you at the very least heard of. Ghost King Azal managed to gain a total of 112 levels during Nevermore, with more than a third of that earned during the final month," Nevermore said with a sigh. "Only slightly beating out someone from the Holy Church who earned 108 through a similar trick."

"... that was an option?" Jake asked. "How the hell did they do it?"

"Treasures bound to them they brought in from the outside. A final resort to try and bring honor to their organizations by sacrificing much of their foundations," Nevermore shook her head in disappointment.

"Damn," Jake muttered. "I guess this brings me back to my first question... is six million Nevermore Points a lot?"

Nevermore smiled at him for a moment before a second screen appeared above the first. One with a number on it.

5,991,906

Jake took a second as he pointed. "That's lower than mine."

"Brilliant observational skills, truly putting all your Perception to use," Nevermore shook her head. "This is the current record."

Hearing this, Jake grinned. “Fuck yeah... totally knew I had him beat.”

No matter how much Jake had tried to distract himself, he had been afraid that somehow, Ell’Hakan still had a higher score. Especially after that whole thing with levels also awarding points and multipliers... though then again, you needed 10 race levels just to get 5% more, so maybe it wasn’t that extreme.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Feeling happy, Jake looked at Nevermore as the Bound God shook her head and waved her hand again as a third screen appeared, with yet another number on it.

5,705,821

Jake looked at it for a bit before scratching the back of his head. “Not sure what you’re trying to tell me with that... is it the number 10 on the top ten Leaderboards or something?”

“That’s the score of Ell’Hakan, the one now holding the second place on the Leaderboards in this era.”

“... what?” Jake exclaimed, looking confused as he pointed to the first number that was more than a quarter of a million bigger. “Then that is...?”

“The score set by Yip of Yore last era... the man now holding the second place on the All-Time Leaderboard.”

Jake didn’t have time to say more as a giant slab dropped down from out of nowhere, smashing into the white floor, showing that Nevermore also had a flair for dramatics whenever she wanted. Words began to appear on the slab, as ten names were revealed from the bottom to the top. When Jake saw the full list, he did have to do a double-take, despite Nevermore having already confirmed what was going on.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-Grade): All-Time

1. Jake Thayne
2. Yip of Yore
3. Monk
4. The Holy Son
5. Anonymous
6. Gwyndyr of the Crimson Flame
7. Anonymous
8. Aurustromoz, Dragon of Gold.
9. Ell'Hakan
10. Ninth Hell Devil

--

He kept staring at it for a few more seconds as he let it sink fully in. His goal had been to beat Ell'Hakan... and, well, he had definitely done that. An impressive feat in its own right, seeing as he had managed to snag the number 8 – now 9 – spot on the All-Time Leaderboard. One thing did strike him as weird, though, as he looked at the Leaderboard.

"I recognize Gwyndyr, the Holy Son, and I also read about Aurustromoz, the Patriarch of the Regalflight... is everyone on this Leaderboard still alive? Did every person with a top placement in prior eras really all become gods?" Jake asked with confusion.

“Yes,” Nevermore answered. “But you got things a bit mixed up. They are on this particular Leaderboard because they are still alive. You lose your spot if you die, and another may rise and take your place. It happens more than you think, and the two who have been on the list the longest are the Holy Son and the Monk.”

“Who is this Monk?”

“Someone that wished to be anonymous. You can choose your own name on the Leaderboards, not just this one, but also the two outside. Which is something we should address right away... what do you want to be shown as? Do know there are some limits, and the name has to be associated with your Path and Records to be accepted,” the Bound God explained. “Also, if you wish to change your name at any point, you can return to Nevermore and request it.”

Jake looked at the name currently displayed for a bit. He had gone by many things throughout the times... Chosen of the Malefic Viper is probably at the top of that list. Recently, he had been called the Harbinger of Primeval Origins quite a bit, and then there was, of course, the final option: the Primal Hunter. All of these were possible choices, and he kind of wanted to go with the final one... but not yet. For now, he would simply let it be.

“Jake Thayne is fine,” he said, shaking his head. Others also tended to use their names based on what he saw, and no need to break that pattern.

“As you will,” Nevermore agreed with a nod. “In that case, allow me to be the first to formally congratulate you for your performance within the World Wonder. It has been a pleasure to have you visit.”

Smiling, Jake nodded and acknowledgment. “It’s been a long but pleasant stay. For the most part, anyway... you could do away with the water levels.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on your feedback. But before you go, two more things. Let’s first get the easy one out of the way,” Nevermore said, and with a single wave of her hand, Jake felt as if power rushed through his body. Everything tingled for a moment, Jake nearly feeling like he was using his boosting skill. Except he didn’t, and quickly, everything returned to normal.

Jake raised a hand as he opened it and closed it into a fist a few times. He realized what had happened and quickly checked his system messages as he grinned.

Titled gained: Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore

Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore – Throughout the ages, few have stood at the true pinnacle of an Era. Even fewer have stood above even this at the true apex, dominating all eras prior. Attain first place on the All-Time Nevermore Leaderboards, proving yourself a Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore. Only one Nevermore Performance title can be held at a time. As a Peerless Conqueror of Nevermore, you are a master of dungeons, increasing stats gained from Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles by 50%. +15% All Stats.

15% to all stats was... a lot. Coupled with the title he had gained from the Challenge Dungeons, he was up to a 20% bonus to all stats from Nevermore total. He also noted the part about only being able to have one Nevermore Performance title at a time, which was apparently different from the Nevermore Dungeon titles.

Then there was the other effect of getting more stats from his Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles. This effect was, currently, honestly kind of shit. Jake only got 65 stats from his Dungeoneer XV title in the first place, and even with a 50% boost, that only became 97. However, it was the kind of title that would keep getting better the further Jake progressed. Maybe it sucked now, but if he managed to also max out his Dungeon Pioneer, it would give a respectable amount. In later grades, it would also keep adding more and more. Plus, with Jake's quite frankly ridiculous percentage amplifiers to stats, any raw base stats held immense value.

"That's a nice title right there," Jake grinned and looked at Nevermore. "Thanks."

"Do not thank me; you earned it through your own merit," the Bound God answered, returning his smile. "Now, the final thing before we say our farewells... there are no item rewards, as everything was put into the title and the items rewarded from the Challenge Dungeons. Usually, those who perform really well do not really need any equipment either, just leading to lost work for crafters if we gave out such things. But there is still an extra exclusive reward I will offer you, granted by the system due to... unique circumstances."

Without any pre-cursor, a small bottle appeared, floating just within reach of Jake. Confused, Jake used Identify on it.

[Bottle of Restoration (Unique)] – Restores Primal Origin Energy. Must be consumed before fully leaving Nevermore.

Jake took a bit to realize what this item was... and he felt almost disappointed. Had the system just decided to officially name his Jake Juice?

“To clarify something, the description you see may not reflect any true names,” Nevermore clarified.

“Oh, good,” Jake sighed with relief. “Then there is still hope for it to be called Jake Juice.”

“You know, that isn’t even impossible. If that is the name the energy gets known by, and it becomes cemented in its Records, that will be of the official name any who sees it will see.”

“... on second thought, maybe I shouldn’t call it Jake Juice, though that would be extremely hilarious,” Jake smiled as he took the bottle. He had to drink it now, so... “Bottom’s up.”

Drinking the liquid inside, Jake didn’t really feel anything. It also just tasted like plain water, having no real taste. However, when he sought deep within himself, he felt it. The hidden “pool” of energy had just gotten a huge infusion, and even if it had gotten pretty damn big already after he had gained so many levels over the last decade, he now had more than even before his fight with Valdemar. A lot more, in fact.

“With this, I believe your journey through Nevermore has fully come to an end... at least for now. Though I have the feeling your next visit will be a bit more relaxed with none of the time pressure of competition,” the Bound God said with a final smile.

“See you again,” Jake nodded.

“Perhaps,” Nevermore said. “Now, prepare yourself as Minaga has prepared quite the stage for your arrival. Oh, and one more thing, would you be fine with your number one All-Time placement being shared?”

“Sure,” Jake shrugged, not seeing the harm. He was already the top of the era, no need to avoid sharing he was the top of every era.

“Very well, I’m sure that will create some wonderful political turmoil.”

Jake tried to say more, but before he could, the world warped around him as he was tossed out of Nevermore.

There was quite a lot to take in as Jake appeared in the central square. Instinctively, he quickly shot out a Pulse of Perception, only to get overwhelmed by how much information he had to sort through. There were so many goddamn people, many of which he knew. Then, there were well over a hundred gods hidden all around, mixed with the crowd.

Jake stood atop the building belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, with Viridia right in front and the Fallen King right beside him. Looking up, he saw Minaga dramatically float in the air, gazing down at Jake with a grin.

“Well, I guess we should redo a few things, seeing as things have... shuffled a bit,” Minaga smiled. Out of the corner of his eye, Jake spotted a fading beam of light that had been upon a building belonging to the Holy Church, and he saw the Saintess who had been in a party with Ell’Hakan glare daggers at him. It wasn’t hard to notice who he had bumped down from the top 10.

“Join me in welcoming my personal bane, the one who ruined much of my confidence in dungeon design, and our new top dog of Nevermore! Jake Thayne!” Minaga announced loudly as music began playing.

Jake just stood there and stared, happy as hell he was wearing his mask, as everyone began clapping while staring at the giant projection of his visage in the sky.

“Oh, wait, I nearly forgot!” Minaga suddenly cut the music. “I guess I failed to clarify what I meant by top dog... because I’m not just talking about this era. It’s with pleasure I can announce that for the second era in a row, the All-Time record has been broken!”

Viridia stared at Jake as the Fallen King looked unsurprised. Minaga started back up the music, louder than ever, as even more attention fell on Jake, now also from a shitload of gods...

Maybe I should also have just gone with Anonymous...

At least Jake thought so for a moment... until he saw him from across the square. A single orange humanoid stared at Jake with a look of genuine shock, at least for a second, before Ell'Hakan managed to hide it. So, yeah, maybe this level of flexing hadn't been that bad of a call, as he could at least smack down the ego of that orange fuck with his own even larger, superior ego.

Chapter 877: Something Worth Celebrating

Vilastromoz just leaned back and smiled, still within the streaming room that was now just showing the Nevermore City square and all of Minaga's antics. Well, one of Minaga's clones anyway, as the god was also still in the room with a god clone.

"Man, ain't that host the most handsome Unique Lifeform you've ever seen? His presentation skills are also just through the roof!" Minaga praised himself loudly. They were all waiting for the grand reveal... and soon it did when his clone announced the dramatic twist of one more person appearing.

To many of the mortals in the square, it was perhaps a surprise... but to the gods in the living room, they had just waited for this to happen. They had watched Jake and his party for the last many years, and they knew how well he had done. For him to not even have been on the top 10 made it clear to everyone that he would appear at some point for a grand announcement.

Something he did... making Vilastromoz grin even more. The Wyrmgod and Minaga's clone both looked at him as Jake appeared and his performance was revealed.

"Congratulations," the Wyrmgod said with a slow nod. "A joyous occasion."

"Found a good one, huh?" the Blightfather said, acknowledging Jake's achievement.

"A fortunate and earned victory," the Holy Mother said, also showing her respects.

"Glad to see he did well," the Nature's Attendant added happily. "For little Dina to have been in the same party as the new champion of the All-time Leaderboards... it was a good decision to have her join him. Thank you, Vilas."

The Viper just smiled back at the second-in-command of the Pantheon of Life. "She pulled her weight; you have nothing to thank me for."

"But I do," his father-in-law insisted. "I expected him to do well, but this still exceeds it. The impact on her future will be felt for certain, and she has been granted a great boon. She was even on the top 100 of the Era's Leaderboards, doing far better than I thought possible."

"Well, in either case, you shouldn't be thanking me, but Jake," the Viper shook his head.

"I will make sure to," the god nodded as he turned to Artemis. "What say you, shouldn't we have him visit the Pantheon of Life once he is available? I am certain Ygg will also want to see him. We should probably wait a little, though... let things calm down a bit."

"My image already effectively extended an invitation within the Colosseum of Mortals, and I'm sure the Malefic One's Chosen is more than aware he has an open invitation standing," the archer god responded, sounding a bit more confident than before, having gotten quite used to being in the presence of so many far more powerful gods over the last nearly two decades.

"Well, he strikes me as the sort to easily forget things, so perhaps we should remind him," Nature's Attendant commented.

"I'll do it for you, no problem," Vilastromoz waved it off as he looked at Artemis and smiled. "I have a feeling he wants to visit anyway. I heard something about archery lessons."

Artemis averted her gaze as the Viper just grinned. This was fun, and he was feeling pretty damn good right now about how everything was going.

"Ya done talking? Finally! Anyway, bloody well knew he would do it," Valdemar grinned as he waved his hand. "And if it ain't a feat that calls for a proper celebration. Drinks are on me!"

A large keg appeared, and the god held it up and yelled toward all the observing gods. "Hey! Get over here already; grab a mug!"

Receiving a direct invitation from a Primordial was not something any of the many observing gods would ever refuse. Quite the opposite, as they reveled in the opportunity. Many gods went by and offered their congratulations to the Viper for how well his Chosen had done, which Vilastromoz gladly accepted.

Everyone got their mugs of ale one after another, and the Viper saw no reason not to accept as he joined in on the festivities and grabbed a mug. Raising up a mug of his own, Valdemar spoke loudly as he infused his voice with energy. "To Jake Thayne and a new record!"

With that, he downed the entire mug, joined by a few others, who only a second or two later stumbling back as the alcohol brewed to be strong enough for a Primordial to get drunk entered their system. Vilastromoz also had a taste, and he found the taste quite pleasant, even if it did carry too spicy of an aftertaste for the otherwise sweet initial impression.

For once, the Viper simply enjoyed the moment. There was cause for celebration, after all. Jake and the Viper both had things to celebrate... while a certain other pair of Chosen and Patron were probably feeling quite the opposite.

Jake defeating Ell'Hakan on the Leaderboards had most definitely been within their margin of error for the story the two were trying to spin. Either they would spin one story where Ell'Hakan beat Jake and would thus begin his comeback to either defeat or turn Jake to the "good side."

Or, the other possible path was for Jake to win, in which case Ell'Hakan would remain the underdog... the problem was that Jake hadn't just beaten Ell'Hakan. He had beaten both of them. The announcement Jake had also beaten Yip of Yore was a brilliant strategic move by Jake – certainly made entirely accidentally – as it helped undermine the god who sought to become the first slayer of a Primordial.

It was publicly known, at least among the gods, that Yip held the top spot before. That he was the greatest genius of the multiverse, and for the top genius, what were truly his limits? As an unrivaled genius, it was only natural he would keep improving, perhaps to one day even become strong enough to slay the Malefic Viper. To slay the Primordial who had kept hidden away for so long and was, in the eyes of many, the weakest of the twelve.

Now... now he was no longer the top genius. Jake had stolen that throne – that legend. Ell'Hakan was also troubled now, for he was no longer just the underdog fighting another Chosen genius; he was fighting the top genius. Was he even qualified anymore to challenge Jake? So much doubt had been sown with that one announcement.

And doubt was the biggest enemy of those two storytellers. They needed certainty and steadfast belief in the legend they tried to spin, not potential confusion and people questioning the validity and possibility of their claims.

All in all, Jake had performed damn well, and Vilastromoz definitely owed him a beer. Not just in regards to the stuff with Yip... the Viper also had to thank him for the personal rewards he got from having his Chosen be the new holder of the top spot on the All-Time Leaderboards.

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

Ell'Hakan held a stoic expression as the Unique Lifeform known as Minaga announced the arrival of the Viper's Chosen. This was not an unexpected turn of events, as he and his Patron had already discussed the possibility of the Viper's Chosen doing extremely well within Nevermore.

On a personal note, he did find it disappointing that he lost to the human. Ell'Hakan had done his utmost within the World Wonder, even beating the other Chosen in regard to how many floors he had completed. What was perhaps even more infuriating was that Ell'Hakan had genuinely started to believe he would take the top spot.

When he announced his Challenge Dungeon's multiplier, none had surpassed, only tied him. This gave him the false belief there was a good chance the Viper's Chosen hadn't surpassed him either. If he had, why wouldn't he have revealed it? Getting a 100% multiplier would have led to much prestige in its own right, so even if he had failed to take the Era's Pinnacle spot, he would have won at least a minor victory.

Due to this lack of an announcement, Ell'Hakan proceeded with the assumption the other Chosen had equaled his score at best. This meant the next years after the Challenge Dungeons would be crucial. In order to get a leg up, he had even prepared a welcome party on the city floor after floor seventy-five to receive the Viper's Chosen and have him waste some time dealing with them while trying to sow discord within his group. However, Ell'Hakan never even heard of him appearing on the city floor, his rival having just skipped right past it to proceed to the next floor.

Even so, Ell'Hakan just focused on himself and his own party. Sure, they ended up losing a member, but the one who died could only blame himself, and Ell'Hakan's Patron would handle any blowback from the god backing his fallen party member.

He had kept doing his utmost until the very end, where he at least had the foresight to make sure he would finish before the Viper's Chosen. There were only upsides to this; if he did ultimately win, finishing first would block the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Meanwhile, if he lost, he would at least still get the title. A title that was most certainly nothing to be scuffed at.

Era's Conquerer of Nevermore – You have done what few could ever hope to achieve: proven yourself the pinnacle of an entire Era. No matter how brief the achievement or how fleeting this position is, this accomplishment can never be taken away from you. Attain first place on the Era Nevermore Leaderboards, proving yourself an Era's Conqueror of Nevermore. Only one Nevermore Performance title can be held at a time. As an Era's Conquerer of Nevermore, you are a near-unrivaled expert of dungeons, increasing stats gained from Dungeoneer and Dungeon Pioneer titles by 40%. +10% All Stats.

It was a truly great title that Ell'Hakan was more than pleased to have achieved. He was fully aware that if the Viper's Chosen and he did not share a generation, Ell'Hakan would truly have no equal... but then again, perhaps he was only as powerful as he was because of the Primordial's Chosen. It helped Ell'Hakan push himself further and truly seek to be the pinnacle of this generation... no, this entire era.

All in due time.

As the light beam descended upon the newly arrived Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and Minaga announced how he had won, Ell'Hakan saw the shift on the Leaderboards as his own position fell one. Clenching his fists, he maintained his composure, even if the situation didn't particularly-

"... I failed to clarify what I meant by top dog... because I'm not just talking about this era. It's with pleasure I can announce that for the second era in a row, the All-Time record has been broken!"

For a moment, Ell'Hakan let his expression drop as he stared toward the Chosen of the Malefic Viper in the distance, and for a moment, he met the eyes of the other Chosen before regaining his wits.

This... was not part of the plan, and Ell'Hakan cursed internally as he knew they would have to shift and adapt the narrative even more... potentially toward a direction Ell'Hakan was truly not a fan of.

Jake remained as composed as he could while the music blared, and all eyes were on him. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do or say. When he had done the Chosen Ceremony, he at least had a game plan and could prepare himself, but now he was just thrown onto what was effectively a stage. Should he say something? Smile and wave?

It didn't get better when people started to actually fucking clap, as Viridia stood right behind him with her head slightly bowed and an incredibly happy grin on her face. Jake also saw Farleigh, the vampire patriarch, making him want to say hi, but the situation didn't seem to allow it. The Fallen King noticed Jake's discomfort and sent him a quick mental message to assist.

"No need to act. Simply be. Remain stoic and reveal no emotion. Just maintain a straight back and forward-looking eyes to exude confidence. You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and someone recognized as the most talented genius of this generation, if not the entire era. To you, this result is naught but a meeting of your expectations."

Jake took the words to heart as best he could as he did just that. He simply stood there and let everyone observe him as they clapped. It felt unnatural to him, but seemingly no one else thought so. Seconds passed, and with every moment, Jake really hoped something would happen... maybe Valdemar could swoop down and kidnap him to try and force Jake to join Valhal? Yeah, that would definitely be preferable to his current situation.

Luckily, Minaga continued before things got too awkward.

"Alright, calm down people. It's just someone breaking a record that has existed for a few billion years and beating every single other living being who has ever competed on the Nevermore Leaderboards. No big deal,"

Minaga said in a lighthearted tone before he turned a bit more serious.

"All jokes aside, the overall performance surpassing that of previous eras should only bring us joy. It's representative of the growing base of Records supporting every faction and individual through the continued expansion of the system. Represents progress on a wider scale. Jake Thayne is simply the one standing atop a new generation that will be the first to lead us into the ninety-third era. These C-grades you see before you represent the future of every faction. They represent possibilities of Paths never seen before and even more new Records to populate this multiverse.

“Finally, to the ones who do not find their names on a Leaderboard despite hoping so, do not see this as a failure you should take to heart. You were beaten by the strongest generation ever, one you are still a part of. The Path to godhood is no sprint, and to try and reach ultimate power is an endless trek. You are still in the early stages of walking that Path. So, if you believe what you did was a failure, don’t. Become a success to show the multiverse what you are capable of, as it’s your future that defines you... and if you ascend to godhood, no one will give a damn that you did horribly in Nevermore while still a C-grade.”

Minaga was surprisingly wholesome as he spoke some words of encouragement to everyone, especially those who may be feeling dejected after realizing they hadn’t qualified for the Leaderboards. Looking at the Fallen King, the Unique Lifeform sent him a quick answer. “I got top 100 on the Universe Leaderboards and top 250 on the Era one.”

He didn’t sound disappointed, so Jake just nodded as Minaga seemed to finally be ending his presentation.

“Anyway, time to wrap things up. Thank you all for coming to this little ceremony of ours to celebrate the next generation and the revelation of the Leaderboards. Quite an eventful one this time around, eh? I hope you all enjoyed the show and will continue to revel in all the amenities of Nevermore City during your stay. Goodbye for-“

Suddenly, Minaga stopped as his eyes went wide, and he yelled loudly.

“Wait! How is this even possible!? There was one more!?”

A beam of light descended from above, and Jake stared over along with many others as he saw the new arrival...

Which was a Minaga clone wearing a funny hat while holding a sign saying “made you look,” with a dumb grin on his face

“Gets them every time,” Minaga grinned as he bowed. “Toodle-oo!”

With that, Minaga disappeared along with all of the beams of light and projected figures. Jake also felt much of the attention on him begin to fade as he subtly breathed out a sigh of relief. Now that everything was finally done with, Jake was just looking for a way to get out of there... until the words of Viridia washed away all hope.

“Congratulations, truly. You have brought honor to the Malefic One and the Order of the Malefic Viper, and I cannot even hope to begin to express my gratitude,” she sent. “Now, are you ready to meet the others?”

Jake looked at her and sent back. “Meet the others?”

“Ah, you perhaps weren’t aware. It’s customary for all of the top performers of the Leaderboards to have a get-together after the rankings have settled down a bit,” she politely explained as Jake realized he was still not yet free, as he faced one of his most dreaded challenges: forced social interaction with strangers.

Chapter 878: A Little Get-Together

If Jake was being perfectly honest, he had hoped to just quickly bail and get out of Nevermore City as soon as it was convenient. He would first want to visit the Order and check everything was good there before making his way back to Earth, where he was certain quite a few changes had also taken place. After his Chosen Ceremony and all that had happened surrounding that, this was pretty much a given, and he hoped Miranda hadn’t been too overwhelmed.

However, it appeared that was not an option, and Jake ended up following Viridia and the Fallen King to a large conference hall of sorts. When Viridia had said this after-party was for the top performers on the Leaderboards, she didn’t just mean those from the Era Leaderboard. In fact, those from the Universe one were far more interesting to have there due to their newness to the multiverse.

As Viridia explained it telepathically while they walked over there:

“It has long been known the most effective way to forge an alliance and recruit new members is through first creating a positive relation between a member of your faction and the one you want to recruit. While it may sound cynical, the objective is to effectively use friendship to convince someone to join a faction. This is especially true when it comes to those from the new universe, as they often have a difficult time relating to a large faction, while the bond between themselves and another individual is far from comprehensible.”

"To be clear, you are not actually expecting me to do any recruitment or alliance-forging, right?" Jake wanted to clarify before he arrived at the conference hall.

"Not actively. Your mere performance will serve as a recruitment tool in its own right, and many factions and unaffiliated individuals are already showing much interest. This is a time when the Malefic Viper is making his comeback to the multiverse, and your performance in Nevermore will be their first impression of him. They will see that only a few years after his return, he already has a Chosen who has proved himself a talent at the pinnacle, which is about as good of a showing one can have."

"So... what am I even meant to do?" Jake asked, genuinely unsure. "I don't see it doing the Order much good for me to be in a room with Ell'Hakan alone. While we can't fight due to being in Nevermore City and all, there is a good chance we will enter a battle of words... and as much as I hate to admit it, I don't think that's a fight I'm gonna win."

Viridia was silent for a moment before answering. "I cannot tell the Chosen what to do... but I would avoid getting into any squabbles needlessly. You have nothing to prove and only prestige to lose if you engage with the other Chosen. Let others handle Yip's Chosen, and simply try to learn about and maybe even get to know the other top performers, especially those from your universe. Information is scarce on them. It also won't hurt to get to know young talents from the other large factions, as there is a good chance you may reencounter many of them in the future during your adventures. The system has a tendency to push talents together, either directly through system events or in subtler ways none can truly understand."

"In other words, you're telling me to try and make friends?" Jake asked, clarifyingly.

"You can view it like that. But more than that, you are there for them to try and make friends with you, as I am certain the majority will be more than happy to approach you. As the Order has not been in the best state for the last many eras, we have adopted a very neutral position in the multiverse, resulting in us having few enemies and allies. This lack of any strong relations means you become more approachable, as doing so won't lead to any political issues. So I believe it highly probable you will be sought out by most of the talents on the Era Leaderboard."

"That all sounds very logical and extremely annoying... but fine, I'll try to play nice," Jake finally relented.

At least he wouldn't be alone there. Using a Pulse, he spotted others also making their way toward the conference hall, including his Nevermore party members and quite a few familiar faces from Earth. Arnold was walking with his group of void-related life forms, and surprisingly, they were all headed

toward the hall. He also saw Carmen heading there with some people from Valhal. So, yeah, he would have some pleasant company.

"Hey, who exactly will participate? You said people toward the top of the Leaderboards, but I see a lot heading there. Like, a lot," Jake asked.

"Top 250 on either Leaderboard. With the repeat of names between them, I expect no more than four hundred individuals to participate. Do also note that only you C-grades will take part. The rest of us will be busy in the interim, dealing with other political endeavors," the S-grade Hall Master patiently explained.

"Got it," Jake confirmed once more as soon they reached the hall. It was just a large building, with the inside further spatially expanded. Looking to the Fallen King, who had been floating alongside them, Jake gave him a look.

"You got briefed on what's going on?"

"The vampire gladly did so," the King answered.

"Thanks for getting him up to speed," Jake said as he looked at Farleigh, who quietly walked with them on their way there while apparently telling the King what was about to happen.

"It is the least I can do," he smiled and bowed. "I'm also uncertain if this information is useful, but I came to learn from an acquaintance of mine that this get-together will be hosted by a trusted person of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore."

Jake looked at the vampire before sighing. "Probably Minaga again..."

"That... I cannot rule it out. But I do not believe it is," the vampire patriarch scratched the back of his head.

"Guess we'll see."

Soon standing before one of the entrances, Jake and the Fallen King were already beginning to gather a lot of attention on themselves. Especially Jake, but a Unique Lifeform also gathered interest in its own right. Seeing no reason to stand outside and get ogled, the two of them entered the large venue, as Viridia and Farleigh stayed outside, seeing them off.

Once inside, Jake scanned the area and found a nice empty spot for him to chill at. Throwing the Fallen King a look, the Unique Lifeform gave a small nod and followed him as the two stuck together. Luckily, it wasn't just the two of them for long as a bird entered the hall and headed straight for Jake.

The Sword Saint also soon walked in before even more familiar faces made their appearance. Arnold and Eron both entered next and after only briefly looking around, headed toward Jake and the others. Jake smiled when he saw Carmen waltz in, and she did not even think twice before splitting off from the others from Valhal to head their way.

Jake had barely said hello to her when he saw two more Earthlings walk in. Both of which he kind of hadn't expected to see there. It was Maria, the fire archer blessed by Gwyndyr, and Jake's very own brother, Caleb. Waving them over, Jake soon had gathered quite the group... as Casper also arrived together with a group of Risen that he quickly bailed to walk toward Jake and what had soon become quite the gathering who all had one thing in common:

They were all from Earth.

Jake, Sylphie, Sword Saint, Carmen, Fallen King, Caleb, Maria, Arnold, Casper, and Eron... ten people from a single planet in the new universe. Okay, the Fallen King kind of wasn't, but he had been revived on the planet, so Jake counted him. This gathering reminded Jake a bit of the get-together they had on Minaga's City Floor, just without Jacob and Bertram, with the setting also quite a bit different.

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

Quite a lot of attention was garnered as their diverse group gathered. So many factions represented in one group were rare to see, and many were throwing them looks as if to find out what this group had in common.

Ell'Hakan had also entered and stood a good distance away with his own gathering of people. Jake just ignored him as he followed Viridia's advice and acted like the other Chosen didn't even exist. Which was quite easy as he did a bit of catch-up with old friends and family.

"Who in the hell did you scam to make it into the top 250?" Jake asked Caleb shortly after he arrived.

"You," Caleb said with a smile. "At least I'm pretty sure that's why Umbra suddenly wanted me to join an even better team after the Challenge Dungeons to try and get more Nevermore Points."

"So what you're saying is that you owe me big time?" Jake grinned.

"Sure, sure," his little brother waved him off. "I would say I'm also surprised to see you take the top spot, and Umbra sure seemed like she was, but honestly, I can't say I am."

"Glad to impress an ancient god and meet my little brother's expectations," Jake said jokingly.

After a brief talk with Caleb, Jake also briefly checked in with Maria, who had joined a group of followers from the Crimson Flame and apparently done quite well for herself in Nevermore. She did know she had primarily been chosen for her group because it was required to have someone from the new universe in the party, but she still believed she carried her weight.

She also recognized that her relations with Jake made Gwyndyr want to invest more in her. Even if they weren't close in any way, she was still the closest Gwyndyr had. Jake also learned that the reason everyone had gathered around Jake near-instantly wasn't just because they liked his company. They had borderline all been told to seek out Jake once in the conference hall, in large part to communicate their faction already had an established bond with him. Bullshit politics that Casper confirmed to be true. Not that Jake particularly cared, and he felt many of them gladly used the excuse of wanting to forge a stronger bond with the top performer on the Leaderboards to chill with all the other Earthlings.

He also asked Eron some stuff and generally just caught up and got a feel as to how others were doing. Carmen mainly complained about her party members disappointing her with how fragile they were while throwing in jabs about a certain Challenge Dungeon that may or may not have contained labyrinths. Besides that, they just shared stories of Nevermore and had a good time.

Arnold was just using their group as cover as he stood and fidgeted with a tablet, not engaging with anyone. Just as Jake expected of him.

All in all, things were chill for a while as the entire hall filled up, and due to the already pretty large group Jake was with, no one really bothered them quite yet. The fact that they hadn't officially started yet also helped, as people were still arriving.

Soon, there were just shy of four hundred people in the hall... and with that, a magic formation activated that sealed them off from all observers who wanted to spy on them. Jake instantly felt a few dozen observers disappear as it activated, most of which were gods or high-level mortals, as far as Jake could tell.

Shortly after this formation activated, a stage was raised in the middle of the hall and a figure appeared on top of it. Jake looked over and saw the newcomer, who was definitely not a C-grade.

"Welcome, everyone. It's my pleasure to have you all here, young talents of the multiverse. I will be your host today and am present to ensure everything proceeds calmly and peacefully, and I will also admit that it will be nice to make some new acquaintances I may come to know better in the future," the man Jake recognized to be... probably A-grade, said.

"Now, I am not much for speeches, but let me still give a small one. One that can also serve as a small warning and food for thought. All of you have already proven yourselves, but do not forget Minaga's words. You may be exceptional now, but who is to say the same will be true in a few centuries or even just decades if you stop striving to improve? If it's worth anything... when I was in C-grade, I didn't even crack the top 1,000,000 on the Leaderboards as far as I could tell. I was just a wyvern back then, trying my best to find my Path, teamed up with a ragtag of others who also didn't have any trusted comrades. Compared to me back then... you all definitely have a better start on your Paths. Revel in that knowledge, but do not let your momentum and potential go to waste."

This presenter had shoulder-length silvery hair and a fair, almost androgynous appearance. He wore what looked like an expensive medieval shirt, pants, and boots and looked entirely human outside of his eyes. Rather than pupils, it looked like he had a spinning wheel of lights in there. Again, could still be human, but Jake felt an aura he had gotten quite good at recognizing: that of a dragon.

As Jake looked at the dragon in human form, he also felt an odd sense of pressure. One he could easily resist... but it hit somewhere he hadn't ever felt be hit before. It wasn't that of grade suppression or even power, but one born of Records related to something Jake hadn't expected:

His Blessing.

An Identify quickly confirmed the reason, as Jake realized this was a first.

[Dragon of the Silverstorm Fissure – lvl ??? – True Blessing of the Wyrmgod]

Ignoring the overly long name, this was Jake's first time ever meeting the Chosen of another Primordial.

"Ah, where are my manners. A few of you seem to have already checked me out yourselves or realized who I am, but allow me to introduce myself: I am known as Silverstorm, Chosen of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore. Currently A-grade, but with hope I will reach S-grade soon. It's truly a pleasure to meet all of you."

Jake observed the man closely, and he didn't have a shadow of doubt in his mind: this Silverstorm was definitely already at the level of a weaker S-grade. Jake also felt that despite his gentle outward appearance and words... he was hiding quite the bloodlust. He was not someone who had reached his current level of power through making labyrinths and crafting but through slaughter.

"Now, let me not delay things anymore. Enjoy, all of you."

With a clap of his hands, tables appeared all throughout the hall, containing food and beverages. A few dragonkin also entered the hall, and as Jake checked out a few, he saw they were all C-grades and all held Blessings of the Wyrmgod. Jake had expected them to join the get-together but soon realized... they were the catering staff.

The stage in the center also lowered into the ground, just fading into solid matter, as the Chosen of the Wyrmgod returned to ground level. Nearly instantly, he was swarmed by people from the different large factions, and Jake truly knew the dragon's pain. Living the life of a Primordial's Chosen wasn't easy.

"This is going to be so awkward," Carmen commented after a few seconds. "Who thought it was a good idea to throw a bunch of strangers into a conference hall? They could have at least set up a dueling ring in the middle or something."

"Doubt you would find many willing to fight you. All that would do was expose your skills in front of hundreds of potential future rivals," Caleb shook his head. "I sure wouldn't want to fight anyone here."

"... I hate that you're probably right," Carmen mumbled, annoyed. Turning to Jake, she threw him a look. "So, what's the supreme genius of our generation going to do?"

"I have absolutely no plans, and I'm currently in full survival mode," Jake answered, only half-joking.

"Just take it easy and deal with whoever approaches you," the Sword Saint advised. "You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, and as Carmen said, the top performer on the Leaderboards. It's only good etiquette they come to you and not the other way around."

Jake slowly nodded as he looked toward one of the tables right next to them. Reaching out, he sent out a string of mana and pulled a glass to him, not spilling a single drop. "Well, in preparation for that, I think I'm going to check out if they at least got some proper alcohol."

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"I feel like you shouldn't," Jake said as Sylphie asked if she could also have something to drink.

"Ree..." Sylphie screeched dejected.

Jake took a swig of the drink he was holding, and as he felt it burn its way down his throat, he got an idea.

"Alright, alright," Jake shook his head, and using a bit of mana manipulation, he made a small bubble of the liquid float out of the glass and up toward Sylphie. "Have a taste."

Sylphie, with glee, opened her beak and consumed the bubble. Half a second later, she began flapping her wings rapidly while making screeching sounds. Having fully expected this result, Jake had erected a sound-sealing barrier around the two of them while Sylphie learned alcohol maybe wasn't for her.

Still smiling, Jake saw the Sword Saint motion, making Jake remove the barrier right as Sylphie had also calmed down.

"Approaching on your six," the old man said.

"I noticed, but kind of hoped he was gonna change his mind," Jake said while calming down dear Sylphie as he had indeed seen the approaching man. Turning around to meet him, Jake saw the one he recognized as the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell and third-place finisher on the Leaderboards, trailing only after Jake and Ell'Hakan.

Guess it makes sense the number three approaches me first... though I don't hope it becomes a pattern.

Something Jake feared it would, as he saw the elemental called Wintermaul throw a look toward Jake's group, seemingly checking out when they were free next...

This is going to be a long day...

Chapter 879: A Proposal From the Heart

Jake hadn't met many demons throughout his time in the multiverse. Even if they were a widespread and diverse race, he just hadn't really run into many of them outside of the occasional enemy here and there. Outside of dungeons, Irin was the only one he really knew, and she was practically an entirely different species to the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell.

He had mostly ashen skin with what looked like blue crackled lines across it. As if he had more mana in his body than it could contain. On his forehead was what looked like an amethyst crystal merged with his flesh, veins spreading out from it. The elaborate blue robe he wore was clearly not of poor quality, and overall, he radiated the aura of a rich young master. However, he clearly also had the power to back up his demeanor. The ones with him were four other demons who Jake guessed were from his party, meaning they all made it into the top 250.

Stopping in front of Jake, the Demon Prince smiled and reached out a hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Chosen of the Malefic One. Rather than waste your time, let me get straight to it: I have come with an inquiry that I hope you might entertain."

Jake didn't reach and grab the other man's hand right away as he asked. "What kind of inquiry?"

Pulling back his hand, seemingly not at all offended, the Demon Prince smiled even more than before. "How you might benefit from assisting us in bringing upon the second coming of the Cerulean Devil."

... yeah, Jake had no idea who the fuck that was.

This was far from the first time someone walked up to Jake and dropped some kind of grand revelation while looking at him as if he should totally know what the fuck the other party was talking about. How in the hell – pun intended – would he know about some devil that he guessed based on context clues was dead?

Alright, think fast, Jake. Devil is the name demons give to their gods, so likely some dead devil who really liked a slightly off-blue color. Got it... and I guess it's pretty easy to figure out how he wants me to help.

Keeping his calm, with a great assist from the mask, Jake looked deep in thought for a second. "I wonder what the Demon Prince might have in mind."

The demon observed Jake's reaction for a moment before speaking.

"I guess my name would make things a bit clearer. I am known as the Cerulian Demon or the Demon Prince of the Fourth Hell. I have inherited a fragment of the Crystalized Cerulean Devil's Heart and the Legacy of the once great ruler of the Fourth Hell," the Demon Prince answered as he motioned toward the crystal on his forehead. "All of this is no secret... neither is it a secret that the remaining fragments are not as potent as those that once were."

"Am I right to assume you are not asking the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but what people call the Harbinger of Primeval Origins?" Jake asked clarifyingly, already certain about the answer.

"A bit of both, I believe, but that will depend on if you are willing to take up the task and how you would be able to accomplish it. In either case, we, no, I, require your unique talents to do something we believed impossible and that I have cause to believe you may be capable of."

"Let me take another guess, you want me to use my abilities on one of these Devil Heart Fragments to make it more powerful?" Jake also assumed.

"No... no, not quite; we may have our own methods to do that, even if they are likely more flawed than what you can accomplish," the Demon Prince shook his head. "What I want to ask of you is not to empower a fragment of the Crystalized Cerulean Devil's Heart... it's to create an entirely new, fully formed Crystalized Ceulean Demon Lord's Heart using the Records of a fragment... my fragment."

Jake's eyes narrowed a bit. "You want to create a Demon Lord's Heart with the Records of this Cerulean Devil using that crystal in your forehead? That... sounds risky, to say the least."

"Of that, I am fully aware. Usually, I also wouldn't attempt such a thing, but this iteration of Nevermore has offered me a golden opportunity. I am certain you are aware of what this is," the Demon Prince said as he summoned a familiar-looking item that Jake quickly Identified nearly on instinct.

[Crystalized Demon Lord Heart (Legendary)] – The crystallized heart of a Demon Lord. The immense energy contained within the crystal can be absorbed by any demon, allowing them insight into the heritage of Demon Lords. Grants demonic powers to any item it is fused with. Can be used in a limited number of alchemical products of a demonic nature.

"You, too, have one of these, yes? Or at least someone in your party does," the demon asked.

Jake nodded slowly. "I have one."

Smiling, the Demon Prince admired the heart. "A Crystalized Demon Lord Heart is usually created through a ritual using a Demon Lord, which inadvertently leads to some of the Records of this particular Demon Lord to enter the crystalized heart. However, look at his heart. It's pure. Untouched. So brimming with power and Records pertaining to no particular Demon Lord. Now, imagine if all this energy was aligned to the Cerulean Devil. No, not just the energy of this heart... the energy of several hearts, fused together with my fragment into one!"

He radiated ambition as the Demon Prince spoke of his plan, and Jake was... not entirely averse to the idea. In fact, it sounded quite feasible the more the demon talked about it, even if it remained incredibly risky. Moreover, based on what Jake heard, he wouldn't even need to use his Jake Juice. Arcane energy should be more than good enough as long as he kept everything under control during the fusing process.

Jake also understood why the Demon Prince had approached Jake in particular. It truly hadn't just been due to his talents as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins – even if that certainly did play a part. It had as much to do with Jake being the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, the greatest alchemist in the multiverse in the eyes of many. Plus, as the Harbinger of Primeval Origins, he had already shown himself capable of similar feats before.

One also had to remember that the Demon Prince likely needed a C-grade to do the ritual. It was similar to how a B-grade blacksmith couldn't craft weapons for a C-grade, their Records simply not making it possible. So if the Demon Prince wanted to craft this heart to be useable by a C-grade, he would need another C-grade to craft it... and Jake likely looked like the best candidate to do just that.

As for why Jake would accept such a task? Perhaps a better question would be why he wouldn't. To do a ritual with several legendary hearts and a fragment likely of a rarity above even that was bound to reward a shitload of experience and Records. Plus, it would be a positive diplomatically. And, finally, he did, of course, expect some form of payment. All of this naturally assumed he would succeed.

"So, what say you?" the Demon Prince asked after a few seconds, where Jake looked deep in thought.

"I'm tentatively interested, but I will need to think it over a bit," Jake said. "At least if you don't want me to just try and wing whatever ritual you are planning, more likely than not killing you in the process."

"I would very much prefer an outcome that does not involve my death," the demon smiled, at least seeing the humor in Jake's response. "That was all I wanted to ask, and I will not take up any more of your time. Congratulations once more on your achievement, and I will be staying here in Nevermore City for a while after this ceremony. If you do accept the task, do be aware it's time-sensitive in nature and I would much prefer for it to happen before you depart from Nevermore City. I will make sure to have everything prepared ... and I will do anything in my power to fulfill any request you may have, should you succeed."

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

Jake simply nodded. "I will send a response whether I accept or not before I just leave the city."

"That is more than I could ask for," the Demon Prince said with a small bow as he backed away.

It was definitely an interesting proposition, even if Jake had a few doubts... many of which were dispelled by what his brother told him next. "If you are doubting if you can trust that demon, you definitely can. The Cerulean Demon is part of an old Lineage of very proud demons, and they value verbal contracts nearly as much as written ones. It would quite literally hurt his Path if he went back on his word or tried to deceive you."

"You seem to know an awful lot about demons," Jake commented.

"What can I say? They are the best clients and wonderful assassins. Great work ethic all around, and they are one of the few races where the majority love paperwork," his little brother said with a smile.

"Huh," Jake muttered. Now that he was thinking about it, Irin did seem a bit too happy with doing administrative tasks...

As Jake was thinking, he was already prepared for the next group of people to approach. The ice elemental, Wintermaul, who had seemingly been waiting for his chance, was just about to make his way over after the Demon Prince left when someone else jumped ahead... someone the C-grade ice elemental would definitely not raise an issue with.

The silver-haired Chosen of the Wyrmgod appeared only a few steps from Jake, space barely affected as he moved through it effortlessly. He looked at Jake as he took a step forward, and Jake's mind worked at high speeds as he tried to figure out what he was supposed to do or say.

Villy had never coached him on how he should act around other Chosen of high-level gods. Was he supposed to act like they were the gods they represented? Villy talked about that often being the case... but he was also a Chosen, so maybe he should just treat them equally to himself as he wanted to? But then there was the issue of the grade disparity, so... yeah, fuck it, Jake would just act like usual.

Right as Jake was about to greet the other Chosen, the dragon named Silverstorm smiled brightly and reached out to grab Jake's hand faster than he could react.

"We meet at last!" the dragon said in a jovial tone. "I have been hoping to finally get a chance to thank you! Ah, and it sure was wonderful to see you take the top spot on the All-Time Leaderboards! I cannot hope to begin to express the debts of my gratitude, my fellow Chosen!"

Jake, completely confused, had no idea what the hell the guy was talking about. "... why would you want to thank me?"

Had Jake met the dragon before? Nope, definitely not. He would have remembered if he had. He was good at forgetting stuff in his spatial storage, but he tended to remember auras pretty damn well, and this definitely wasn't an aura he had experienced before.

"Oh... I guess you haven't been told," the dragon named Silverstorm said, still looking extremely happy to see Jake, even if he calmed down a bit. "You're the reason why I'm the newly selected Chosen of the Wyrmgod, and this little gathering is more or less my first big public appearance."

Once more, Jake had to search his memory to try and figure out when or how the hell he caused that to happen... but luckily, the dragon quickly saw through his confusion and elaborated.

"Let me clarify. I have carried the Divine Blessing of my Patron for a long time and was one of a dozen or so Chosen candidates, waiting for our Patron to choose one of us," he began before Jake subtly felt space around them seal off, as it was clear the other Chosen only wanted Jake to hear the next part. "The thing is... and this part naturally shouldn't be shared, my Patron is not the best at picking his Chosen. That's not to say that he is bad when it comes to who he picks, as that would just be putting myself down needlessly. It's more to do with how and when he picks them."

"Now you got me curious... and I'm still waiting for why I am the reason you got chosen to be the Chosen," Jake commented.

"Getting to it," Silverstorm said as he continued. "You see, there are nearly always a few Chosen candidates picked, all of us working for our Patron and fulfilling our duties, such as handling the mortal affairs of Nevermore, gathering certain items that are required, recruiting more members, handling politics... all of the things we should not bother the Primordial with. We do all this to assure our Patron can focus on the World Wonder itself, which has led to the minor problem that he can get a bit... engrossed in it."

Jake was beginning to understand as he wasn't sure what to feel...

"So, what tends to happen is that all of us candidates kind of end up staying as candidates while he works on the World Wonder... and by the time he decides it's time to make a selection, we are all dead to the endless march of time. That means the next batch of candidates will be picked and given Divine Blessings, as the Wyrmgod naturally doesn't want to pick someone as his Chosen without vetting them first, and the cycle continues. To a god who has lived for that long, even the life of an S-grade is short and forgettable, so perhaps this is all understandable. I also just don't think my Patron cares particularly much about having a Chosen compared to many of the other Primordials, on account of him not really having a faction. However, it seems that seeing an old acquaintance inspired my Patron to select a Chosen rather promptly this time around, with it ultimately being me who was chosen. So for that, I must truly thank you, even if you caused my Blessing simply by existing."

Remaining silent for a while, Jake still wasn't sure what to say or feel. But one thing was for sure: "I don't think you have anything to really thank me for. Doesn't look like he picked you as his Chosen without merit."

Silverstorm was powerful; of that, there was no doubt. As for that entire thing with the Wyrmgod being forgetful... Jake could totally see that happen. Duskleaf had talked so many times about massively long experiments, and for a dungeon engineer in charge of the most popular World Wonder in the multiverse, Jake didn't doubt the Primordial also kept busy. One could even say that Silverstorm had gotten unlucky to be born just before a new initiation, as that meant the Wyrmgod was even busier than usual. Now, it seemed Jake had somehow turned that misfortune into good luck, though.

"Even if you do not believe you did anything that requires my gratitude, you still have it," Silverstorm insisted. "Anyway, I didn't mean to be overwhelming; I just had to thank you. Oh, and the Wyrmgod did say that he may be interested in seeing if you could assist him in getting a lower-grade Chosen using your unique abilities at a later time. But, as I said before, the Primordial tends to work on pretty broad time scales, so don't think it will happen any time soon, if ever unless you ascend to divinity."

"I still think it's unnecessary to thank me, but you're welcome about the entire Chosen thing, I guess. As for the other Chosen thing, I won't make any promises," Jake said.

"No need for any rush or pressure. Just know that I owe you a favor that I will be sure to repay one day. Now, let me dispel this barrier and let us show the multiverse how great friends the two Chosen of Primordials are," Silverstorm smiled... perhaps this having been part of his plans all along.

The barrier faded as Jake and Silverstorm shook hands, and the dragon gave the human a nod. "Thank you for taking the time, and congratulations once more. I hope you enjoy yourself the rest of the day."

With that, the Wyrmgod's Chosen left again and promptly got swarmed by interested parties, and almost like clockwork, Wintermaul was right there to also greet Jake. At least that's what Jake thought he was there to do... until he noticed the elemental wasn't really that fixated on him. Instead, he was far more interested in Sylphie from the looks of it.

Wintermaul had slightly changed his form even more and now looked like a human with extremely pale skin, wearing a fur coat of sorts. His body was still made of pure mana, and the subtle signs of ice and frost could still be seen here and there, but he could easily pass for a human from a distance. A human that was definitely also an ice mage.

"I greet thee, Chosen of the Malefic One, and I bring congratulations for your accomplishment," the ice elemental said to Jake as he came over with a small bow.

"A pleasure," Jake nodded. "I should congratulate you for your impressive performance as the top-scoring monster of the era."

"Your words bring me honor," the elemental said, very much going through the usual pleasantries. "If I may, would it be possible to speak to your companion?"

Jake already knew who the elemental was talking about, and he just shrugged. "Depends on if she wants to talk to you."

She was definitely interested, though, as Sylphie also stared at the ice elemental. For a bit, they both seemed to evaluate something about the other before Wintermaul finally spoke. "The Sovereign of Ice greets the Sovereign of Wind."

"Ree," Sylphie responded as the elemental nodded. "Your authority is strong indeed. Impressive."

Jake decided to just sit back for once and observe as the two of them communicated a bit back and forth, seemingly discussing elemental magic stuff. It was nice that Jake wasn't the center of attention for once, especially after talking to the Demon Prince and Wyrmgod's Chosen. Especially the other Chosen had been mentally taxing to deal with. So, to see the elemental and semi-elemental talk was a nice break, and he was happy Sylphie seemed to be making a new friend. Yep, definitely a good turn of-

"Your power truly makes you worthy, and so do I believe I have chosen myself worthy. Join hands with me, as my empress, and I, your emperor, and may our offspring be-"

And just like that, Jake was about to break the rule of no fighting in Nevermore City.

Chapter 880: An Unexpected Encounter

Jake took a second to process what the hell the elemental had just said, and before he could even do that, he felt bloodlust radiate from behind him. This shook Jake back to reality as his own aura also unconsciously leaked, joining that of three others.

Carmen had been the first to stare daggers at the elemental, seemingly ready to pounce, but, to Jake's slight surprise, the Fallen King and Sword Saint also showed their clear displeasure as they looked ready to assist Carmen should she attack.

However, before any of them could do or say anything, Sylphie proved that she didn't need anyone to stand up for her, as she made a no-nonsense reply.

"Ree."

The elemental was taken aback, partly by Sylphie's screech and partly by the four C-grades seemingly ready to turn him into slushed ice. Still, he managed to keep his head cool as he focused on Sylphie.

"Please do not take offense. It would be an honor for you to join hands with me. We are both holders of autho-"

"Ree."

"Such a reply is shortsighted and-"

"Ree."

"... what?"

"Ree, ree, ree. Ree," Sylphie explained as the bird stood perched on nothing in mid-air.

Surprisingly, Wintermaul looked deep in thought for a moment before he tried one last time. "I... I can change, or we can maybe find a solution..."

"Ree," Sylphie shook her head, making the poor ice elemental look dejected.

"Alas, it seems we are not meant to conjoin our Paths. I apologize if I overstepped... I did not mean to make anyone uncomfortable or make any enemies."

Turning to Jake, who was still looking at Wintermaul with narrowed eyes, the elemental bowed. "I congratulate you on your brilliant accomplishment and shall take my leave before I make a further fool of myself."

With that, the elemental backed away, as Jake, the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Carmen didn't let him leave their sight before he was far enough away.

"I swear, if not for those rules," Carmen muttered as she unclenched her fists.

"An uncalled-for proposal," the Sword Saint also said with a hidden anger in his voice.

"Such arrogance for an inferior being that dares approach one superior to himself," the Fallen King also chimed in, clearly not being entirely honest with himself as he tried to hide his protective nature of the little hawk.

As for Jake... well, he briefly considered the possibilities of marking Wintermaul and tracking him down in the ninety-third universe to have a "conversation" around boundaries and social etiquette, but that didn't appear to be necessary.

Sylphie had handled the situation surprisingly well, and while the knowledge did make Jake a bit uncomfortable, she clearly understood what the elemental had asked. Her response had also genuinely

sounded like she considered the offer carefully before rejecting it. With brilliant Sylphie-level arguments, too.

"So... not to butt in, but I have no idea what Sylphie's screeches meant," Caleb muttered, having not yet learned to speak Sylphian Hawk, something perfectly understandable, as it took a bit to get used to the nuances of the complicated language.

"She just kindly explained to the ice elemental why they could never work out," Jake said, shaking his head.

"And that explanation was?"

"He's too cold, hard, and spiky to make a proper nest, and Sylphie only likes to sit in cozy and warm places, making them incompatible," Jake explained to his little brother. "Plus, he didn't even have any feathers. Which is apparently a deal-breaker to her."

"Ree," Sylphie confirmed with a firm screech.

"I... I see," Caleb said, looking at Sylphie and then back at Jake. "I guess that works."

"Sure as fuck hope it did," Carmen added in, throwing a final glare toward the elemental. "I don't hope for that icy bastard he decides to try again somewhere without a Primordial keeping watch. Then again, I do like crushed ice in my drinks."

"Him trying again does appear like it would be an unwise decision," Caleb agreed as he glanced at the four people who had been ready to start a major conflict over an elemental who had absolutely no flirting game.

The atmosphere in their group had gotten a bit more tense than before due to the visit of the elemental, but it soon calmed down again as Jake gave Sylphie some well-deserved scratches for dealing with the situation well.

Even if Sylphie was more than fifty years old by now and was to many definitely an adult, Jake still thought she was too young to get into any committed relationships quite yet. Then again, to Jake, she would always be the little fluffy ball of feathers that would run away whenever he took out his cauldron, screeching bloody murder.

As things were calmer, they also got to speaking more internally, as Jake finally got to catch up with Casper his old buddy. And it turned out his friend had a favor to ask.

"So, you know how the Prima Guardian is descending on Earth in a few years?"

"Still got a system notification hidden away somewhere about it," Jake nodded.

"Well, so do I, which is kind of the reason I'm asking. There is good reason to believe there will be some unique rewards from the event, and not participating would kind of suck, so could you maybe hook me and some others up with a way back to Earth? Just for the event," Casper asked, seemingly a bit nervous about making the request.

"Of course," Jake said. "Shit, if you want to stay afterward, that would also be fine. It's ruled by a council of sorts now, and there are already plenty of immigrants there, so one would notice a bunch of Risen also settling there again."

Unlawfully taken from Royal Road, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

"Thanks for the offer, but we're quite happy with what we got going on," Casper answered. "We have quite a nice hidden world set up by now on our floating piece of rock. New Yalsten, we call it. It will take some time, but with the root you gave me, I think we can regrow the tree again and turn it into a proper mystic realm."

"Fair enough," Jake nodded. "Guess I'll have to visit one day."

"One day," Casper smiled. "Right now, it's still very much closed off to outsiders. I could still get you in, but honestly, there isn't much going on there. Unless you want a lengthy lecture in Dungeon Engineering and the work that went into creating New Yalsten, that is."

"You know what? I think I'm good," Jake smiled.

"To add, I will also be returning for the event," Eron suddenly said as he had overheard their conversation. "For the same reasons, too."

"I also heard that some people from the Holy Church, including the Augur, will return," Maria added further. "Wouldn't be surprised if most people try to return to their native planets to try and reap some rewards."

"Sounds like we'll have quite the gathering," Jake smiled. At this point, he kind of felt bad for this poor Prima Guardian. Imagine arriving on a planet only to be met with Jake and all the others standing there, ready to pounce... definitely didn't sound like a fun time.

"Speaking of having quite the gathering," the Sword Saint said after a bit. "I believe I have a few people I should seek out. I sense two others who also carry the Blessing of my Patron, and it would be rude not to at least go say hi."

"Yeah, I think I should regroup with Azal, too. By the way, I asked if he wanted to speak to you directly, but he didn't seem keen on the idea," Casper said as he shook his head. "He did something very dumb to try and get a higher spot on the Leaderboards, and I don't think he is feeling good that you pushed him out of the top 5."

Jake nodded as he remembered what Nevermore had said about Azal. He had been the one to gain the most levels out of everyone, but only by making a dumb sacrifice that would likely hurt his future. Jake was a bit too curious, though.

"What exactly did he do to gain so many levels?" he asked, knowing full well there was a good chance Casper couldn't or wouldn't respond.

Casper sighed. "I probably shouldn't share this, but fine. The weapon he carries around is a powerful mythical sword he made himself, and with it, he can absorb spirits and souls to increase its power and use them as resources for certain skills. However, at the end of Nevermore, he chose to do a pre-prepared ritual to absorb and destroy all of the spirits he had gathered not just throughout Nevermore but since he made the sword right after he evolved. Repairing the sword will be expensive as hell and take a long time, and his Records took quite the hit, but I think he can recover, though it won't be easy.

He isn't a bad guy, and it does suck, but he cares way too much about the honor of the Risen and all that. At least he can take solace in having beaten every person from the Holy Church, even if I heard they did something similar. All in all, as I said... he did something dumb, in my opinion."

"I see," Jake said, as the others had also listened intently.

What Azal had decided to do was similar to if Jake had done a ritual to absorb all the curse energy inside of Eternal Hunger. Well, alright, it would also require Jake to have a Path that revolved around curses far more, but if he did, absorbing all the curse energy to gain a lot of levels would technically have been possible. It would be stupid and lead to a shaky foundation and a limited, if not ruined future, but it would have been an option.

These thoughts also inadvertently made the face of a young half-elf pop into Jake's head as he shook his head to dispel the thoughts. What Azal had done wasn't even close to the same level as Temlat.

"Anyway, enjoy," Casper said as he left a few seconds later after he gave Jake time to process what he'd said. "Oh, and I will now have to also share some details about you with Azal to make things fair. Like the fact you are still walking about with the curse-version of a nuclear bomb in the form of a katar."

"Fair enough, not exactly a secret," Jake smiled as he saw his old coworker and friend off. It was still a bit weird that Casper had turned into a pale undead, but alas, what can you do about it?

With Casper gone, Jake just took the time to observe the hall a bit using his sphere. Carmen and the Fallen King were talking as they compared if his claws or her fists were tougher, and Eron and Arnold had somehow ended up standing and staring at a tablet together as the healer motioned and pointed at the screen, with Arnold giving short responses.

Meanwhile, Maria talked to Jake's brother, leaving just Jake and Sylphie, the bird enjoying the relaxing downtime. Elsewhere in the room, groups had also gathered and talked, with a huge group around Ell'Hakan, pretty much as far away from Jake and the other Earthlings as possible. Silverstorm was with a woman with golden hair and horns, which he recognized as the princess from the Regalflight and fifth-place finisher. Together with the two of them was also the seventh-place finisher, the Disciple of Heartsoul Daolord, a young girl who looked barely in her teens, though she was definitely far older in reality. He had a good feeling he would get to talk to them later, and based on how they threw some glances his way occasionally, he even got the feeling they were talking with Silverstorm about him.

Jake had been a bit surprised Dina hadn't gone over to say hi yet, but he soon saw why not, as she chatted with a few people he presumed to be members of the Pantheon of Life and United Tribes. More accurately, the wolf who took the ninth spot on the Era Leaderboards, Grimclaw Noxmane. Jake did know that the United Tribes and Pantheon of Life had a close relationship, so it made sense she was doing a bit of politicking. He also saw the beast that reminded him a bit of the Great White Stag with this group, along with several other beasts and beastkin who had all placed highly.

Speaking of beasts, Jake had to check an extra time before he found another person of interest. Lopas, the sloth-like beast and fourth-place finisher of the universe and eighth in the era, was currently sleeping under a table, having taken one of the tablecloths to cover himself.

To that, Jake could only show respect. He was a sloth who knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was apparently to just be left alone and sleep. Jake also looked a bit around for the person known as Immortal Faith and the Eastbound Monk, but he wasn't sure what they looked like. The monk was probably part of the Dao Sect, though, with Immortal Faith... well, that person could be part of pretty much any faction with gods in it. He had even considered if it was maybe Eron who had used that name, but that wasn't the case.

Finally, of all the factions Jake looked for, there was the Holy Church, the largest of them all. In their group alone, they had nearly forty people – one-tenth of the total number of people attending. While they didn't end up taking any of the absolute top spots on either the Era or Universe Leaderboards, they could still be said to have dominated it simply by the sheer number of people they had in the top 250.

Alongside their many allies who also stood nearby, with Ell'Hakan even standing not that far away, it was almost as if a line had been drawn down the middle of the conference hall. There definitely were cliques, with many of the fully neutral factions standing in between.

As Jake was standing there, just looking out at the room after taking another drink, he was approached by someone. He turned and looked, instantly seeing an appearance that didn't match what was in his sphere, and he also felt an aura he wouldn't ever fail to recognize.

"Greetings, Viper's Chosen, and congratulations on your performance," the young woman said as she got closer, raising a glass with a smile on her lips. Jake narrowed his eyes as he responded.

"Thank you, miss...?" Jake responded, keeping calm as he wondered what the hell this person was doing here. Everyone else was busy, and Jake made sure to be a bit way as he tried to speak privately to not get any of the others involved.

"Does what you call me matter?" they responded, swirling the liquid in their glass as Jake only now realized that only he could hear what this person said, while anything he responded was also only heard by them. "And no reason to act that suspicious. I have come with no ill intent, just curiosity about something."

Jake narrowed his eyes as he stared at the young woman... the shapeshifted Eversmile. He couldn't understand why he had appeared here or how he had even done so. Then again, he had seemingly been able to hide his true identity even from the Wyrmgod inside of Nevermore...

"What are you curious about?" Jake asked... with the answer not at all the one he expected.

"Where did you get those boots?"