

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 701: Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth True Ending

Minaga had been pretty honest from the get-go when he talked about the floors after his city floor. They had indeed just been the same setup over and over again, with ever-increasing difficulty. The difficulty actually reached a level where Jake and the others had to get serious, especially in the final room of each floor, where at least one of the hardest options was hard-coded to always include a boss. At least Jake assumed it hard-coded as it was like that every time, and Minaga never denied that was the case.

One minor change was that all the labyrinths seemed shorter, or all had shortcuts in the form of traps you could activate to progress faster as well as more standard shortcuts. This included a few instances of walls that could be opened as well as illusory walls – these were Jake's favorite as he didn't notice the first one he saw in his sphere was even meant to be illusory before he laid eyes on it.

This was the only reason why Jake and company could keep their clear times of floor thirty-eight and thirty-nine below a full day on each, though it did get damn close on floor thirty-nine. Having to do nine rooms total was a bit taxing; no two ways about it.

Jake did also have to admit that they had gotten fortunate, though. Not lucky enough for him to think that Minaga was actively helping them, but lucky enough for him to feel lucky. More than half of the rooms had been combat rooms, and with a few bosses and collection rooms mixed in, they had just enough time. Helped a bit further along by liberally consuming potions between rooms so they never had to slow down. They also limited all chatter with Minaga to the labyrinths, where their speed was limited by the floor rules.

Anyway... with their success also came more experience than Jake had expected.

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 220 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 223 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 221 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

Jake would undoubtedly say that two levels in two days were damn good. It was definitely faster than alchemy could ever be unless he got epiphanies related to upgrading skills. The others had also all gained plenty.

Anyway, after the floors, they found themselves standing inside the in-between floor before it was time for the fortieth floor. They were not in a hurry, as they definitely needed to all be back in peak condition. Jake felt that the final floor would not be easy, and seeing them all relax, Minaga also swooped in to echo that sentiment.

“Remember to rest up well before the final floor of my labyrinth, alright? It’s gonna be quite an experience and will truly test you. The Demon Lord boss will look like a cakewalk in comparison; I can promise you that! Okay, maybe not a cakewalk, but definitely a far easier kind of walk than the walk you are about to walk into.”

“You know, I have quite a good idea of what we will face,” Jake smiled.

“Well, don’t spoil it for the others even if you do!” Minaga argued.

“Pretty sure they figured it out too.”

“In that case, let’s all act like none of you know, so please act surprised when you see the final challenge, alright?”

Jake threw a glance at his party members, and after getting a few shrugs, he agreed. “Sure, pal, you can have that.”

“Thanks, and see you soon! Who knows... maybe sooner than you think!”

Yeah, Minaga himself is definitely the final boss, Jake thought, smiling to himself. He would lie if he said he didn’t look forward to it. The Minaga that had appeared in all of the welcome rooms had been a level 275 Unique Lifeform, and if he was as powerful as the Fallen King would be at level 275... Jake was definitely not confident in winning alone.

Even with his party, it would be incredibly rough. Also, despite them all knowing they would face Minaga, they did have the problem of not knowing what he could actually do. Sure, he had teleported around a bunch with help from the dungeon, but he had shown none of his actual powers. The only clue was that he was some kind of mage with the name of the different difficulties and his whole demeanor and clothes. Also, being a dungeon master and mage just tended to go together, with Casper being an outlier.

As part of Jake’s final preparations, he also finally distributed the last 2400 stats he hadn’t placed anywhere yet from his Altmar Signet. Looking at his stat caps, he could get roughly 800 more Strength and 1100 Agility from the ring. That left him with 500 stats left to place, and after a bit of consideration, he put them into Endurance. Having

more Endurance would allow him to endure his boosting skill better and even keep it active for longer. Besides, if he changed his mind later, he could just redistribute the stats.

Checking out the ring, he nodded.

[Altmar Signet of Supremacy (Legendary)] – A ring presented by the Altmar Empire to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. This ring is made of an unknown but extremely energy-dense metal, with an unknown gem of immense power embedded in it. This ring was originally based on the Trial Signet design but has been further refined and improved to make a fitting gift for a Chosen. The first time the wielder equips the ring, they will become able to distribute the signet's energy into whatever stats they desire. Distributing any of the stats will make the ring Soulbound. A brief recharge period is required between each re-distribution of stats. Stats cannot be redistributed during combat. Enchantments: +2500 Perception, +900 Strength, +1100 Agility, +500 Endurance

Requirements: Soulbound

With all preparations done, Jake and company continued forward and saw no reason to delay. The others had also consumed elixirs to make sure they had all the stats they could, and besides some potential improvements in equipment, they had no more optimization to do. They were already in formation as they entered the fortieth floor, ready as could be and at the peak of their game as the room appeared before them. Upon their entry also came the expected floor introduction.

Welcome to the Fortieth floor of Nevermore: The Grand Finale of Minaga's Labyrinth

Main objective: Defeat the final boss.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: Final boss (0/1)

Note: It's the finale!

Current Nevermore Points: 42973

Jake read it over along with everyone else. However, they did not have much time as an aura appeared in the middle of the large cathedral-like building they found themselves inside. The temperature of the place increased as flames gathered, revealing the outline of an all-too-familiar figure.

[Demon Lord – lvl 275] The source of this content is novel. “You gotta be kidding me,” Jake whispered under his breath as the Demon Lord fully manifested, and a spear appeared in his hand as he pointed it towards them.

“I have been waiting for you! Behold, I, the long-lost twin of Demon Lord Gubrothas, shall be your deaths! My name is Demon Lord Gobruthas, and today I will avenge my-“

He didn’t get further as suddenly, the entire cathedral was enveloped in blue energy, and the room exploded as a massive white pillar crashed through the roof, crushing the Demon Lord into paste. Everything shook as the pillar kept drilling into the ground, squashing the Demon Lord further. On top of it, Jake already saw the expected figure he had presumed to be the boss.

It was naturally Minaga himself.

[Minaga – lvl 275]

Jake saw him, and then... then the lights came. Stropelights began blinking throughout the hall as thousands of openings appeared on the pillar and walls of the room, all shooting out colorful lights in all shades of the rainbow. The walls of the cathedral also began extending outwards and shuffling around, expanding the battle arena significantly.

The light show continued for several seconds before a massive spotlight appeared, illuminating Minaga atop the pillar as he spread out his arms.

“WELCOME, WELCOME, WELCOME! TO THE GRAND FINALE!”

With his words, a system message appeared in front of them all.

Event unlocked: True Ending

You have completed all the prerequisites and proven yourself worthy to face the true final boss of Minaga’s Labyrinth: its creator. Take heed, for this challenge surpasses all those you have faced prior.

Note: Due to the difficulty level of the challenge, any individual that takes lethal damage will be teleported out of the boss room instead of dying. Should all party members be defeated, the event will fail and cannot be reattempted.

New Bonus Objective gained: Do not allow a single party member to be defeated during the battle.

Jake scanned the message and frowned as he yelled at the Unique Lifeform before he could continue his introduction show. “No death here?”

“Not unless you kill yourselves, no. Actually, let’s just get all that out of the way,” Minaga answered before continuing, the spotlight still on him.

“Let me say it like this... concessions were required before the Wyrmgod and system would accept having a challenge of this caliber placed on the fortieth floor of the C-grade portion of Nevermore. Not a minor concession either. In order for balance to be reached, the system overlaid the condition on this challenge that you can’t die, only be defeated. In order words, if you are to take fatal damage from me, you won’t actually die but be teleported to jail! And if you all get jailed, you will have failed and be sent back to the in-between room, and things will look quite a bit different when you reenter,” Minaga explained from his platform.

“So, as the system message said,” Jake nodded at Minaga repeating the information.

“Exactly,” Minaga smiled. **“Now, can I continue without you ruining my groove?”**

“Be my guest,” Jake bowed as he gave the Unique Lifeform space.

“Thank you. Now where was I... oh right!” Minaga cleared his throat as he continued with his scripted speech.

“You, brave challengers, find yourselves at the final challenge of Minaga’s Labyrinth! What else could it be but the opportunity to face the peak of dungeoneering itself? Me! The creator of the greatest labyrinth ever!”

“Oh my lord, I cannot believe the final boss is actually Minaga himself!” Jake exclaimed loudly.

“We were thoroughly bamboozled and all taken by surprise,” the Sword Saint echoed in a dry voice.

“Yeah, a big reveal,” Dina nodded along, giggling a bit.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched, trying to act surprised too. Only the Fallen King wasn’t a good sport about the entire thing.

“Ha ha! Naturally, you had no way of seeing such a twist coming! This will be the ultimate challenge of my labyrinth, and should you come out victorious, you will be generously rewarded! Should you fail, you will have to do another challenge that will still give pretty decent rewards, but way worse than should you defeat me!”

The five of them nodded as they observed the Unique Lifeform. Jake scanned him as well as he could, trying to get a good read... and one thing was indeed sure: Minaga was far more powerful than any opponent he had ever faced before, bar-none. To make

matters worse... the Unique Lifeform knew them. He had observed them doing the entire dungeon, and he would not put it past Minaga to use that against them.

“Don’t let your guard down for even a second,” Jake warned his party. *“And don’t hesitate using boosting skills.”*

A second passed as the final vestiges of the light show died down, and the fight was about to start.

“So, challengers... are you ready to face Minaga?” he smiled, looking tauntingly down at them with raised eyebrows.

Jake smirked as he pulled out his bow and jumped to the side, the Fallen King and Sword Saint moving forward as Dina stayed in place with Sylphie shooting into the air.

“I shall take that as a yes,” the Unique Lifeform said as he lifted one hand and grinned from ear to ear. He snapped his fingers as his body exploded with energy, his voice still echoing throughout the entire hall. **“Cue my boss theme.”**

The deep sound of bass rumbled the room as the music began playing from who-knows-where. Jake and the others didn’t take their time to enjoy it, though.

Following his own advice, Arcane Awakening activated at 30% right off the bat as he nocked an arrow and took aim at the Unique Lifeform that had yet to move. Yet just as he released his arrow, a massive tile of floor flipped over right in front of him, blocking him and making his own arrow explode right in his face.

Then, the more than twenty-meter-wide tile flew towards Jake, forcing him to dodge away as more of the floor began rising to try and block him in. Busy dodging, he could only get a few glances as the Sword Saint closed in on Minaga, his boosting skill also active.

Minaga’s entire pillar exploded in the very next second, roots erupting from all over it, piercing towards the Unique Lifeform. He jumped in response, meeting the Sword Saint in melee as he summoned a staff in each hand.

The Sword Saint kept diving in as he slashed, making Minaga block the blow. Yet, just as the old man was about to pull back, Minaga moved in closer, and it looked almost like his staff stuck to the Sword Saint’s sword as he swept it upwards.

All the old man could do was be dragged along with the staff as he was tossed above Minaga... right into the path of a diving Sylphie who had to divert her course. To make things worse, Minaga lifted his second staff and pointed it at where Sylphie was dodging, shooting out a torrent of flames that forced her away even further.

Then, in an almost dancing motion, he pivoted out of the way of a blast of force shot by the Fallen King as more than a dozen magic circles appeared around him. Stopping his pivoting, he pointed with a finger gun towards the Fallen King.

“Bang.”

All the magic circles exploded simultaneously, releasing giant ice spears that flew toward the other Unique Lifeform. Reacting quickly, the Fallen King summoned a golden wall in front of himself, but the ice spears proved more powerful than he had expected, making the barrier crack and forcing the Fallen King to retreat just before it shattered.

Jake, who had finally managed to get free of the shuffling floor tiles, released a barrage of destructive arcane arrows at Minaga, who was falling to the ground. This made him raise his hand as a metal wall appeared right in front of him, summoned from pure energy manipulation as far as Jake could see.

“Oopsie,” Minaga said as a root spear nearly hit him in the foot as he landed on the floor. He managed to dodge it, just as two overlapping crescent waves of water and wind cut towards him, forcing him to once again summon a defensive barrier, this one of molten metal, a huge amount of steam released as the attacks hit it.

“All-elemental magic... perhaps more than just elemental magic,” Dina said through their Golden Mark.

“Advice?” Jake questioned.

“Be prepared for any kind of attack,” Dina just said.

Jake sighed as the steam began to gather above Minaga while he stood there with a lifted staff as the orb of dense energy grew above him while he infused even more energy into it.

“Come on, you can do better than this! In fact, I know you can.”

Jake and the others had time to properly get in position to strike again as Minaga just stood there with a giant grin on his face for a few seconds before he shrugged.

“Fine. If you won’t attack-“

Cracks formed all over the orb above him, releasing intense energy..

“-then I will.”

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Chapter 702: Nevermore: Big Spells!

The very next second, the orb of steam above Minaga exploded, bathing the entire room in dense white fog. What's more, this steam had some of the concepts from the mist in the labyrinths infused into it, meaning that within a second, he had severely limited the sense of everyone. Well, everyone except Jake, that is. With his Mark of the Avaricious Hunter and Perception, he was pretty much unaffected, considering the size of the room.

"Dina, left, fire," Jake warned her, and she responded just in time as she turned and manifested a wooden shield right as a staff slammed into it, exploding in a huge inferno that blasted her backward. She slid across the ground as Bobo had managed to help shake off the last of the damage, dozens of tendrils of wood extending from her body.

Minaga was about to strike again as a stable arcane arrow pierced through the mist, hitting him in the shoulder and penetrating through his robe.

"Man, how bloody high is your Perception stat?" Minaga questioned as he telekinetically pulled the arrow out just before it exploded, once more making it clear he knew what Jake and company were capable of. Except he seemed to have underestimated Jake's Perception.

Jake also had a bit of a theory as he shot another arrow. Minaga reacted a bit slowly but managed to block it with a barrier he summoned with one staff as he pointed the other toward Dina, who was about to cast some magic of her own.

"Dina, dodge to the left."

Without hesitation, she stopped casting and jumped to the left, just in time to avoid a beam of light that burned a tunnel through the mist. Minaga seemed a bit surprised she reacted in time but was even more surprised when two arrows flew around his barrier, hitting him in the shoulder and arm.

Both were once more pulled out telekinetically instantly, but Jake had confirmed his theory. *The mist is also limiting his Perception somewhat...*

Minaga was less affected than anyone else, though. Even Jake was hit harder by the mist; he just managed to overcome it through sheer stat points. To continue his testing, Jake loosed another arrow, this one of the destructive variety. It was blown up in mid-air halfway toward Minaga as he shot a small beam of light at it.

Another flew right behind it that Minaga was forced to sidestep, the Unique Lifeform looking slightly annoyed at Jake interrupting him. With Jake distracting him, he had lost his chance to deal damage to Dina before the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Sylphie could reenter the fight.

A massive tornado gathered as Sylphie addressed the dense steam that hampered everyone except Jake. The tornado lifted all the steam just as the Sword Saint and Fallen King got close to where Jake told them Minaga was standing, the old man attacking with a more cautious approach this time around.

From behind, the Fallen King summoned a large massive ball on a golden chain that he swung from the side, timed to arrive at the same time as the Sword Saint's attack.

Minaga saw the attacks coming and smiled as he sunk into the floor, making both attacks miss entirely.

Jake's eyes opened wide.

"Dina, behi-"

It was too late as the Unique Lifeform popped up right behind Dina, who was decidedly not ready to respond. In one hand, he held a ball of fire, and in the other, an orb of frost, both giving off intense energy. He brought them together as he did a double-palmed strike only a meter behind her. The moment the fire and ice met, Jake's danger sense exploded, and he instinctively used Gaze of the Apex Hunter on Minaga to try and delay him.

It only managed to freeze him for a minuscule moment, but it was enough for Dina's guardian to at least respond. Bobo counter-attacked instantly, as hundreds of roots shot out to meet the mixed fire and ice attack.

With what happened next, Jake was incredibly glad he had given Dina a chance to defend herself.

A massive explosion of white energy blasted an entire section of the room apart as Dina was sent flying, her entire form encased in a mix of flames and ice. She smashed into the other side of the massive room as Minaga stood still for a moment.

"Good response from both of you."

He did not have time to say more as the Sword Saint closed in, and this time Minaga did not pop into the ground as the entire floor erupted from the Fallen King telekinetically lifting it with such force the tiles shattered.

Minaga seemed unbothered, but the old man was intent on being a threat. Water surrounded his blade as he did an upwards slash, and Minaga moved to block again, only to find himself fainted when the sword abruptly shifted direction. The Unique

Lifeform was ready and had already moved to block the sword... only for the entire blade to vibrate as it seemed to rewind in time for but a moment. It threw off all timing as the Sword Saint slashed the surprised Minaga across his stomach just as he jumped backward.

“Also a good one!” Minaga smiled as a faint trickle of blue blood dripped from his stomach, with only a light cut left there. Jake had already had his suspicions, but the Sword Saint confirmed it.

“His body is more durable than expected...” the Sword Saint said just as he charged in again. *“Dina, are you okay?”*

The Sword Saint engaged Minaga as Jake offered range support with the Fallen King as the two of them worked together to ensure the old man was not instantly overwhelmed.

“I’m fine... but Bobo is hurt badly,” Dina communicated through their telepathic link as she dislodged herself from the wall. Her robe was torn, and the wooden armor usually covering her body was broken in several places from a mix of frost and flames. *“I will need some time to heal him.”*

“Let’s hope he can’t do that frost-fire attack again,” Jake answered as he kept shooting arrows. Talking and fighting at the same time was not particularly hard with a C-grade mind.

By now, Sylphie had already managed to thoroughly get rid of all the steam as she prepared an attack from above, even if she still had to keep the tornado active to keep it up there. The Fallen King was also cooking as Jake and the Sword Saint fought Minaga, who was not particularly pressured. Jake did notice that he did not do any magic after the big attack he had sent Dina flying with, though.

Even so, actually damaging Minaga was an uphill battle. It was good that he didn’t seem to have any healing spells as he slowly began to push back the Sword Saint. Jake’s fellow human was simply too out of his league when it came to sheer stat disparity. Luckily, they only had to hold on for so long.

The Fallen King was done with his preparations. Both of his claws were shining golden as his golden crown flashed with energy. A golden veil fell over where Minaga stood as he. With a look of surprise on his face, he was pressed into the ground as everything around him seemed to vibrate. He slightly buckled as all the tiles around him cracked, and a dent in the floor was made in the area the golden veil affected.

This magic was an extension of what the Fallen King had practiced during his time on the city floor. Usually, he was always the direct source of all his force magic, resulting in it often functioning more as direct ranged attacks rather than what it truly was: an advanced form of telekinesis.

Now, he was capable of not only shooting it out from his body but could strike from even more angles.

With Minaga temporarily suppressed, the Sword Saint and Jake made their moves. The old man pointed his blade as he used his erosion stab while Jake released an Arcane Powershot.

"You're pretty good too!"Minaga grinned as his eyes began to glow. The golden veil of energy started lifting off him just as the Sword Saint and Jake's attacks arrived.

With the pressure slightly lessened, Minaga managed to point his staff and meet the stab head-on, resulting in the Sword Saint getting sent flying back from the sheer feedback of his sword hitting metal. As for Jake's blow, he hit himself in the chest with his other hand, blasting himself backward and out of the golden veil.

"Nice tr-"

A green pillar of highly consensed wind energy descended from above, drilling down in a constant stream. Sylphie had hidden within her own giant tornado, successfully proving it was a superior method of stealth than any other, making Minaga not notice even as she prepared her attack. Mentioning the fact that the steam was mixed into the tornado helping to hide her was not necessary. Not at all.

Rock from the already shattered tiles was sent flying everywhere as the constant stream of wind energy continued, bearing down on Minaga. Jake did not sit idly by and already had an arrow nocked as the others also prepared themselves to strike the moment Sylphie's attack was completed.

It turns out they would get their chance sooner than expected.

From the floor, a massive amount of rock speared out and momentarily blocked off the wind long enough for Minaga to jump out of the attack. Just as he did this, three ranged attacks arrived at once, but he clearly had all his magic back as he summoned a thick metal shield, borrowing the momentum from the attacks to retreat slightly.

"Gotta admit, I did forget about the bird for a moment there. Big mistake," Minaga's voice echoed through the hall as he landed safely on his feet. The attack from Sylphie had frayed his robe and left Minaga just in his pants. His upper body was covered in small cuts here and there from the slashing winds, with a few small holes on his arms and the cut from the Sword Saint being the only other outward injuries.

With a wave of his hand, Minaga took the time to put on a new pair of identical robes. Above, Sylphie was annoyed at him for escaping her attack as a barrage of wind blades descended, but Minaga just casually swept his staff across the air as a brown magic circle appeared, radiating with earth mana.

It didn't fire right away as Minaga had to dodge a Splitting Arrow from Jake first, but before anyone else could make a move, he grabbed one of his staffs with both hands and held it like a baseball bat.

“Batter up!”

Minaga swung the staff hard as he hit the magical circle. The moment he did, a more than ten-meter-wide rock flew out, leaving a trail of fire behind it like it was a meteor.

Sylphie's wind blades all hit the meteor, but they failed to have any impact, forcing her to dodge out of the way. At least she tried to. Below, Minaga pointed his staff at the meteor as it began to pulse, and even from the ground, Jake felt the gravitational pull from the large boulder.

The bird tried to get away, but the pull was too powerful. Sylphie summoned her Green Shield as she flapped her wings as best she could, and at the very end, she managed to get mostly out of the way. Emphasis on mostly. The side of the meteor still hit her, sending her tumbling as her green shield exploded into wisps of green energy. She had wisely not tried to turn herself into wind, as Jake could only begin to predict the effects that would have had.

She got away with only a damaged wing and a few burns as Minaga stared up at her, clearly a bit disappointed at his attack, failing to do anything of note. Seeing the power of the attack, Jake also had a prediction as he shot several arrows at the Unique Lifeform.

Minaga reacted by dodging and hitting away one of his arrows using his staff, and even when the Sword Saint attacked, he did not use any magic at all. This allowed the Fallen King to swoop in from the side, having realized the same thing as Jake. Minaga – seemingly unable to use magic – tried to block the Golden Claw using one of his staffs, but the sheer scale of the attack still landed several gashes up his arm.

Exactly five seconds after he used his meteor attack, Minaga slammed one of his staffs into the floor, making it erupt into a sea of sharp spikes that forced the Sword Saint and Fallen King back. The arrow flying for him he also barely blocked as a small metal plate appeared in front of his face for a brief moment.

“Five seconds,” the Fallen King and Jake sent through the telepathic link at nearly the same time. Jake allowed the Unique Lifeform to elaborate as the King continued. *“Every time he does a major spell or combination magic, he cannot use any magic for five seconds afterward. That is our time to strike.”* The most update novels are published on *novel* ♦

Jake nodded, as that was his conclusion too. It did also make sense... because if Minaga could spam out spells like what he used on Dina, they wouldn't have a good time. Shit even when he didn't do combination magic, they were pressured.

Minaga went on the offensive with his magic up and running as electricity crackled in his surroundings. Lightning bolts were sent flying towards the Sword Saint, the old man summoning a wave of water to absorb it.

With a palm, he shot off a giant fireball toward the Fallen King, making the Unique Lifeform block the other Unique Lifeform. He was about to also shoot something towards Sylphie as the ground below him rumbled. He quickly stomped as the ground shook, and a small earthquake vibrated the entire hall, but even if he tried to stop it, a powerful vine full of life energy still shot up from the ground. Just as it did so, it grew thorns and wrapped around his arm.

Minaga quickly shot out a wind blade to try and cut it off, but before he could, the vine ripped itself back into the ground. The thorns dug into the arm and cut through the flesh as blood flew into the air, making the Unique Lifeform cringe.

“Okay, that actually hurt.”

The attacker had naturally been Dina, who had managed to stabilize herself by now and rejoined the fight. She had laid low and waited for a chance to strike, and seeing the torn-up arm, Jake would say it was definitely worth it.

With her back in the fight, the fight was equal for a while as they repeatedly traded blows. Minaga did take a few hits here and there, but his tricky spellcasting also caught them by surprise occasionally, resulting in far worse wounds. Luckily for them, they now had a healer back in the fight.

After a solid few minutes where a balance was reached, the Unique Lifeform retreated slightly as he lifted both staffs, smashing them into the ground as a massive wave of pure force magic pushed Jake and the others back while also disjuncting any projectiles.

With the space disrupted by his shockwave, Minaga raised his hand as sand began to gather, followed by an intense flame that embraced the sand. Within a second, all of the sand turned into an odd orb of glass with hundreds of flat surfaces all across it, making it look like a hollow disco ball, which-

Jake's eyes opened wide.

“Defenses, now!”

His warning came just in time as Minaga pointed a finger gun at the glass orb. A beam of light shot out, entering the disco ball as condensed lasers shot toward them – one for each. Every single one of them had reacted and summoned their own defenses, with Jake standing behind a stable arcane barrier. However... even behind the barrier, he saw the laser slowly burn through it, and from what he saw, the Sword Saint and Dina were struggling as several layers of their barriers were already melted through.

Minaga pointed the ray of light into the ball as he grinned. Then, the rays of light hitting them all disappeared as Minaga just stood there, shooting light up into a ball that was slowly growing brighter and brighter.

“Let’s take this spell for a spin!”

Using his other hand, Minaga raised it as he telekinetically pushed the side of the ball as it began spinning – the entire boss room getting turned into a deadly laser-rave in the very next instant.

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Chapter 703: Nevermore: Many Minagas, Handle it! (Yes, I have made this reference once before, sue

Thousands of lasers the width of a pencil spun around the room, cutting through it at intense speed and power. Every single person in Jake’s party summoned their best defenses or tried to dodge, as Sylphie turned her entire body into wind to resist most of the damage.

The Fallen King intensified the energy in his shield as best he could, and Dina jumped back as walls of roots continuously rose in front of her to try and block the attack, layer after layer getting burned through. On the side of the Sword Saint, he summoned several veils of water along with an odd painting that radiated intense energy. They all did their best to block or lessen the damage of the attack.

All except for one.

The moment before Minaga unleashed his attack, Jake rushed forward, stepping down as he teleported. Despite the shockwave slightly destabilizing space, he got more than halfway to the Unique Lifeform as the laser show began.

Because there was one place where the attack didn’t hit: right below itself. Right where Minaga stood.

Jake sprinted as the lasers arrived, more than a dozen beams sweeping in from the side. Despite this, Jake did not slow down in the slightest. Both katars appeared in his hands just as the first beam hit, but Jake was ready.

Using Eternal Hunger, he met the first beam of light with the edge as he reflected it off the weapon, the beam moving so fast he had to use the Blackpoint Blade as a bridge to make the beam flash past him. At the same time, Jake dove in between two beams and found every small spot he could fit through as he briefly met the eyes of Minaga, who just stared at him.

He kept staring as Jake dodged hundreds of beams within a second as he arrived in the safe zone right below the disco ball.

"That is some bullcrap right the-"

Jake kept going with his momentum as he slammed both katars into the chest of Minaga, who was still casting the spell. He penetrated halfway to the hilt with both weapons before the light show stopped, and his danger sense exploded as Jake jumped back, not even having the time to try and pull out his weapons.

A beam shot down right where he just stood as Jake pivoted around it, slamming a dark green glowing palm into the Unique Lifeforms side while the beam of light burned a hole dozens of meters into the ground. Minaga seemed to have had enough as the sound of the disco ball shattering sounded out, and thousands of razor-thin shards of glass descended upon Jake, forcing him to properly retreat.

Jumping back, he failed to fully dodge his own Blackpoint Blade that Minaga sent telekinetically flying after him, leaving a cut on Jake's cheek. Eternal Hunger had already been recalled as Jake made his retreat.

Jake wasn't even sure how prematurely he had interrupted the large spell, but he was sure as hell happy he had. Seeing as Minaga was not following up with more spells, Jake assumed he couldn't, as he pulled out his bow and began pelting the Unique Lifeform as he checked in on his teammates.

Sylphie had managed to come out of it mostly unscathed, but she had consumed a lot of energy just from thousands of beams of light sweeping through her elemental form. Dina had also come out okay, though she too had consumed a lot of mana, repeatedly summoning her root walls, with Bobo only barely managing to block what did get through. She did get a nasty cut right above one of her eyes, though, but she was quickly healing it.

The Sword Saint was surprisingly unscathed as he stood behind a large painting. The painting itself had been utterly burned to a crisp with a few holes in it, and the Sword Saint did look like losing that particular painting was not a pleasant experience. From the telepathic mark, he also made it clear that was a limited useability skill with quite a high energy consumption.

Finally was the Fallen King, who – to put it nicely – looked like shit. The constant barrage of lasers had managed to get through his barrier, leaving hundreds of burn

marks crisscrossing his entire body. The only untouched parts were the mask and the ivory hands and feet that were too naturally tough to be affected.

Despite clearly being damaged, the Fallen King did not seem affected and didn't hesitate to make a move to at least get some revenge. Golden energy gathered in both of his hands as he unleashed a large golden beam full with energies of the soul-damaging variant.

Dina and the Sword Saint also engaged as Sylphie dove down, a whirlwind of slicing winds surrounding her. The next few seconds resulted in Minaga getting dozens of minor injuries as four people went ham on him during his period of weakness, while Dina focused on healing everyone.

Five seconds after the spell stopped, magic from Minaga reappeared. A tornado of fire erupted from his body, throwing away the Sword Saint, and with the other hand, he shot out a howling blast of snow and ice, launching Dina toward the back of the room. Jake managed to dodge both of these as he navigated a stable arrow around the magic, hitting Minaga in the chest. A blast of force hit the exact same spot as Jake's arrow, making it pierce even deeper than before, and with a mental command from Jake, it exploded, bathing Minaga in destructive arcane energies.

Jake's eyes opened wide as he was forced to summon a stable arcane barrier, a gust of wind sweeping towards him. It only managed to lift Jake off the floor and send him skirting back, but the Fallen King was less lucky. A spike of metal flew out from Minaga, piercing him in the chest and blasting him back until he hit a wall. Said wall then began to fold as if wanting to crush him, but the Fallen King released an omnidirectional shockwave, freeing himself.

Minaga attacking Jake and the Fallen King once more gave Sylphie and the Sword Saint an opening as they both struck. By now, they had begun to get a far better read on Minaga's abilities as well as his overreliance on hand motions to cast. They found more and more small openings as the wounds on Minaga accumulated a bit at a time, with whatever damage Jake and the others took swiftly handled by Dina, who focused primarily on healing and landing the occasional strike if she saw a good opening.

After Jake landed a solid Powershot a few minutes later, making Minaga reel back with a bloody chest, he suddenly stopped mid-movement as he grinned. His body was full of wounds, but he seemed unbothered.

"Oh damn, I hit seventy percent health! Do you all know what that means? That's right, it's time for phase two!"

Jake got a bad feeling as he heard this and wanted to shoot another arrow at Minaga, but he suddenly felt space around him warp as Minaga took out an odd orb and raised it above himself. At the same time, his body began to oddly warp.

As they all watched, more Minaga's appeared. Five versions of himself looked to almost walk out of the original as the orb above him exploded, and Jake's vision momentarily went dark.

He found himself transported to another arena, standing alone in front of a clone of Minaga.

"Ha ha! After spending nearly half of my remaining health points, I have successfully split you up, and on your lonesome, you shall face this clone holding an undefined percentage of my true power! Only after you have defeated it can you enter the arenas of your party members and assist them in killing their respective clones. After you have slain all of the clones, you may return to the main boss room once more and face me in a final phase!"

Jake stared at Minaga for a bit and got a feel for the clone's power. It was a lot weaker but not weak by any means. What's more, if they were all facing their own versions... Jake wasn't sure how all the others would do, especially Dina, who had to consume a lot of energy this far.

"What, no banter?" Minaga said, sounding disappointed.

Without hesitation, Jake charged. If he could only help the others after he was done here, it meant he had no intentions of delaying. Mid-charge, his speed increased as Arcane Awakening activated at the offensive 50%. His reason for entering melee rather than staying at range was also simple... he was pretty sure Minaga was way better than him at ranged combat.

What he did not believe Minaga was better at was dodging Jake in a melee brawl.

Minaga grinned at Jake's charge as both staves appeared. One of them sent a flamethrower toward him, but Jake quickly jumped to the side and, with another jump, continued his charge. With a swipe of the other staff, a barricade of rock spears shot out of the ground, which Jake vaulted over before they had even fully emerged.

Dozens of orbs appeared all around Minaga as beams of light shot out, but Jake expertly dodged them all as he stepped down one final time, teleporting to appear right in front of the Unique Lifeform. A staff flew down towards his head, but Jake had already slipped by it and landed a solid jab at Minaga's chest. This time the weapon penetrated far deeper than on the real version, leaving a solid wound.

Metal chains shot out from one of the staves right as Jake shot out a shockwave of arcane mana, shooting them away before he managed to land another cut. Minaga retaliated fast as he unleashed an explosion of fire, making Jake jump back. Mid-jump, he pulled out his bow and fired a single arrow in an instant, taking the Unique Lifeform by surprise as he got a nice hole in his chest.

Landing, Jake teleported into melee again as Minaga was already preparing to launch a ranged attack. He successfully interrupted Minaga by stabbing his arm, continuing his relentless assault. Jake had no plans of letting up as he continued his all-out aggression to never allow Minaga to cast a major spell, assuming he could even do the major casts in this split form. This required him to make some sacrifices as his Scales of the Malefic Viper had to handle quite the brunt of magic attacks Jake chose to endure or only partly dodged to avoid disengaging for too long.

Minaga eventually began adapting as he became more defensive and summoned metal barriers to defend himself as he kept attempting to get some distance. Jake tried to stay close, but a powerful mix of earth shards and wind magic made it difficult as momentarily, the fight shifted to ranged combat.

Momentarily.

Through the use of Eternal Shadow, Jake managed to avoid a large spike of lava as he once more closed the distance.

Jake had time on his side as the poison was slowly accumulating within Minaga, but he was also on a tight timeline. He had a nagging feeling that he was on a timer... as for if this timer was due to his party members being in danger or some unknown factor, he had no way of knowing.

Either way, the best course of action would be a swift victory, no matter the scenario.

Elsewhere, Jake's other party members also faced their respective clones. Sylphie's room was a glorious battle of two domains of magic fighting one another as a bird and Unique Lifeform flew within, trying to find chances to strike at one another. Both sides consumed vast amounts of resources, with no clear winner in sight.

The Fallen King fought Minaga straight on, the other Unique Lifeform meeting him with a similar mindset. In the end, they were both Unique Lifeforms. A natural compulsion to compete was ingrained within both of them, even if Minaga was by all rights far more powerful, both in this form of himself within the dungeon and his true, likely divine, version outside.

Other Unique Lifeforms were simply the closest they could ever get to kin, and this left them with a need to prove themselves superior. It was the same as with the Ashen Devourer. As such, their fight was fierce, as both parties went all out from the get-go, trying to prove themselves the better Unique Lifeform. Content originally comes from **novel•fire●net**

Dina took a far more calculated approach as she communicated her strategy through the Golden Mark, and it was instantly approved. Rather than fight Minaga, she went entirely on the defensive, not even trying to attack unless it was to interrupt something she found too dangerous to block, avoid, or heal through. She was strong, yes, but in a

one-versus-one, she was likely the weakest in their party overall. Her offensive prowess was simply not that impressive.

This left Jake's final party member... the Sword Saint.

Miyamoto listened to Minaga finish his speech as he prepared himself. The Unique Lifeform stood in front of him, seemingly just waiting for his opponent to make a move... but the Sword Saint had something bothering him.

"You're holding yourself back, aren't you?" he asked Minaga.

"What makes you ask that?" Minaga asked with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

"Your movements are at moments almost intentionally stilted when you swing the staff. As if you are purposefully making sure you do not pass a certain self-imposed threshold of technique. I have done so before when practicing with others," Miyamoto answered.

"Man, you are crazy good at fighting for a C-grade, you know that?" the Unique Lifeform shook his head.

"I shall take that as a compliment," the Sword Saint bowed.

"It was, so you should! Anyway, yeah, you are right, but it is what it is. Or do you not want it to be what it is?" Minaga questioned.

"This may be inappropriate of me to ask, but..." the Sword Saint said as he sighed.
"Would you allow to me experience your guidance?"

"You want me to not hold back as much?"

"Yes, as impertinent as that may be," the Sword Saint nodded. He knew he was being selfish in his request. They were there to beat the fight, and here he was, asking for guidance instead. As the others were trying to win quickly, he was just talking. No... he was asking for his fight to be made harder.

Minaga looked at him for a second before just smiling. **"You know what? Fine, I can bend the rules a bit. From here on out, this clone will not use any magic, but I shall raise my technique level to a proportional degree to make up for it."**

"I thank you," the Sword Saint bowed. "I will also not-"

"No, you do everything you can to win," Minaga dismissed him. **"Trust me, you will need it. Also, I am changing your victory condition. Rather than defeat me, the other four clones just have to be destroyed."**

He knew not to argue as the Sword Saint just nodded.

Minaga looked at him and grinned as he waved his hand, a sword appearing floating in front of him. It looked like a weak common rarity steel sword that you could buy in bulk for cheap, and the Sword Saint did not feel anything special about it. What's more... it was blunt. Not a shred of an edge present.

"Well then. Prepare yourself. The lesson is about to begin, and you have only one task."

Reaching out, he grasped the sword, and the moment he did, Miyamoto jumped backward on instinct as his eyes opened wide.

"Survive."

Miyamoto desperately took a defensive stance as he felt like a child standing before his sword instructor for the very first time. Fear mixed with excitement as he prepared for a duel with someone of skill incomparably superior to his own.

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Chapter 704: Nevermore: Solo Battles

Blood flew into the air as Jake managed to slice the neck of Minaga, making him stumble back. His one arm already hung limply at his side as he tried to retaliate with the other using a blast of fire, but Jake dodged under it and stabbed Minaga in the arm.

A final eruption of power sent Jake stumbling back as a rain of lightning bolts struck him, making his entire body tingle from the impact and his scales crackle with energy. Minaga himself looked spent as he stood there, leaning on his staff.

Jake pulled out his bow, showing no mercy as an Arcane Powershot hit Minaga square in the chest, sending him flying into a wall with another hole in his chest. Activating his Arcane Charge from the Mark, he made Minaga flash with arcane energy as he groaned momentarily.

Still embedded halfway into a wall, he looked at Jake.

"Heh... good fight. I at least had fun. You are also the first one to win, so take pride in that! Good luck with the rest of our battle," Minaga said as he smiled. **"See you soon."**

With those words, Minaga's clone turned into wisps of energy that moved and created three portals, each with the figure of one of his party members above it. The one not showing was the Sword Saint's, and Jake knew why, as the old man had informed them of his special "lesson" with the Unique Lifeform. After he had informed them of that, there had been radio silence, but considering they had not gotten any notifications about failing the bonus objective, he should still be fighting.

Jake felt happy but was not really proud of being the first one to finish his fight. In fact, it was completely expected. The clone he fought was weaker than the real Minaga by a great deal, but it was still level 275, which meant his Big Game Hunter skill remained active as powerful as before, and all of his skills that allowed him to do more damage to higher-level foes still worked. He was truly the best in fights like this.

Focusing on where to go next, he looked through the portals as he quickly reached out using the Golden Mark.

"Done with my clone. Where should I head next? Anyone needs help badly?" Jake questioned, unsure where to go. They had not communicated much as they were all busy with their own respective fights, so Jake didn't know the situation in the other rooms.

"Ree!" Sylphie complained through the link, clearly not happy with how things were going on her end.

"I can hold on for a while longer," Dina said.

"Leave me be," the Fallen King said dismissively, sounding almost offended by Jake even daring to ask if he needed help with handling the other Unique Lifeform.

No answer from the Sword Saint. Not that it mattered, as helping him was not an option.

Jake didn't delay as he jumped through the portal with the figure of Sylphie depicted above it, and the moment he arrived on the other side, he was buffeted by powerful winds as he got a lay of the land.

If Jake's fight had been a focused fight with emphasis on micro-strategy that led to little impact on their surroundings, Sylphie's fight was the exact opposite. The entire room was thoroughly torn up all around him as magic of a massive scale ravaged through. With no party members to watch out for, Sylphie let loose and became a living whirlwind of destructive winds, filling nearly half of the room.

Minaga had clearly responded in kind as massive magic circles floated around him, large-scale spells thrown out as if mana wasn't even a resource to him. Giant freezing tornadoes met Sylphie's winds as they canceled each other out, both parties trying to land smaller and more deadly attacks whenever an opportunity presented itself. That usually took the form of Sylphie occasionally attempting a fly-by, with Minaga

sometimes finding an opening to land a beam of light or a highly-condensed ice shard or metal spike.

A sort of balance had been reached, and Jake truly had no idea who would win if it continued. He had no interest in finding out either.

Sylphie and Minaga crashed within the tornado as their domains overlapped, and Sylphie's charge was met with Minaga striking out with a palm of whirling flames. A giant inferno exploded from their impact, and the fire was rapidly dispersed by the powerful winds. Just as Minaga prepared to strike again, he suddenly cursed. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON novel.fire.net

"Well, shi-"

A fully charged Arcane Powershot hit him in the side, blasting his barrier apart and sending him reeling back with blood trickling down his side. A stable arcane arrow had penetrated deeply into his shoulder, and he did not have time to pull it out before Jake made it explode.

Sylphie quickly followed up as she unleashed a giant blade of wind, sending the Unique Lifeform tumbling back even further. Minaga stabilized and went on the offensive, but facing two opponents was much more difficult.

He seemed to know this too, as he tried to be ultra-offensive, knowing that if he didn't, he would fail to accomplish anything. Rather than dodge, Minaga tanked several attacks as dozens of magical circles popped into the air around Sylphie. She tried to get away, but a few of the circles lit up, sealing the area. The rest of the circles began glowing with increasing intensity, and even when an arrow pierced Minaga in the chest and sent him flying, he didn't lower his hands but finished the spell.

All of the magic circles shattered at once, releasing pulses of dark energy that washed over Sylphie. A screech echoed throughout the hall, making Jake worried. He moved to make sure Minaga could do nothing more as he blasted the Unique Lifeform back repeatedly as Sylphie got her bearings.

The explosions of dark magic had not just hit her but all of the wind that was connected to her. Her entire body seemed to give off black smoke as it had invaded her body, almost like a poison consuming her from within. Jake did not register it as poison, but he knew it was damn close.

Minaga had a hard time dealing with Jake alone due to how injured he was, and when an enraged Sylphie rejoined the fight, things got even worse for him. Coupled with what injuries he had taken from Sylphie during their one-versus-one fight, Jake and his bird niece managed to finish off the Unique Lifeform within the next few minutes.

"Two down - and with the old swordsman doing his thing - two to go! Do hurry, though!" Minaga's voice echoed as his body faded into wisps of energy, spawning two portals. As they were still forming, Sylpie flew over and landed beside him.

"Ree," Sylphie said, sounding sad as she took out a small bottle from her vest and ate it.

That dark mana spell had severely damaged her mana pool, forcing her to drink a mana potion. She was also a bit low on other resources from Minaga's magic and her long fight, but she sounded confident if disappointed in how hard of a time she had.

Jake calmed her down as he telepathically confirmed that the Fallen King still refused help, making the two of them head to Dina's arena next.

What met Jake and Sylphie upon entering was a raging inferno as Minaga's chosen school of magic to deal with Dina was clear. It seemed to be working pretty well, too, based on how much ash was spread everywhere, making it appear as if an entire forest had been burned down throughout their fight.

Dina was flying around the room as she repeatedly defended herself, Minaga chasing after her as he released fireballs, blasted out flamethrowers, and summoned what looked like living creatures of pure fire to chase after her. Dina kept calling green barriers or vines to defend herself, even if they got burned down in seconds.

Yet even as she was clearly on the back foot, Dina looked nearly untouched as she near-perfectly defended herself from the constant barrage of spells. Even when Minaga mixed it up and used things other than fire, she was ready and responded appropriately.

Jake and Sylphie entering the arena naturally changed the situation quite a bit. Quite a bit in this instance, meaning a Minaga that was utterly screwed as the three of them teamed up, and with Dina helping out the two of them, they could be far more offensively-minded. Knowing one had a healer on their side did wonders for one's self-confidence, and in this case, it even allowed Sylphie to get healed up a good deal.

Minaga did give it a good shot, but the clone was just too weak compared to the real thing and didn't have the same powerful composite magic. Or maybe he did, and Minaga just chose not to use it. Hearing that the Sword Saint would fight Minaga in a "special way" just confirmed something Jake and the others already knew: the Unique Lifeform was not serious.

Which made sense... because if he was a god – which he one-hundred percent was – they wouldn't stand a chance at all, even if his stats were heavily reduced. Just through sheer experience and skill, they would have been fucked. That he held himself back to a certain threshold was only to be expected and that the old man had convinced Minaga to slightly let go of these self-imposed restrictions was indeed risky as fuck. Not that Jake could blame him. The Sword Saint had a hard time finding people around his own level of power skilled enough in pure technique to fight him.

After fighting Dina's clone for around five minutes, it, too, bowed out as it summoned one final portal, which they promptly headed through. What met them was an even more intense sight than what Jake had seen in the two prior rooms.

The Fallen King stood on one side, his entire body filled with wounds as several sections had huge swats of his bark-like skin ripped off, and one of his legs looked halfway cut through. On the other side was a Minaga who had lost both an arm and a leg, with his entire body truly telling of the intense fight. He even lacked two of his four eyes as claw marks bled across his face.

"Do not interfere," the Fallen King's voice echoed in their heads just as they appeared.

"Arrogant as always," the Minaga clone smiled. **"I say always, even if I don't really know you, as honestly, all of us Unique Lifeforms are the same, aren't we? All arrogance. With actual power to back it up, mind you."**

Scoffing, the Fallen King's body exploded in golden light as he summoned two golden hammers on chains. He swung one as Minaga jumped using his one leg, dodging it. The second hammer descended from above, but Minaga flung himself out of the way using telekinesis as he pointed his staff at the King, shooting out a highly condensed beam of light.

It hit the King's barrier, making him float to the side as fast as he could. Just as the bubble was burned through, the beam barely missed him, allowing the Unique Lifeform to counter once more. Both hammers swung wildly as the two wisps in the King's eyes began to glow.

Both hammers began shining brighter than before and briefly sped up, hitting Minaga who tried to block, flinging him across the room. Jake thought it hadn't done much, but he frowned when he got a better feel for that golden glow.

Soul magic.

Jake saw Minaga get to his feet, but he had clearly taken a lot of damage. That hammer had not just hit Minaga's physical body but directly impacted his Soulshape, rocking it and damaging it. Jake could already imagine the headache one would get if hit directly.

Nevertheless, Minaga was not down for the count yet, as a magical circle appeared below him. It accelerated him forward, flying towards the King as he infused mana into his staff. It began to grow thicker and longer as the King tried to stop the other Unique Lifeform.

Minaga chose to take the golden blast of force directly to the face, sending blood flying everywhere as he swung hard, hitting the Fallen King in the side faster than he could react. The barrier broke, and the Fallen King folded like a lawn chair around the large staff before getting blasted into the wall at the far end of the room.

Dina looked worried and was about to make a move, but Jake held out a hand and stopped her. A second later, a dense golden beam erupted from the broken wall, hitting the now-kneeling Minaga who was missing half of his face. He didn't move, but the moment the beam stopped, the Unique Lifeform fell over forwards, dead.

"Wow, good job, you killed one of five clones all alone! Truly proud of you, fellow Unique Lifeform!" Minaga's voice echoed through the hall.

Out of the broken wall, he had been thrown into walked the Fallen King, his right arm utterly broken and his entire mid-section full of injuries. Yet he gave off an indomitable aura and a strong sense of pride. With Minaga's body dissolving, Dina no longer held back as she took out her staff and fired off green lightning that began slowly mending the King's broken body.

Soon enough, a portal appeared, this one bigger than any of those prior. On the other side, Jake could see Minaga sitting with his legs crossed atop a raised platform as energy revolved around him.

"You good to go?" he asked the Fallen King, who floated over next to him. He saw the golden lines pulsing through his body, making it clear his boosting skill was going. If not active at full power, then close to it.

"I shall do fine," the Fallen King said dismissively.

Jake threw Dina a glance.

"The body of the Fallen King is just a vessel... unless it is utterly destroyed, he will be fine," she explained.

Kind of already knew that, Jake shrugged as he led the others through the portal. This also meant the Sword Saint had succeeded. If not, they would have gotten a notification, so he had to be fine. Well, not necessarily, fine, but still not lethally injured.

Arriving on the other side with the three others, they appeared standing below the newly raised platform Minaga was sitting on. An orb of energy floated above him, nearly ten meters in diameter, radiating with intense power.

Right after they arrived, another portal appeared beside them. Jake looked over as what at first looked like a bloodied rag fell out. However, on his second inspection, he saw it was the Sword Saint who landed on the ground hard, looking like he could barely stand, as he fell to his knees.

The reason he looked like a rag was due to all the blood and tattered clothes. His body was marred with more wounds than Jake could count, nearly no part of his body untouched. Even as he kneeled there, blood slowly dripped from his body, making it clear many of the cuts were incredibly fresh.

Jake stared at the old man with wide eyes.

"What the hell happened to you in there?"

The Sword Saint looked at the ground and smiled slightly as Dina focused intensely on healing him. The countless wounds on his body slowly started to close. Even so, it was clear he had taken significant damage, and he was in horrible shape, especially considering his boosting skill was going at full power.

Yet he smiled to himself.

"I survived a tough lesson," the old man spoke as he seemed to recall what he had just experienced with an expression of fondness.

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Chapter 705: Nevermore: A Difficult Lesson

The Sword Saint had found himself in a lesson with quite a difficulty.

To face a superior foe was nothing new to him. Throughout his life before the system, he had fought many people superior to himself as he got better and better. Oftentimes, he also met those who simply had a stronger physique, making their speed and power higher than his own. Even so, he had risen to become one of the most talented swordsmen in the entire world, even before the system. With his many years of continued practice, even as his body deteriorated, he was perhaps the most skilled.

After the system, he had yet to face a single individual around his own level who he would recognize as superior to himself when it came to pure technique. Everyone who he found capable of beating him found their superiority not through sheer skill but by some other advantage. Jake had an instinctive style that surpassed all sense of logic and technique, as one example.

No, the only person that the Sword Saint had fought around his own level, with a level of technique even approaching his own, had been Ell'Hakan. He was still behind, even if he had proved himself a formidable fighter. The fact that he used a trident did contribute, too, as the Sword Saint hadn't fought people who used those often.

Alas, the point is that the Sword Saint found it difficult to find opponents who could match his skill level. Fighting people of equal or superior skill was the best way to improve, so he felt like the lack of proper foes held him back. He did firmly believe that

once he spent more time in the wider multiverse, he would meet many who matched or surpassed him, but for now, he felt starved.

That is when Minaga appeared.

When the Sword Saint asked Minaga to duel him using at least some of his true skill, he had expected it to be with his staff, as that was what Miyamoto had seen the Unique Lifeform display hints of overwhelming skill with. To see him pull out a sword was a welcome surprise, but he did quickly come to realize he had made one mistake.

He had either overestimated his own skill level significantly... or underestimated Minaga's.

The Unique Lifeform made the first move as he stepped forward. Moving back slightly, the Sword Saint tried to get a read on his opponent. Minaga took another step, entering the range of Miyamoto, making him take the chance to try and land a light attack.

Blood sprayed as the Sword Saint jumped back, a light cut on his arm from the blunt blade. It had moved faster than he had expected, yet it seemed to not have been any more swift than his own sword.

"Good try, but too obvious," Minaga smiled. **"So try again."**

Not wanting to back down, the Sword Saint moved in again, this time not holding back as his Rainblade activated. Water revolved around his blade, and several raindrops shot out toward the Unique Lifeform. Without Minaga even moving, the raindrops were cut into pieces mid-air, and the Sword Saint missed, stumbling forward.

Miyamoto jumped back as a sword swept up, leaving a light cut on his chest.

"Keep coming." Google search [novel*fire*net](#)

Following the encouragement, the Sword Saint did just that as he tried all he could. He used several of the attacks in his arsenal, but no matter what he did, it proved useless. Miyamoto felt like an utter novice. A child fighting against a true master.

And he only felt euphoria from that sensation.

"You have already progressed somewhat. The concept of the blade is embedded within your water, allowing it to cut and act like an extension of your weapon... but it is only that. An extension. Your concept itself still needs work. Most will come with time, but as much shall be from practice. I noticed on the prior floors that your focus recently has heavily shifted to improving other aspects of your powers. Rain and time magic are all well and good but don't lose sight of the blade," Minaga explained, blocking dozens of blows as the Sword Saint's robes were getting more and more flayed from the counterattacks.

"Here, let me show you..."

Miyamoto swung with all his power as Minaga seemed defenseless. He did not even use his blade but instead swept his hand up, moving to catch the sword. The sharp edge of the Sword Saint's blade hit the palm of the Unique Lifeform. The Sword Saint stared in confusion as Minaga's flesh remained uncut, and he held the ancestral blade like a blunt metal stick.

"The strongest blade is not forged from the greatest materials in the multiverse or sharpened till perfection. The strongest blade is the one wielded by the strongest swordsman. Sharpness is a concept like any other, and it depends on your will as much as any physical prowess or whatever weapon you may possess. You will still need the whole... but as you are now, I need nothing more than my intent to render your cuts useless. Before a fire mage, fire shall do little harm. In the same vein, a master swordsman should never find himself cut by a lesser blade," Minaga said in a calm tone. **"In other words, to me, it doesn't matter if you wield a sword or a blunt object. With your current power, you simply cannot cut my flesh."**

Miyamoto tried to retrieve his sword, but the Unique Lifeform had it thoroughly grasped in his hands. Rather than struggle, the Sword Saint did something else. He dove forward as he chopped, a faint layer of water surrounding his hand.

Minaga moved his sword to block it and smiled.

"Man, having a good student is great," he said, kicking the Sword Saint away before throwing his ancestral sword back to him. Catching it, Miyamoto barely managed to block in time as Minaga attacked.

"As I just said, anything can be a blade as long as it has the faintest level of sharpness. Water is a great tool to make blades, as you have no doubt already realized. But you need to seek deeper. Consider all the whys you can find. The Path you walk is one of enlightenment through practice and learning, same as me. Don't look at those around you as ones to imitate, and at most, only observe them for inspiration. Only Dina walks a similar kind of Path as you, after all. Jake, Sylphie, and that other darn Unique Lifeform all walk Paths following their instincts, which means teaching them can be downright detrimental as that could bring them further from their instinctual comprehension. To them, actually understanding something isn't overly critical. They only need the how, the why an afterthought to comprehend after-the-fact. You, on the other hand, do well with a teacher as you get stronger from the why... am I just rambling here? Do you understand what I am trying to say?" Minaga asked, the Sword Saint listening as his body slowly filled with more sword cuts.

"I believe I do," the Sword Saint answered as he retreated, Minaga giving him a light reprieve to respond. "I am to truly ponder on the concept of sharpness... no, on all

those related to my Path. I am to honestly try and understand them. But I believe I am already doing this. My sword is already central to my Path; all other concepts are only there to assist my blade."

Minaga laughed as he moved in, and Miyamoto once more tried to desperately block. He managed to block a few unpredictable slices, but he still found himself bloodied.

"When did I ever say you were doing anything wrong!?"Minaga laughed, pressing on as the Sword Saint tried to adapt. **"Did I ever say you were straying from your Path?"**

Miyamoto was confused, which made him briefly lose focus, getting a nasty cut on his shoulder. He tried to counterattack but was pushed back as Minaga landed a palm strike on his chest, leaving more than fifty small crisscrossed cuts from the light attack.

"I believed you were pointing out flaws," the Sword Saint said as he stabilized himself, questioning if he failed to comprehend something the master swordsman before him said.

"I was. You have three massive flaws compared to me,"Minaga smiled as he raised his sword before continuing his relentless assault.

"The first is experience," the Unique Lifeform said as he allowed the Sword Saint to attack over and over without countering, gladly just blocking everything. **"The number of foes you have encountered that could truly match you are limited. This will improve with time, but you would do well practicing with someone of high skill when you can. Not necessarily skill equal to your own, just someone close enough. Superior would be best, of course, but that can be hard to find."**

Their "fight" continued as the Sword Saint was now on the defensive, using everything he had to avoid any lethal blows, his boosting skill already active on full power just so he could hang on.

"The second is time. You may think it is the same as experience, but... actually, no, you probably don't think that, as I assume you know the difference. You strike me as a smart fellow, after all. Anyway, this one is the most obvious. You need time to practice what you already know. Time to meditate. Time to ponder. Time to simply grow in power and have your horizon expanded. Experience and time do go hand in hand, as experience is simply one good way to spend your time," Minaga continued, sending the Sword Saint flying as he nearly lost an arm.

"Third is your biggest flaw compared to me by a large margin, but sadly, I cannot help you in this area," the Unique Lifeform said in a far more serious tone than the two prior. He even stopped attacking for a second as he sighed.

"The third is... handsomeness. No matter how many times you evolve, you simply cannot even begin to approach the perfection that is Minaga."

Miyamoto stared for a few seconds before he smirked to himself, feeling a sting of pain from his cut-open cheek. "As much as it saddens me, that is simply something I will have to live with."

"Damn shame, damn shame," Minaga shook his head. **"Anyway, let's continue our fun. I am sure you have already realized what this lesson is about by now, right?"**

The Sword Saint nodded as Minaga still explained.

"That's right, it's experience. That will be my method of teaching. Observe, feel with your body, and study me as you try to survive. Learn what you can without finding yourself crumbling, but do know that you are on a timer. The lesson will end when either your party succeeds in killing my four other clones, or your body fails you. Whichever comes first. Now, let us speak with naught but our swords."

These were the final words Minaga spoke as he attacked again, the Sword Saint meeting his teacher. Everything he did was foiled, but he kept fighting as the minutes passed. He was pushed back repeatedly, as Minaga did not let up, barely giving him time to breathe. Yet the Sword Saint also began to notice something else. The Unique Lifeform intentionally used certain repeated rhythms in his swordsmanship. One would think getting a read for this rhythm would make it easier for the Sword Saint, but he soon came to realize this insight was a necessity, not a way to get an advantage.

Because Minaga kept heightening the difficulty. Whenever the Sword Saint thought he saw an opening or reached an adequate understanding of his opponent, the pattern slightly changed, forcing him to dance to Minaga's tune once more, and all he could do was try and keep up.

No matter how much he felt like he had improved, the wounds kept coming. Miyamoto barely found a brief opening to consume a health potion to battle the blood loss as his body was shredded nearly beyond recognition.

This kept going as the minutes passed.

Suddenly, Minaga changed his movements and attacked in a far more aggressive manner than before.

The Sword Saint moved his blade carefully as he tried to block the other sword, but it seemed to move in an everchanging pattern. Just as Miyamoto thought he was about to block it, it seemed to disappear, only to reappear, leaving a cut on his chest. He knew better than to try and counterattack, but even as he attempted to dodge, he was not able to.

With wide eyes, he could only stare as the flat side of the blade struck him in the stomach, sending him tumbling backward, leaving a trail of blood from all his wounds as he slid across the tiled floor. Trying to get up, he felt his legs failing momentarily.

I cannot delay.

There was no choice anymore. Deep inside, he knew that a mere Glimpse of Spring would do nothing in this situation. It was unfortunate, but he would rather unleash his full Transcendence than fail the bonus objective. Miyamoto also believed the backlash this time should not be as bad as it was during the Treasure Hunt.

With determination, the Sword Saint slowly stood, and with a sigh, he opened his mouth. **"I call-"**

"Aand the others have killed the fourth clone," the final Minaga clone interrupted him as he stopped mid-movement. **"Well, that was a bummer and a bit faster than expected. Oh well, what can you do about it? I guess I could have made the clones stronger, true, but I digress."**

Shaking his head, the Unique Lifeform threw a glance toward the old swordsman standing there, frozen a dozen meters away. **"I guess you win. Congratulations! Man, I teach a damn good lesson if I say so myself. I should become a multiversally renowned teacher! Actually, on second thought, that sounds miserable. Yeah, I am just going stick to impromptu lessons like this."**

Miyamoto could only stare as his wounds suddenly began aching. He could only reflect on his own state, and compare it to the creature before him. The Minaga clone stood there relaxed, with his simple blunt sword in hand, not a single thread on his robes touched by a blade.

The Sword Saint – if he could even call himself that – looked quite the opposite. No part of his body was not covered in small cuts, as thousands marred his body from head to toe. More blood than a human body could possibly contain spread throughout the room from his wounds.

One would think he would feel humiliated. Miyamoto had been utterly dominated from the very beginning. There were no two ways about it. Hundreds of times, Minaga could have killed him, but every time he was spared.

Miyamoto could only feel grateful as he bowed deeply, despite the intense pain it invited. **"I thank you for this lesson."**

"You bloody well should! Nearly no one gets an opportunity like this. Now get out of here and see if you can beat the final phase!"

With those words, the Minaga clone exploded, and the Sword Saint was enveloped by a portal as he dropped back into the boss room, surrounded by his four party members.

Jake looked at the old man smiling as he looked reminiscent of his lesson with Minaga. Dina was quickly healing him as Jake shook his head and turned his gaze towards the meditating Minaga, who still had his eyes closed. If he was giving them time or preparing something, Jake didn't know, but he welcomed the brief pause nevertheless.

And brief it was, as only a few seconds later, Minaga opened his eyes.

"You have passed the second phase, I see! And all of you even remain in the fight, proving none of you are pathetic dead weights,"Minaga spoke, sounding oddly offensive for no reason.

Slowly standing up, Minaga lifted his hand and pointed at the giant floating orb of energy hanging above him. Jake's danger sense stayed silent even as Minaga's finger began glowing.

"For this achievement, I will reward you the opportunity to face my final form... me in a way cooler environment with more magic and stuff!"

With those words, the orb above him exploded into a massive shockwave, bathing them all in light as the entire boss room was obliterated, even Jake blinded as Minaga's voice echoed.

"Cue the final theme!"

Followed by the music changing; Jake still having no idea where the hell it was coming from.

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Chapter 706: Nevermore: Third Phase!

Jake's eyes slowly adjusted as he sent out a Pulse of Perception, trying to get a read on what exactly Minaga had done when he exploded the giant orb. What met him was a mental image he had not seen coming.

The entire room outside of the now mostly bare floor was gone – even the tiles having disintegrated from the odd shockwave. The walls and ceiling had been blasted apart, leaving large floating platforms all around them, just there in empty space.

Because that is all Jake saw outside of the central platform and the many floating pieces of debris: empty space. The environmental mana also changed significantly and appeared far more empty. Hollow. Nearly all of the affinities were gone, leaving them only with pure mana.

His eyes slowly adjusted as he noticed how much darker it had gotten. As they finished adjusting, he finally got a good understanding of what had happened.

Stars all around them provided little light as Jake and company found themselves floating on a large stone platform in the middle of space. The only other physical objects besides the large stone platform they were planting on were the broken parts of the walls and ceiling that had survived the giant orb's explosion, now floating all around them, suspended in space as gravity had also shifted.

The orb had been entirely made to blow up the room and had done nothing to Jake and the others. It was just a fancy way to introduce this arena where the final phase would take place.

As for Minaga himself, he was floating on a small platform right in front of them, both staves ready.

"Let us have this final fight amongst the stars! Come, challengers, and face me in my most powerful state! Okay, my most powerful state within the C-grade portion of Nevermore, anyway. Wait, also outside of that special lesson with the old swordsman. Ignore those. This is my most powerful state nevertheless!"

They stared up at the Unique Lifeform as Jake had a premonition.

"He is going to use more... complicated forms of magic now. At least space magic, probably also other kinds," Jake sent through the Golden Mark, warning the others.

None of them seemed surprised, as there had to be something different about this final phase. Jake experienced an odd mix of emotions as he wanted to see what Minaga was now capable of, but on the other hand, he also wanted to win.

Jake smiled as he looked tauntingly at Minaga, getting a grin in response.

"Now, let us begin!"

Minaga's words became the starting shot as his body began to glow with power. Jake felt his aura heighten, and he instantly understood there was more to this phase than just more complicated magic.

The Unique Lifeform had finally used his own boosting skill.

Jake instantly retreated, as the Sword Saint and Dina did the same while she kept healing him. The Fallen King, despite being damaged, dove forward. Considering his boosting skill was fully active from the get-go, he seemed keen to get into the action. Sylphie followed suit as she circled around their foe, waiting for an opening.

Smiling, Minaga stomped his foot. The platform below him cracked as he kicked off it, all of the stone catching fire and shooting towards the Fallen King. He blocked it with a barrier in front of him, but Minaga had already released another attack before the King had time to react. This one struck from above, completely avoiding the summoned barrier as dozens of ice shards fell upon the Unique Lifeform.

Minaga was about to do more when an Arcane Powershot struck him, forcing him to retreat slightly. Jake did not let up as he kept shooting, fully making use of the wide-open space. He had already found his way to some of the debris, using it as a foothold while shooting.

“You really are the biggest threat. Or maybe just the most annoying,” Minaga praised Jake. At least he saw it as praise. The Unique Lifeform spread out his arms, and suddenly, Jake felt like the stars above shone slightly brighter than a moment prior. He jumped as he felt a sense of danger, and just in time as a beam descended from above, obliterating where he had just been standing.

Using a hand motion, Minaga made the stars above shift. Jake was still staring as what looked like a bull was formed as lines were drawn, and the entire figure began to glow. Sylphie tried to stop Minaga, but he teleported – meaning space magic was now also on the table – and appeared too far away for any of them to interfere.

Up above, the constellation flashed one final time as it began moving. For a brief moment, Jake felt like the constellation connected to a higher concept, one far beyond anything in a C-grade dungeon. It was gone as fast as it came, but Jake had used Identity on the constellation on instinct... and he was not sure if he regretted that decision.

[Eldenstar Bull Monarch – lvl ???]

He saw this Identify result only for a brief second as it suddenly changed – even his system log was no longer the same.

[Sign of the Bull – lvl 260]

The beast broke out of the stars above as it descended upon them. Its body was made up entirely of stars, making it take on an ethereal appearance. The power it radiated was also not to be underestimated, especially if one considered it was some kind of summon.

This beast flew straight down for Sylphie as space seemed to warp around it. Minaga also quickly began moving again as he pointed his staff towards Jake. Stepping down, Jake teleported away just in time as all the debris around him flew toward where he had just stood, forming a solid ball of stone. *Gravity magic?*

Jake also had to dodge this solid ball as Minaga threw it at him. High above the platform, Sylphie had engaged this Sign of the Bull monster. The beast used some kind of astral magic as space warped and small stars appeared, exploding to dispel Sylphie's wind. Sylphie did not want to see herself outdone, though, as she began to tear into the creature of stars. It seemed very effective, too, as the winds alone seemed to almost destabilize the constellation's form.

Why or how it was so effective, Jake didn't know... but then again, Sylphie's Sylphian Winds were weird.

Back with Minaga, the Fallen King had shrugged off the ice shards and engaged again. Golden blasts lit up the darkness of space, blocking out the lights of the stars as Minaga summoned a dense barrier to block. The golden waves rolled over it as Minaga lifted his hand.

One of the staves appeared as space shook. The entire staff began shining as reality warped around it, the staff itself warping in turn as it took on the appearance of a spear, and lighting bolts flew from its form. A golden hammer soon descended, but Minaga had already teleported once more, appearing floating above the middle of the platform as he grasped the staff, ready to throw it.

“Dodging this one is heavily recommended.”

He was looking straight at Jake, but he was ready. So was the Fallen King. Problem was... there was no sense of danger. His intuition screamed, and Jake reacted.

“Dina, watch out!”

Minaga twisted his body mid-throw, the spear of lightning flying past Jake and the King – straight for Dina, who had retreated with the Sword Saint to heal him.

Jake's warning allowed her to respond just in time, and she acted without hesitation. Her entire form exploded in green light as a projection of a grand tree appeared above her, Dina herself standing within its trunk. It shielded both herself and the Sword Saint as the spear hit the translucent projection of the tree, only slightly embedding itself before the lighting was absorbed.

“So you have learned a bit from that old tree!” Minaga grinned. Dina's body had also changed just as she cast this spell, her small antlers growing, and her clothes changed. She had entered her most powerful form, putting them on even more of a timer.

The Sword Saint stood beside her, looking apologetic. However, he did seem in way better shape now than when they first entered the room, that blast of intense life energy no doubt also doing him good.

Dina seemed less than happy with being forced to activate her form change and pointed her staff at Minaga's staff, which was stuck in the bark of the projected tree. Roots shot up and coiled around it, dragging it into the ground, effectively sealing it away.

"Now that is just petty," Minaga shook his head just as he flew to the side to avoid a golden blast and a Splitting Arrow.

At least he thought he had avoided the attacks, as they flew straight past him and hit the Sign of the Bull that Sylphie was fighting, blasting it back and allowing Sylphie to land a solid blow of her own. Minaga saw this and cursed to himself a bit. He began flying upwards to help the beast, but Jake and the Fallen King had resumed their attacks, forcing him to respond.

He dodged all the attacks by flying through the air and deflected a few arrows with his staff. Exactly three seconds after he had thrown the lightning spear, he teleported away when Jake and the Fallen King had managed to pincer him.

"Three seconds between the big spells and more magic," Jake shared his thoughts with the group. *"Or it may be a trick... either way, it could be an opportunity."*

With his magic back, Minaga went on the offensive. The Fallen King and Jake found themselves heavily pressured as Sylphie was slowly winning above, and the Sword Saint and Dina prepared themselves to rejoin the fight. The projected tree was still there, and Dina had briefly shared through the Golden Mark that she could not move or do any long-range magic with the skill active.

A projected tree that didn't allow you to move? Very thematic. From the looks of it, Minaga knew this was the case, too, as he went hard for the Fallen King. The Unique Lifeform had already been damaged after the second phase, and now he was even worse off. Dina's quick healing simply wasn't enough, and with how much stronger Minaga was now, Jake could not help enough.

Ice and rock shards cut into the Fallen King as he retreated and summoned a barrier, only for a burning ray of condensed light to descend from above, burning into his shoulder. A third follow-up attack sent a plane of pure space magic barreling into him, blasting him into the stone platform below, creating a small crater.

Before the Fallen King could get up, the stone around him warped, creating a small mound to temporarily seal him in.

Minaga raised his hands as energy began to gather. Jake instantly recognized the signs of a big spell being cast, and he tried to help with Gaze and a Powershot, but it only

delayed Minaga slightly as he simply tanked the arrow, accepting the wound in trade for potentially finishing off one of his opponents.

Jake felt the Fallen King's intention to try and land his final trump card through the Golden Mark. Yet just as he was about to, another figure rejoined the fight.

Thrown by a massive vine and surrounded by dense life magic, the Sword Saint flew straight for Minaga. Jake saw the light gather far up in the sky as the faint projection of a moon appeared just as overcast skies blocked out its light.

The old man turned younger for a moment as he appeared right in front of the Unique Lifeform and drew his blade.

“Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut.”

Space momentarily shattered as the barrier of spatial magic summoned by Minaga was cut through like butter. A large crescent wave spanned the horizon as blood spewed into the air, and the aura of the moon above faded away.

Minaga was sent stumbling back, a massive wound across his chest from shoulder to hip – the kind that would have had guts spilling out if the Unique Lifeform had any. He swiftly responded as his hand began to burn, and he dragged it across his own chest, cauterizing the wound.

“Man, that one was a lot stronger than against the Demon Lord... why did I agree to give you a lesson again?”Minaga asked rhetorically as he teleported away from Jake's attempt to follow up. Something Jake was totally fine with, as he knew one of the Sword Saint's weaknesses with the Glimpse of Spring was that he could not move immediately after using it. At least not very well.

“Good cut, though,”Minaga still grinned. **“Does make me wonder... why is it only a glimpse?”**

The Sword Saint still looked tired, even if he was healed, as the old man smiled. “Perhaps you will find out.”

“Making me all excited here,”the Unique Lifeform laughed in between dodging attacks from Jake.

Down below on the platform, Dina's skill that had left her rooted – pun intended – expired, and she rushed over to the Fallen King, who had managed to break out of his tomb of stone. She had instantly gone to work with her healing, and the Unique Lifeform had taken out one of his golden soul pellet-things that he used as better-working potions for him.

In the sky, Sylphie was winning swiftly, her Sylphian Winds seemingly countering the constellation beast quite nicely. Once she was done, she would rejoin the fight against Minaga, and with the Fallen King and Dina also there, Jake saw their chances as good.

The only negative was that time wasn't on their side. Everyone besides Jake and Sylphie had their boosting skills going at full power now, and while Minaga also had one active, Jake suspected he would outlast them. It was also only a matter of time before Jake and Sylphie had to go all out.

They all knew this, thus why they moved in unison to strike at Minaga while they could. With just the four of them, they pressured the Unique Lifeform, and Jake had to admit the old man surprised him.

If Jake had to say the Sword Saint had one major weakness, it was his defensive profile. He did use that weird painting once, but in most cases, he could only use his sword or weak water barriers to block attacks. That was still the case... but his way of doing it now felt different.

Minaga shot off turbulent waves of unstable space, making reality crack in its wake, but the Sword Saint some-fucking-how managed to slice through it, the magic dispersing. He even cut a blast of wind apart, making it scatter harmlessly around him. Whatever the hell had happened during that "lesson" of his had made the old man come out... sharper? Like the power of every cut had become stronger in some odd way.

Soon enough, the constellation beast was slain by Sylphie as she dove down and joined the assault. Minaga did prove a lot better defensively in this final phase, as he liberally teleported around and used spatial barriers, but he was still just only one being against five. When it was just two or even three of them, Minaga had the upper hand, but by now, they knew not to get separated and always covered each other.

Minaga slowly took on wounds as Jake and company managed to come out mostly okay if one didn't consider their stamina and mana draining fast. Dina, in her transformed state, was a well-spring of life, healing them passively as she assisted them purely defensively, making sure no one took a bad hit.

The Sword Saint even covered the stars above with a raincloud that made rain fall upon the battlefield at all times. Things weren't looking good for Minaga as he was repeatedly pushed back.

Things continued until Jake managed to land a well-charged Arcane Powershot after the Sword Saint broke a space barrier, sending the Unique Lifeform barreling back.

Sylphie flew in to follow up as Jake saw Minaga smile.

"Sylphie get ba-"

It was too late as Minaga turned towards Sylphie, as a black cube appeared in his hand. The hawk tried to avoid it, but he threw the cube like a baseball, and despite Sylphie's wind blade and Green Shield, she was hit. The moment before the cube hit her, it expanded as Sylphie was entirely swallowed, the cube continuing in its thrown trajectory, the hawk nowhere to be seen.

“One down,” Minaga smiled as he pushed his hands together. **“And do you know what time it is?”**

Jake communicated with Sylphie, who seemed trapped within some odd space as Minaga spoke again.

“It’s labyrinth time!”

With those words, dozens of black cubes of shifting space appeared all around him and flew toward Jake and the others at unprecedented speed. They were all ready... until the cubes suddenly began teleporting. The Fallen King was not fast enough as a cube appeared right in front of him, swallowing him.

The Sword Saint dodged two, but a third one came from an odd angle as it flew out of a portal behind him, and when he turned and tried to cut it apart, he was simply swallowed along with his sword.

Dina blocked nearly a dozen of the cubes with vines and blasts of life energy until one managed to swallow her too.

From Sylphie, they quickly became aware of what these cubes were:

Spatial labyrinths.

Small self-contained labyrinths you would have to break out of to escape. They were small, but... who knew what Minaga could do with even a minute of no interference. Clearly, it would be best for at least one person not to get trapped.

This brings us to how Jake reacted.

More than a hundred cubes came for him – far more than any of the others - teleporting and shifting as portals appeared, spewing them out.

He proceeded to dodge every single cube as they flew past him, continuing into the darkness of space along with the four that contained his party members.

The Unique Lifeform had raised his staff and looked to be casting something as Jake looked his way mid-dodge. Minaga made eye contact and stopped casting.

“Yeah, good point; I won’t ever get it off. Oh well, I guess this is also a valid option.”

Minaga pulled the staff out of the ground below that Dina had tried to seal before, as his other one appeared too.

“Let’s see if you can hold out till the help arrives. Very in character, by the way. Refusing to do my labyrinths even now.”

“Hey, not my fault tha-“

A beam of light shot at Jake, forcing him to dodge as space around him seemed to bend, forcing him to blast himself to the side using mana in order to not have his face blown off.

“Oh no, you won’t get me monologing to buy time!” The source of this content is **novel** ♦ **fire** ♦ **net**

I wasn’t trying to... Jake wanted to defend himself as he desperately tried to dodge. He realized there was no space to hesitate anymore as his body exploded with power. Arcane Awakening fully activated as he prepared to face off against Minaga in his most powerful form alone.

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Chapter 707: Nevermore: An Underhanded Strategy

Jake knew that winning versus Minaga alone in his fully empowered form was not gonna happen. He had won against the clone only due to how much weaker it was than the original, but even that had been a pretty hard-fought battle.

Of course, this was assuming Jake actually had to beat the Unique Lifeform to win.

Jumping back, Jake disengaged from Minaga as the Unique Lifeform unleashed a barrage of spells, clearly having decided to try and take Jake down before his teammates had time to return. Given the estimated time it would take to do the labyrinths and the fact that they had been flung into empty space, forcing them to make their way back to the central platform again even after they were out, Jake didn’t wanna bet on them getting there soon.

Retreating further, Jake let Minaga give chase as he dove behind a large piece of debris, making the barrage of fireballs hit that instead. A large boulder flew over next, breaking it apart, but Jake was already long gone as he teleported to another part of the broken wall, where he promptly released a potshot.

His arrow was blocked by a barrier, which was totally okay with Jake. Any amount of time or energy Minaga spent on defending was time he didn't attack. And damn, did Minaga like to attack as he waved his hand, making more than a dozen magic circles flash into existence behind him. At the same time, Jake felt space around him constrict as dense spatial barriers formed to his sides, above and behind him. *Combination spell.*

“You may be fast... but can you dodge this?”

Every single formation pulsed as each released a flaming metal spike straight at Jake. He dodged them and was about to taunt Minaga when a second barrage came, followed by another one even faster than the ones prior. The pulses continued, growing even faster as soon Jake was faced with more than sixty machine guns shooting out metal spikes.

Too many, Jake concluded as they kept coming. While he would have loved to see Minaga burn through mana by keeping the spell active, he knew that it was only a matter of time before he was hit, forcing Jake to make a difficult decision.

Have to risk it.

Rather than dodge, Jake charged forward. Minaga seemed pleased but frowned slightly as Jake's body split into two. The spikes usually focused on one target, but with two, Minaga had to either spread them out more or choose to focus on one. Both cases would be advantageous to Jake.

Jake felt pleased with himself as he closed in with his Eternal Shadow ten meters to his side. Yet just as he began to feel this, his danger sense spiked.

Every single formation behind Minaga exploded as each shot out seven or eight metal spikes like a shotgun. Jake cursed as he tried to dodge and summoned a stable arcane barrier. His Eternal Shadow also reacted fast and dodged many attacks but was eventually hit and dispersed.

Blood flew into the air as Jake was hit by three metal spikes. One hit his thigh, one in his stomach, and one in his shoulder as he had angled himself to take the hits in the side. This was the least amount of damage he could see himself getting out of his pickle with.

Before Minaga could do more, threads of arcane mana flew out of Jake's hand and wrapped around every metal spike as they were pulled out, still leaving him with three nasty holes.

“Man, I wanted to say a quip, but the fact you got out of that combo spell with so few injuries... yeah, you are definitely a cheat.”

“Says the Unique Lifeform who was born overpowered,” Jake shot back as he pulled out his bow and began shooting arrows alongside his words.

“Says the Bloodline Patriarch,” answered Minaga while he dodged the arrows or deflected them with his staffs.

“Still just a human and not some darling of the multiverse,” Jake continued as he managed to trick Minaga with a Splitting Arrow, getting a single one of them to hit him in the leg.

“Oh, poor you, being one of the enlightened races with infinite potential and all the Paths in the world open to you,” Minaga snorted as he pulled the arrow out as he didn't know if it had been primed to explode. It hadn't, but he played it safe.

“I guess we are both suffering,” Jake smirked as he retreated while shooting, wanting to get some distance from Minaga before his magic returned.

“We do have it rough, the two of us, that we agree on. Of course, I have it harder, as I have to live up to my own greatness every day.”

“So humble, too,” Jake smirked as he used two One Steps and found a nice cluster of debris.

“The humblest there is; in fact, I would argue I am the best at being humble in the entire multiverse,” Minaga joked as three seconds had passed and magic was back on the menu.

This once again put Jake on the back foot as survival was the name of the game. He didn't want to risk another major spell as even the normal casting was a bloody nightmare to keep up with, not even Jake capable of fully dodging everything. The passive barrier from the fully activated Arcane Awakening coupled with his Scales of the Malefic Viper did help a bunch with the larger magical attacks, but ultimately, Jake's lowest stat was still Toughness. He was not built to take hits but to avoid them.

On the labyrinth front, things were looking... okay? Each labyrinth wasn't overly large, but they would still take time to break out of. Sylphie used her speed to just quickly look for an exit, and at least there were no traps or anything within. She could also hear the whispers of the wind within as there was no mist, allowing her to rapidly make progress.

The Sword Saint did note how there was even lighting within the grayish empty hallways of the labyrinth. It was ultimately just a damn maze you had to find your way out of, and the longer you took, the more fucked your party would become as you floated further and further into the emptiness of space.

Dina further added that the entire place was shrinking slightly with time. This both meant that the labyrinth got shorter and faster to do, but Jake also didn't want to know what would happen if it shrunk too much. Getting crushed within a labyrinth cube did not sound like a nice way to go.

As for the Fallen King... well, Jake had a brief exchange with him as they reached an agreement.

Focusing on not dying while also not giving Minaga time and space to cast another major spell remained Jake's main focus as he slowly bought time. Minaga didn't seem overly stressed about finishing off Jake rapidly, though, and he knew why...

His resources were dropping fast. Arcane Awakening was a massive drain on its own, and coupled with his need to constantly use One Step, summon barriers, and regenerate his Scales, it was obvious he would run out of energy sooner rather than later.

Minaga gave off the vibe that he didn't believe actually beating Jake could be worth it, so he kept up his constant barrage of spells, either waiting for him to mess up or to run out of stamina or mana. He acted as if everything was going as expected.

So Jake did something Minaga definitely had not seen coming. Lifting his hand to his face, he grasped the mask on his face and pulled it off as he threw it toward the Unique Lifeform. His opponent dodged it but looked confused as he looked at Jake and saw that the mask had never left Jake's face, despite him just throwing it. Yet an object had clearly just been thrown past him.

“An illusion? No, that-“

A golden wave of energy erupted behind Minaga as a golden claw lit up the horizon, striking him in the back. Blood spewed out as the Fallen King instantly materialized from the thrown mask, as Jake had used a property of his mask he hadn't ever used before. As per the description:

“The Fallen King has anchored his existence to this mask, and as its owner, you are the master, allowing you to summon the Fallen King to your location at any time.”

Jake viewed summoning the Fallen King as kind of rude, and it went against the agreement they had... but in this case, Jake gladly used it for their collective gain. With permission from the Fallen King, of course. What's more, this was something Minaga definitely couldn't predict, as Jake had never done it before.

“Summoned? Wait...”

Minaga found himself with the Fallen King on one side and Jake on the other as both let loose. The Unique Lifeform struggled for a bit as he was put in a bad position and had to play defensively for a while, taking several wounds as he attempted to stabilize. Jake and the Fallen King were not gonna let that happen, as both went all-out. Pulling out an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and rapidly charging Arcane Powershot, Jake released a devastating attack as the Fallen King summoned a massive golden hammer that descended from above, like was it judgment from the heavens.

Combined with Minaga seeming confused and surprised, it was enough for him to use his very first defensive combination spell. Putting his hands together, a giant metal sphere appeared all around him, with a field of swirling darkness soon appearing to consume it. This left him standing with a semi-transparent barrier that both the golden hammer and arrow failed to even impact, as both attacks simply sank into the darkness, never to be seen again.

As for Minaga... well, he seemed far more interested in what had just happened with the Fallen King than the actual fight. He looked extremely curious and confused as he slowly floated down to the large central platform and began to speak.

“This doesn’t make any sense? That kind of summoning must mean... huh, you are bound to him? Oh, I get it. He killed you, and in order to survive, you chose to bind whatever vestiges of your soul remained to the Records that would be transferred to the item you would drop, which you knew would be your mask. Naturally, leaving you utterly broken in the process. This only made possible as you were the boss of a Tutorial, meaning the Records transference for the kill was increased. Of course, there would be no way for you to actually ever recover from that state as that would require powers capable of actually restoring a Truesoul and lost Records. Unless the system decided to lend a hand, which I assume it did due to how perfect your resurrection was. Well, perfect, besides you now being bound to Jake here, which by the way, is also utterly insane,” Minaga began ranting as he hit the nail on the head with everything that had happened before pointing at Jake.

Jake heard Minaga begin to talk as a thought appeared, and using the Golden Mark, he quickly spread his idea as Minaga continued. When the dark defensive sphere disappeared, none of them attacked either as he and the King watched Minaga walk around the large central platform.

“Why insane, you might ask? Say, Jake, do you have any idea what it means for him to store his soul within the mask, which is, in turn, bound to you? It means he stored the entire concept behind his existence within you. Within your Records. Yet you weren’t affected negatively in the least, which means your own Records were not only equal but superior to a Unique Lifeform, allowing you to utterly overpower him. Especially considering this bond remains after his resurrection. If I had to gander a guess, you probably even hold influence over his life and death... man, you really are utterly broken. Both of you, but in

different ways. Man, I can see why Vilas made you his Chosen; you seem to have been a monster even in the Tutorial... no doubt due to that Bloodline of yours.”

Minaga just kept talking as he looked deep in thought. **“What’s more, for a Unique Lifeform to willingly submit in such a fashion... no, is it even submission? Some kind of mutual understanding? Man, this is peculiar.”** Chapters first released on [novel**fire**net](#)

“An understanding was reached; that is correct,” the Fallen King answered. “One of mutual respect between two opponents. I did what I had to in order to survive, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Oh yeah, and your way of doing so was pretty damn impressive and probably bound to your Unique skill in some fashion. It isn’t something one can just do, after all. Most wouldn’t try either. Ever recovering was truly an impossibility, and I find it amazing that Jake even bothered bringing you back to life. The system doesn’t like to give out items allowing someone to circumvent one of its rules, so it couldn’t have been easy,” Minaga said in a pondering tone.

“It did happen due to a system event,” Jake confirmed.

“I did reckon it would have had to be during a system event... was it a direct request of the system? It sometimes likes to fulfill wishes, so to speak. Or perhaps it was an item of some kind? If you don’t wanna answer, that is perfectly fine.”

“I guess it isn’t that big of a secret,” Jake answered as he tried to look like he was thinking for a few seconds. Finally, he sighed. “It was an item.”

“One-time use?” Minaga questioned curiously.

Jake looked at the Fallen King as the Unique Lifeform had caught on. He also seemed to consider for a moment before answering. *“You may answer...”*

“Very well,” Jake nodded as he resigned himself to confirm. “It was one-time use, and I spent quite a staggering amount of Credits on it.”

“Wait, someone was selling it? During a system event?” Minaga seemed even more intrigued.

“Ah, I apologize. It was during a system event where the system auctioned off items directly as part of a reward for doing another event well,” Jake clarified as he sighed loudly. “I was definitely surprised when the system manifested itself physically like that just to sell items...”

“Oh, manifestations like that do happen, though they are very rare. Well, they are not rare for you as new initiates of the new universe, but for the rest of us, they are few and far between.”

“Truly? Have you encountered the system before in a physical form?” Jake asked, looking surprised.

“Of course I have, duh!” Minaga laughed.

“Really? Under what circumstances?” Jake asked in a curious tone.

“Heh, well, I probably shouldn’t, but if you insist, I guess I can- wait!” Minaga yelled in realization as he felt what had just happened.

At once, all three labyrinth cubes flying through space had been broken out of as Dina, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie had waited to exit at the same time. They had surmised that Minaga would likely know the moment someone got out... so they had all waited right at the exit to get out at once while Jake had deployed a truly underhanded strategy.

“That’s right!” Jake smiled in triumph as the three auras approached, flying at full speed back toward the platform. “I successfully got you monologing!”

“You... you scoundrel! This is unethical! How dare you use my own extreme curiosity, vanity, and desire to hear my own voice against me!” Minaga yelled as the Fallen King prepared to launch an attack.

“A perfectly executed strategy,” Jake grinned as he and the King had gotten some distance from the Unique Lifeform, with Jake standing on the platform below, ready to react to any attacks.

“Damnit! I should have known; it was so obvious that you were just stalling!” Minaga admonished himself.

Pulling out both his staves, he released a shockwave of energy towards Jake and the Fallen King both, the Fallen King blocking the blow and getting sent flying back for several kilometers as Jake dodged, remaining standing on the central platform.

“Almost as if it was so damn obvious I saw right through it!”

Jake’s danger sense erupted as he tried to retreat away from the central platform. Just as he did, a massive magic circle appeared all across it as an enormous shockwave shot out. In the empty space, all around the platform formed what looked like millions of planes of glass as they reshuffled themselves. They created a barrier around the central platform...but it was not the usual kind of barrier.

It was another fucking labyrinth. One that everyone, including the Fallen King, was now outside of, leaving only two people on the inside. What's more, Jake could not resummon the Fallen King. What's even more, far above, the constellations shifted as the stars seemed to resonate with the magic circle on the platform. It was only a matter of time before more of those Sign Beasts would appear.

Minaga stood on the platform, smiling as he looked at Jake. **"Guess it's still just the two of us, eh?"**

Jake looked at the Unique Lifeform when he noticed the formation was still glowing along with the above constellation. The spell was active... a large combination spell...

Without hesitation, Jake pulled out his bow and loosed an arrow. Minaga dodged as Jake released another, this one getting blocked by his staff. Jake kept shooting as Minaga retreated for a bit before changing his strategy and charging at Jake, staff in each hand.

Jake's theory was confirmed, and he was ready.

Beating Minaga with magic? No fucking shot.

One without?

Well... it was time to find out.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 708: Nevermore: "Of course there is one."

Jake kept Minaga at a distance as he continuously retreated and took potshots at the Unique Lifeform, who had no way of fighting at long range without his magic. At the same time, Jake heard from the Fallen King that the entire labyrinth Minaga had summoned seemed spatially expanded, making it a nightmare to get through. He did try to blast walls apart, and while he did have some success, it appeared slower than simply rushing through as fast as possible. Jake did want to simply summon him again, but doing so was a huge strain on the Fallen King. Doing it once was fine, but more than that could have less-than-desirable consequences. So he fought alone.

Minaga handled Jake's barrage of arrows extremely well, but he still couldn't block everything. Jake had gotten good at shooting tricky arrows that curved to hit where the Unique Lifeform moved to dodge or curve around the staff raised to block it. His

opponent was obviously also aware of this as he stopped chasing and stood still while looking at Jake with raised eyebrows.

“Heh, while I can’t do normal magic right now... you do realize you are standing on the magic circle, right?” Minaga grinned as the ground below him began to glow, and the entire formation slightly shifted.

Just as Jake stepped down, he felt like the entire world had become heavier. At least when it came to using One Step, as he realized space had been constricted. What’s more, Minaga seemed to slightly shrink the arena, giving Jake less and less space to work with.

Minaga once more gave chase, Jake no longer able to teleport, making it significantly harder to get proper distance. Three times, Jake barely avoided getting caught until the fourth one forced him to switch away from his bow. Both katars appeared as the nature of the battle changed. Jake accepted this as he dove into melee, dodging under a staff sweep to go for a stab. Minaga was quick and stepped back as he countered, Jake countering the counter as the staff slammed into the ground.

He managed to land a quick stab on the Unique Lifeform’s arm but was hit with an elbow strike in return, making him stumble back. Gritting his teeth, Jake re-engaged again, pushing the Unique Lifeform even more aggressively than before. His strikes were vicious, and Minaga found himself getting slowly pushed back by Jake’s ferocity.

Several minor wounds were exchanged, but neither side could land any meaningful hits. Jake kept pressing, picking up speed as his katars struck dozens of times a second, putting Minaga more and more on the defensive.

“I do find it odd you are so focused on the bow... not gonna lie, you strike me as more talented as a melee fighter,” Minaga said, as he tried and failed to hit Jake with his staff. With his second staff, he did manage to force Jake to disengage for a brief moment as both of them jumped back, giving Minaga more space to talk.

“It’s like you’ve spent far more time training your melee capabilities than your skill with a bow. Don’t get me wrong, you are mean with a bow too, but you don’t exude the same kind of pressure as you do right now. This is like having a wild beast going crazy at you, yet without the usual downsides of such a bestial fighting strategy due to your ridiculous reaction times and pure instinct,” Minaga kept talking as he landed on the platform more than fifty meters away, Jake already charging over.

“I could see you walk the Path without having ever encountered the bow... perhaps for the better. Or not. Who is to tell?” Minaga kept pondering as he prepared for Jake’s attack.

Jake didn't comment on anything Minaga said but kept sprinting. He knew there was some truth to Minaga's words, but he didn't have the time nor the desire to think about things like that in the middle of a fight like this.

“Also... you seem to be misunderstanding one thing. While it is true that I cannot use any magic right now,”Minaga began as he lifted his staff above his head. It began glowing with power as his aura spiked for a moment before he finished. **“This isn't classified as magic.”**

Reacting to his danger sense, Jake leaped to the side just in time as Minaga smashed the staff down, the entire area he had just been in exploding from the sheer force of the Unique Lifeform's swing. His eyes landed on Minaga just as the glow from his boosting skill seemed to change. Minaga smiled as he leaned forward and stepped down.

The ground erupted from his step, sending Minaga flying straight for Jake. Without hesitation, Jake bent his back as a staff swept over where his head had just been, a shockwave of pure force released from the swing. The other staff descended from above right after, Jake barely managing to slip by it.

He was still hit as the ground once more erupted from the sheer power of the blow. Jake flew through the air for a moment as he took out his bow and fired a single shot, hitting Minaga in the back, much to his opponent's annoyance. He also had a good idea why Minaga had suddenly gotten stronger.

Pure stamina manipulation, Jake concluded as he blasted himself to the side using arcane mana to not land on the ground again, as Minaga had already charged towards his estimated landing location. He changed course for Jake mid-charge, resulting in the two of them clashing once more, Jake now purely on the defensive.

Minaga had gotten stronger. Faster. Yet Jake did not surrender or even try to disengage. He welcomed the pressure as he pushed himself further than before. He practically felt his own veins burn from Arcane Awakening as he did all he could to keep up with the Unique Lifeform.

His mind was fully focused as he dodged. He read the flow of the fight as he also felt the power surge through his own body. Jake knew he needed to do something. Wrest back some level of control. Land a big hit. But he didn't have the tools to do so. He knew he lacked a skill for a situation like this, and Descending Dark Arcane Fang just wouldn't cut it. The skill was difficult to use as he had to actively circumvent many of the skill's functions – such as the requirement for it to be a downward thrust. That meant a longer activation time and less overall power.

But... if the skill wouldn't cut... Jake would just have to make it into one that could. The current Descending Dark Arcane Fang was fundamentally flawed. It relied on dark mana, an affinity he didn't really use for anything anymore but had replaced with curse energy when it came to Eternal Hunger. The entire method of delivering the blow was

also flawed, as doing a downward thrust with a katar was awkward at best and impossible at worst.

So he rebuilt it from the bottom as he took inspiration from other skills and what changes he had already made to the skill after he began using katars. There was nothing truly new... he just had to combine everything.

Existing changes to Descending Fang. Inspiration from his curse energy. From his fight with sim-Jake. From the power of the Blackpoint Blade. His own arcane mana. From everything he had done to better his melee skills.

Eternal Hunger began slowly pulsing with energy as a dark mist surrounded the blade, but a faint layer of arcane energy covered it just as it appeared. Meanwhile, Jake only dodged and used the Blackpoint Blade as he prepared. Minaga didn't seem to have noticed anything, or at least he acted like he hadn't. The fight continued for a few more exchanges until Jake saw his opportunity when Minaga tried a slightly wider-than-usual swing.

Using Gaze of the Apex Hunter, he momentarily threw off Minaga's flow as he interrupted him for a fraction of a second. Long enough for him to dodge a blow with ample space to launch his attack.

Jake stomped down, making the ground beneath him crack as he thrust Eternal Hunger forward. Minaga had not been ready as the katar hit him in the side, Eternal Hunger glowing with a deep purple aura as the cursed arcane energy stabbed into his body. The blade penetrated nearly all the way to the edge as Minaga's eyes shot open, and swung at Jake hard, missing but launching himself away as Jake got a system notification.

[Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)] – A fang that strikes from the darkness – one that clamps down with the fury of your arcane. Infuse your blade with a mixture of dark and arcane mana as you do a downward strike, significantly increasing damage done and penetrative power. Dark mana makes the wound harder to heal and drains energy until dispelled. Arcane mana creates a powerful coating and extends the edge while increasing all its basic capabilities. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Fang of Man. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Descending Dark Arcane Fang.

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[Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)] – A fang born from darkness, now having embraced the power of curses, kept in control by the Hunter's arcane mana. Infuse your weapon with a mixture of curse energy and arcane energy as you do a thrusting strike, significantly increasing penetrative power and damage done. The curse energy will linger in any created wounds, the effect dependent on the

nature of the curse energy applied. Arcane mana creates a powerful coating and extends the edge while keeping the curse energy contained. Significantly more powerful when used with Eternal Hunger. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Fang of Man. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang.

Jake briefly glanced at the notification as Minaga landed a dozen or so meters away, a nasty wound glowing with an eerie light in his side. What's more, Jake felt a brief burst of revitalization as Eternal Hunger fed on the energies of the Unique Lifeform.

He also took this brief chance to chug down a stamina potion as he was down below 15%, and it would soon become a major problem. Keeping up with the Unique Lifeform was not easy at all.

Minaga took a solid second to address the wound as Jake felt him flood it with vital energy, rapidly eliminating the curse energy. Jake also took this chance to properly observe his foe.

Despite his high-energy attitude and unbothered demeanor, Minaga looked like a mess by now. His entire body was covered in wounds, dozens of holes left by arrows lined his form, and this wasn't even mentioning the deep claw mark all across his back or the frightening cauterized wound across his chest. This wasn't even mentioning the fact that poison had repeatedly built up within the Unique Lifeform. His soul was also partly damaged from the King's attacks, and he wouldn't be surprised if a few seeds from Dina had managed to take root inside of him.

All in all... Jake felt that Minaga did not have that long left. He was on his last legs for sure.

"I said it... way nastier as a melee fighter," Minaga spoke as he didn't look to be attacking again. Jake also knew why.

Another aura entered the arena as the Fallen King had finally broken through. Sylphie was also close behind, with Dina and the Sword Saint quickly making their way through the labyrinth, their estimated arrival within the next half a minute. Minaga seemed to realize fighting the King and Jake without his magic wasn't a good idea. He looked at them both as he sighed.

"Oh well... I guess it's soon time for the grand finale... just a bit more... and there we go. I am now down to only 10% health," Minaga's voice echoed throughout the entire space as he lifted his hand, and a barrier appeared around him. Jake had no confidence in breaking it, even if he really wanted to try, as he got a very bad feeling the fight wasn't as over as he had just begun to believe.

The formation below him on the platform stopped glowing as the entire labyrinth disappeared in an instant. Dina, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie appeared in the middle of

nothing as they quickly got their bearings, and their party began regrouping. Dina went straight for Jake as he was hit by a green bolt of lightning, sending a wave of pure life energy through him. It was probably needed... his health pool was not looking good. Fighting Minaga alone for so long was not healthy, not to mention the constant drain on his health from Arcane Awakening.

Jake and the others kept looking on as Minaga smiled. **“Remember when I called the third phase the final one? Yeah, well, what good boss doesn’t have a secret hidden phase, only activated if certain conditions are met!?”**

Of course there is one, Jake thought just as he noticed something. The constellations above were still glowing.

They were never to summon more beasts... that entire thing was just misdirection.

The realization came just as Minaga spread out his hands, and the entire cosmos lit up. The stars above shone brighter than ever before as all the constellations released beams of light that descended upon Minaga as his aura grew.

“Hidden final phase: Cosmic Minaga!” NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel* 

An explosion of bright light blinded them all for a brief moment as the Unique Lifeform was revealed. His entire body was glowing as the constellation covered his body like tattoos, his entire form emanating a staggering amount of power. Jake instantly knew when he felt Minaga’s aura that this ability was similar to his own Arcane Awakening in that it overflowed the body with far more energy than it could handle. Even now, Minaga’s wounds worsened by the second... the problem was what he could do until he ran out of power.

“Finish him quickly!” Jake practically yelled through the Golden Mark as he pulled out his bow, the others reacting instantly too. Attacks flew out from all of them as Minaga looked at them. Lifting his hand, a shockwave was released, blasting them all back... but Jake felt there was more in it.

A faint layer of dust had been included with the blast and was now floating in space. Jake didn’t even have to warn the others as they all reacted defensively as every single speck of dust exploded. As they were still reeling back, a light descended from above as beams of light shot down like falling stars.

Followed by actual meteors.

None of them held anything back as the cosmos lit up from their own respective magics. Minaga seemed to only grow more and more powerful with every passing second as his aura kept growing... making the final thing clear.

“We need to kill him now, or I fear he will detonate!” Dina warned through the Golden Mark.

They all knew as their attacks flew at Minaga. Jake hit several arrows as the Unique Lifeform simply stood there, blocking the hits or taking them with his body as the entire sky seemed to be falling down upon them. Pillars of light flashed down, forcing them to dodge or be struck with attacks even the Fallen King could barely handle, not to mention the constant meteor shower.

The situation was turning desperate as the Sword Saint proposed a solution.

“I can use my Transcendence fully... however, tha-“

“Don’t, not yet” Jake stopped him as he looked at Minaga and steeled himself. *“I got one more trick ready... if that doesn’t work, feel free. However, I will need a moment to land a hit...”*

“Simply give the word,” the Fallen King said.

“I will do my best,” Dina added.

Jake nodded to himself as he prepared a final trump card he had prepared for this fight against Minaga. Another kind of attack he had never used before, as it relied on something he seriously doubted the Unique Lifeform could predict.

With no hesitation, Jake took out five poison bottles and threw their contents into his mouth as he charged toward Minaga, his party ready behind him.

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Chapter 709: Nevermore: A Grand Achievement

Jake charged forward to the changed rhythm of Minaga’s boss theme. It had once more shifted in this so-called final hidden phase, and the stars also seemed to pulse with the beat. The number of attacks descending from above was staggering, and only Jake had a chance to even approach the Unique Lifeform without having to take several hits on the way. This content belongs to **novel●fire●net**

Vaulting over a meteor, Jake got closer as he didn’t dare use One Step due to how warped space was from the meteors that clearly had some kind of strong gravitational pull. Minaga raised a hand and released a large beam toward Jake, forcing him to

dodge as a meteor also went straight for where he was dodging. Before it had a chance to hit, a crescent wave of water cut it apart, allowing Jake to keep going without slowing down too much.

Jake focused on what was inside of his mouth as he got closer. He was squashing the liquid around as it burned his throat while it mixed, creating a truly unstable amalgamation. Necrotic Poison. Hemotoxin. Sleeping Night Toxin. Ethsoul Toxin, and finally, his best Neurotoxin. All of it tossed haphazardly together as Jake mixed it inside of his mouth.

He knew this mix wouldn't actually work. It would be impossible for him to turn it into something useful... unless he had help. A way to combine it using powers far beyond what he was capable of. So Jake pulled out the final item.

[Vision's Venom of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – A single droplet of pure concentrated energy and Records related to the Malefic Viper. Significantly increases the potency of any toxin it is mixed with. Using this venom during the creation of any alchemical toxin increases the chance of activating Malefic Viper's Poison, empowering the final product with the Records of the Malefic Viper. If used by the Chosen himself, the activation of Malefic Viper's Poison is ensured if the created item is applicable.

It was a gift from the much-hated statue Felix had gifted, but Jake could not deny the item's power. The small drop was in a bottle, and he quickly pulled out that single drop as he threw it into his mouth, and used Concoct Poison on the amalgamation inside of his mouth.

Right as he did so... something descended. A power far surpassing anything else momentarily appeared within the arena as the aura of what was inside Jake's mouth changed. It became something that should not be able to exist, but through the power of that single drop, it had. Right as he knew it had worked, Jake encased all the liquid in stable arcane mana and created an orb.

[Malefic Viper's Poison] has been activated! The transcendent power of the Malefic Viper has forcefully increased the rarity of your creation to Ancient, increasing all effects substantially.

****You have successfully crafted [Volatile Malefic Soulbane Poison (Ancient)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned****

Moving to only be within only around a hundred meters of Minaga, Jake sent the signal through the Golden Mark that he was ready. Even if the poison was currently being held together by the power of Malefic Viper's Poison, it would soon break apart.

Reacting to the signal, Sylphie made her entrance as a light green breeze swept through, speeding up Jake further and making several meteors change trajectory and

miss him. In the very next moment, a green bullet descended with unprecedented speed, heading straight for Minaga. Her Green Shield was active as she barrelled through dozens of meteors while her body burned with energy. Minaga looked up at her as the barrier protecting his body met the diving bird.

A massive explosion sending a green burst of wind flying everywhere erupted as Sylphie was blasted back, tumbling through space as her body was destroyed, forcing her to transform into wind. She was heavily injured, but she had accomplished her goal as she flew back toward Dina and the others.

The barrier protecting Minaga was filled with cracks as large steam of water shot through the cosmos as a voice echoed.

“Glimpse of Spring: Erosion.”

The stream of water impacted the barrier as the Sword Saint stabbed through every single obstacle in the way, disintegrating everything the attack met. He could not move in closer, but his Transcendence-empowered Erosion Stab still managed to finally break the barrier as it shattered like glass and even left another nasty wound on Minaga’s chest while making him stumble slightly.

Without his defenses, Dina and the Fallen King made their move. Vines sprung from three places on Minaga’s very own body, rapidly spreading and attempting to restrain him. At the same time, a golden aura descended upon the entire battlefield as the King unleashed a powerful suppressive force. Minaga froze as he was unable to move, and Jake closed in as he felt hairline fractures spreading across the mask from the Fallen King exerting himself.

Despite everything, Minaga was not entirely hopeless. He made eye contact with Jake as powerful pressure descended from the stars. A deep rumble went through the entire arena as every single star shot out a concentrated light beam straight toward Jake. His only direction to dodge was backward... but that was never going to happen.

He kept going as the beams arrived. He never stopped his eye contact with Minaga as time slowed down. Moment of activated, and Jake used the slowed-down time to cross the final distance while taking the orb of stable arcane mana into his hand, also holding Eternal Hunger as he appeared right in front of Minaga.

Time resumed just as Jake unleashed every shred of his Hunting Momentum as he stabbed forward with full force. Piercing Fang empowered the strike further as he aimed for Minaga’s stomach, the Unique Lifeform not able to react in time. The orb with the Malefic Soulbane Poison was firmly grasped in his hand as it pierced into Minaga’s stomach, enough for him to embed his entire hand before the Unique Lifeform had any chance to respond.

Without hesitation, Jake used his other katar and severed the hand inside Minaga right as Dlna's vines wrapped around his body and pulled him backward out of another barrage of light beams.

Minaga stared as Jake flew away before looking down at the hole in his stomach. Jake reached out with his hand, and it began to glow with the familiar dark green light of Touch of the Malefic Viper as he pushed the unstable amalgamation over the edge. The stable arcane energy keeping it trapped also disappeared from a mental command as the poison was unleashed.

“Well, shi-“

The Unique Lifeform's entire body erupted in a dark green aura as the poison shot through his body, making his entire form distort as if his Soulshape was trying to escape the physical confines of its body. His appearance warped for a second as reality seemed to flash, the stars above blinking in an uneven light as the constellation tattoos on Minaga's body broke apart one after another.

His entire Soulshape began breaking as his left arm rotted into black dust within a second, followed by one of his legs, while the rest of his body convulsed.

Suddenly, he stopped contorting as Minaga seemed to get a final moment of clarity as he grinned widely. One last time he looked straight at Jake and the others with a taunting look while showing off his usual goofy smile.

“You should know by now... I always go out with a bang!”

With those words, Minaga went supernova as his body exploded. Jake's eyes opened wide as he crossed his arms and summoned an arcane barrier. The shockwave reached him first, making the entire barrier crack, the blast itself following soon after.

Jake's entire vision was one of pure white light as the barrier broke, and the scales covering his body crackled and broke... until suddenly, the pressure was gone. A faint green color instead appeared as Jake was dragged all the way back to his party by Bobo, as Dina stood holding her staff high and her entire body glowing with green light as a massive projection of a tree covered all five of them.

The supernova washed over the tree, the projected bark burning and getting peeled away as the Sword Saint and Fallen King tried to help by summoning two barriers. Jake also quickly joined them as even Sylphie tried to help. Heat began to enter the protective zone within the tree trunk just as the blast subsided and the cosmos became still.

****You have slain [Minaga – lvl 275] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Right as the notification came, the projection of the tree faded, and Dina's transformed state disappeared as she fell over to the side. The Sword Saint was quick to catch her as Jake still stared at where Minaga had been.

There was nothing left but a few broken pieces of rock from the central platform floating through space. Even most of the stars were gone or dimmed to a level where one could barely see them. Jake finally allowed himself to calm down as his intuition told him the danger was over, and he let his own Arcane Awakening fade as weakness embraced his body.

Turning to his party, it quickly became clear they were all in a horrid state. The Sword Saint looked utterly haggard, having used his Glimpse of Spring twice in one fight. Dina was unconscious, so she naturally wasn't in good condition, and the Fallen King stood with a mask that had quite a few cracks in it, giving off a weaker and far more unstable aura than before. Sylphie was the one who came out of the best, though her energy reserves were close to zero. As for Jake himself... well, he could definitely be better.

"We won," Jake smiled to the others just as the entire space shifted, and Jake felt himself be teleported as he appeared within an in-between room surrounded by his four party members. Being confirmed safe dispelled a lot of the tension from the fight that still lingered as Jake felt everyone relax. The Sword Saint quickly took Dina and put her on one of the sofas in the room to relax as Jake also dragged himself over to a chair.

"That idea of yours was reckless," the Sword Saint said as he looked at Jake and nodded. "But it worked, so good job. A better solution than mine, as I feel uncertain I could even have accomplished finishing him that quickly even if I went all out."

Jake smiled lightly as he leaned back. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Sylphie had also slowly flown over and landed on Jake's chest as he held the tired bird, who seemed more than happy to just snuggle up to him. She had done a good job and deserved some head pats.

Even the Fallen King had taken a seat in one of the chairs as he worked on his unstable aura. Jake knew he had severely overexerted himself with that final attack of his. It had been far more than just an attack to stop Minaga from moving... it had weakened his soul and made it far more susceptible to Jake's poison.

As they had been sitting there for nearly a minute, they finally got a notification that felt pretty damn delayed. Jake read the first two and was a bit disappointed, but then he remembered the Demon Lord situation and continued, grinning from ear to ear as he saw the third one.

Fortieth floor completed. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Bonus Objective Completed: Do not allow a single party member to be defeated during the battle (0/5). 1000 Nevermore Points Earned.

Grand Achievement earned: Complete the True Ending event by defeating a fully empowered Minaga in an exemplary manner. 10000 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 25% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

“That is... quite something,” the Sword Saint muttered as he read the notifications.

Jake could only agree as he stared at the Grand Achievement – something he didn’t even know was a thing. 10000 Nevermore Points was already a shitload, but the 25% bonus was... massive. It also answered why getting to the top of the Leaderboards was so coveted. Doing something like this Grand Achievement was something only the true top elite could ever accomplish, and with how massive the bonus was, Jake reckoned it was pretty much mandatory if you wanted to aim for the top. Making up for a 25% deficit seemed pretty damn impossible, and it did make him wonder if there were other such multipliers.

“A hard-fought battle rewarding an achievement I doubt many can accomplish. A level 275 Unique Lifeform is no easy feat to defeat,” the Fallen King said as he had managed to mostly stabilize, but he did remain quite weakened. It didn’t strike Jake as the kind of weakness that would disappear within a few hours or even days either.

“Ree,” Sylphie let out a light screech in agreement as she looked up at Jake with begging eyes, making him pat her again as he reaffirmed how good of a job she had done. Dina was still down for the count as she had clearly gone above and beyond by blocking that damn supernova, which Jake did think was kind of overkill.

Having a brief moment of respite, Jake decided to check something else important. Level-ups. He instantly saw he had gotten one level from the poison, which was honestly fair as Jake had kind of cheated when he made it.

****’DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 227 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

As for his reward for killing Minaga... well, Jake couldn’t really complain

****’DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 222 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

...

****’DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 225 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 224 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 226 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Four levels from killing Minaga was a lot, but also not really a lot, considering how much stronger he had been. If Jake had won this fight alone, he reckoned he would have gained at least ten levels. Not that he believed he could have won alone.

Dina stirred soon after Jake was done looking at his levels as her eyes shot open. She rapidly sat up while looking around, and before any of them could say anything, her Guardian, Bobo, seemed to inform her of the situation.

"We won," she smiled.

"I already said that," Jake smirked in response as he gave her a thumbs-up. "You came in tight towards the end. Great job."

Dina just nodded, but before she could say anything... well...

"Man, I sure did a number on you all, huh?" a voice echoed as an all-too-familiar figure popped right into the room with a big smile on his face.

Dina jumped slightly as Jake turned to look at the newcomer who had just popped up and instantly noticed this wasn't the same Minaga as the one they had just thought.

[Minaga – lvl 349]

"Please tell me this isn't some final-final super-hidden phase?" Jake sighed as he looked at the Unique Lifeform.

"Would you like for it to be?" the Unique Lifeform grinned.

Jake stared for a second as he sighed, doing something he very rarely did: turning down a fight.

"Fuck that."

"To be fair, it wouldn't be a fight even if you were all in peak condition," Minaga shrugged.

"True, true," Jake nodded. "Should we apologize for killing you, by the way?"

“Nah, it’s all good; what’s a bit of murder between friends?” Minaga waved him off. **“Nice touch there at the end, by the way.”**

“Was that a Touch of the Malefic Viper pun?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” the Unique lifeform smiled jokingly before he suddenly turned extremely serious.

“By now, I guess some of you have guessed why I am here. That’s right, it is related to loot... but...” Minaga seemed incredibly conflicted as he let out a big sigh and sat down. **“I must apologize about something. All this time, I have been deceiving you all, and it is only fair I make this confession. You may not believe it... but... I’m actually a god.”**

An absolutely shocking revelation.

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Chapter 710: Nevermore: Minaga's Big Secret & Rewards

Minaga’s absolutely shocking reveal left them all dumbstruck for a moment as Jake acted amazed.

“I cannot believe that the dungeon master, who refers to Primordials by their names, created an entire section of Nevermore, displayed skills above anything a mortal possible could while sparring the Sword Saint, and has acted like a semi-divine being this entire time was actually a god,” Jake said with utter befuddlement. “Where were the signs!?”

“I know, I know, and I do feel genuinely apologetic that I had to keep this secret, but I feared it would impact you negatively if you knew from the beginning I was truly a god,” Minaga said, shaking his head.

“Could the fact that you could create different avatars have been a clue?” Jake questioned himself.

“Ah, to be fair, that wasn’t an avatar. In fact, I don’t make avatars,” Minaga said, waving off the notion. **“The entire sentiment of avatar-creation just seems so unnecessary when you are Minaga.”**

"I do want to ask you what you mean by that, considering it is clearly a leading question, but I would honestly rather wait and see the sweet loot you promised," Jake said, Minaga looking slightly disappointed.

"Sure you don't wanna know my big secret? It isn't actually a secret, mind you, but something everyone who knows about me is aware of, but I still like to call it my big secret for sentimental reasons as it was a big secret once upon a time. Back when I was a mortal, that is. You know, because I am no longer a mortal now. Being a god and all," Minaga said, staring inquisitively at Jake.

"Loot first," Jake insisted.

"It's considered customary to be super respectful to gods, you know."

"And even more customary for loot to drop after you beat a dungeon, but here we are," Jake masterfully countered."

"Damn loot goblin..." the Unique Lifeform grumbled.

"By the way, why do you keep your voice infused with Willpower even now?" Jake questioned as he found it kind of odd.

"Because I am a god, and it makes me appear more dignified, yet intimidating," he answered. "But seeing as you don't seem to respect the culture of the multiverse, I guess that sentiment is wasted on you."

"Sorry, I guess," Jake shrugged, unbothered.

"Just for that, you will be the last one to get your loot," Minaga said with an evil grin.

"Wait, that isn't fa-"

"Nope, I already decided, so get in the back of the line and watch me shower your party in good stuff before you are allowed to get anything," Minaga said, having grasped victory in their conversation. "Because that's right... you all get one reward each! Usually, you can't give out so many items at once, but that is why I made it so the last five floors didn't give anything to increase the reward given here. And man, did you hit the jackpot, as I got some real good stuff prepared."

They all nodded along as Minaga decided to turn to the Fallen King first. "I am starting with you, as quite frankly, what you get is the most boring of everyone. Well, I call it boring, but I doubt you will complain."

With those words, he pulled out a deep blue glowing orb. The moment it appeared, Jake felt the rush of energy from it and the enormous pressure it seemed to exude on its surroundings. Jake looked at it and used Identify as he quickly understood what it was.

[Minaga's Soulcore (Unique)] – The Soulcore of the slain C-grade Unique Lifeform known as Minaga. This Soulcore contains a significant amount of Records related to the Unique Lifeform and has many alchemical uses. Directly consuming the Soulcore will lead to unexpected effects. The Records and energies within are enhanced through unknown means, making the Soulcore even more potent.

It was true that in Jake's eyes, the reward didn't look that special, but based on the Fallen King's reaction, it was clearly something he wanted very badly. He did look confused, though.

"This item... could only appear if you had truly died... but..." the Fallen King said, as he nevertheless accepted the orb, not caring about the pride he showed earlier where he borderline refused to even talk to Minaga. This chapter is updated by move1◇firt◇met

"See, I wanted to tell you why creating this item is possible for me, but Jake here refused to let me explain my big secret, so I can't," Minaga said with a big sigh as he threw a glance at Jake.

"Fine..." Jake relented.

"Great," Minaga grinned as he cleared his voice and made his second grand declaration of the day. "I can create clones of myself."

Only to say something utterly underwhelming.

"Uhm," Dina said a bit nervously. "I think most people learn to do that at some point..."

"I don't think you understand," Minaga corrected her. "I make actual clones."

Dina seemed confused, and Jake also wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"Could you elaborate?" the Sword Saint questioned.

Minaga smiled, very satisfied with having piqued their curiosity.

"When people usually create alternative versions of themselves, it is through pouring items into making a puppet, creating an avatar that holds a portion of your full power, or maybe just a projection with no real power besides just a bit of mental energy. I do neither. I create a second version of myself... independent from any of the others. In power, soul, existence, and Records," Minaga smiled. "The only thing linking us is our minds, as we are all still the same, even if we stand independently. So, yes, the Minaga you killed was truly me. A clone of me, anyway."

"That is... not a possible skill," the Fallen King began. *"Unless it is your Unique skill, but even so, it seems too powerful. It breaks conventions."*

"You know as well as I that the Unique skills of us Unique Lifeforms go beyond the rules of the multiverse and are pretty much just Transcendent skills that aren't actually classified as Transcendent skills due to being granted by the system. We are living anomalies, after all. But, there is some truth to what you said... it is too powerful, hence its limitations. Only a certain number of Minagas can exist at once, though I can make more if they are lower-leveled clones. Oh, and one minor other detail. I don't have any skills besides that one."

"Wait, no skills?" Jake questioned. "What do you mean by that?"

"That my status screen has one single skill and that I never got any other. Okay, that is a lie, as I technically have *some* other skills, but I never had a single skill selection in my life, and everything I do is purely freeform magic. The skills I do have are general utility stuff everyone else also has... though I did never get Identify, so that one is a bit of a bummer. Took a long time to make my own version without a skill."

"Then was it one of your created clones we fought just now?" the Sword Saint asked clarifyingly.

"Yep, and you did kill it for real," Minaga confirmed. "It is no different than if you had truly killed a Unique Lifeform at level 275. Because you did."

"I see," the Sword Saint nodded. "And then I presume the knowledge and experience this clone of yours comes from the original body?"

"Another misunderstanding," Minaga smiled. "There is no original body. In fact, the very first Minaga died only in B-grade. There is no original; there are only many iterations of me out there. There is only Minaga."

"Huh," Jake muttered as he frowned. "How exactly does-"

"Nope, we are done talking about that topic now that I got you interested," Minaga said with an evil smile. "You said you wanted loot first, so I am just obliging."

He then turned to the Dryad in the room before Jake could protest.

"Next up is Dina! I must confess that you impressed me a lot as you even managed to block my Minaga Selfdestruct Attack, though it did seem to take quite a toll. Anyway, I thought about it a lot, and your control is truly impeccable. The problem is what you control. Your vines are strong, but I feel like you need more quality over quantity with them, as only really the ones summoned directly from your Guardian have any real oomph. While I cannot directly tell you what to do or how to improve, I can give you a little something that could help you. Even if you decide to use your reward for something else, that is all fair, as quite frankly, this little thing will be a huge boost no matter what if you successfully learn from it," Minaga said as he took out an odd wooden box.

Dina looked at it for a while before she accepted and opened it. Right as she did, the entire room was filled with a green aura, and Jake felt all of the mana in the room be replaced. Projections of trees appeared everywhere around them, and moss began growing on the furniture from the sheer density and power of the nature mana. Jake identified the small item within the box before she quickly closed it again.

[Refined Ancestral Branch of the Emerald Forest (Mythical)] – A wooden branch from one of the Ancestral Trees found within the World Wonder known as the Emerald Forest. This forest contains immense power and Records related to the concepts of nature and life, with this branch containing some of the essences of the Emerald Forest. Through unknown means, the branch has been further refined, making the energy within far more manageable to absorb. Unknown alchemical uses.

Jake was taken aback the second he saw the rarity tag, and Dina was also looking at Minaga like he was insane. “This... this is...”

“Right, probably should give an explanation. The Emerald Forest is the World Wonder of the fourth universe and is a giant forest filled with creatures starting at A-grade. Deeper within, you will find beings with the power to rival gods, and in the deepest parts, Godkings don’t even dare set foot. I took that branch pretty far inside of the forest and made some improvements so you can actually use it,” Minaga explained. “It’s a really good thing, and I know that your grandad has spent quite some time within this forest.”

“Can I... isn’t this too much?” Dina questioned while just staring at the box.

“Nope! It’s just enough. Moving on to my fellow swordsman. Your reward is rather self-explanatory, so here ya go,” Minaga said as he took out a disc and threw it casually to the Sword Saint. Jake used Identify on it mid-air.

[Minaga’s Sword Projection Formation Disc (Mythical)] – A formation created by the Unique Lifeform Minaga himself, infused with his soul and essence. The user can Infuse energy into the formation disc to summon a projected arena, including a corporal clone of Minaga wielding a sword. The formation takes approximately thirty minutes to activate, and any disturbances will interrupt the process. Reabsorbing the formation into the formation disc is instant. The soul within the formation has a limited lifespan and can only be summoned for a total of 1000 hours before permanently dispersing, rendering the Sword Projection Formation useless. The summoned projection will always be the same level as the user.

Requirements: Soulbound.

The Sword Saint looked at the item and smiled before he stood up and bowed. “Thank you for continuing your teachings.”

Minaga waved him off. "Eh, I like good students, and that was the best gift I could get on as you don't look like you need any equipment. There really isn't much to say, as I created it myself, so you know it is damn awesome. Though it did take a sacrificial ritual using one of my clones, so that was kind of fun. Anyway, moving on to the little featherball!"

Without waiting, Minaga took out what looked like a flower crown, but on second glance, Jake saw it was more of a nest. It looked incredibly odd, and a light green wind seemed to surround it, though compared to the other items, this one had no fearsome aura.

Using Identify, he wasn't quite sure what to think.

[Dreamy Embrace of the Benevolent Sylph (Mythical)] – An item created by a particularly benevolent Sylph who loved all those who, like her, were loved by the wind. Allows the user to submerge their soul into the dreamy embrace of the nest and enter a small simulated world created by the item's creator. While within the simulated world, the user may experience the true winds of this benevolent Sylph, taking inspiration and seeking guidance. However, should the user not be loved by the wind and the remnant will of the Sylph not take a liking to them, the dream may become a nightmare and the Sylph less than benevolent.

Requirements: Soulbound.

Sylphie looked at the thing for a bit before jumping out of Jake's arms and hopping over as Minaga placed the item on the floor. The bird stared inquisitively down at it for a while, as Minaga explained.

"Now, not gonna lie, this item was part of a series of nine, created by a powerful Sylph before she died as a final gift to the world. However, do not think that in any way makes it less impressive. I do also feel like I need to add the fact out of those nine, five have been bound and used by others so far, and this resulted in four of those dying from the Sylph within the dream not being a fan. So, yeah, a lot of people think they are cursed, but I got a good feeling the Sylph will be more than happy with you," Minaga said as he slightly nudged the nest closer to Sylphie.

The hawk kept looking at it for a moment before screeching and putting it into her little vest's spatial storage. With the item safely put away, she hopped back to Jake.

"Now you, Jake. Sadly, I also have to give you something, and man, you are truly difficult to give anything to. Unlike the Sword Saint here, giving you a practice partner or something akin to that could potentially do more harm than good, not to mention I risk having Vilas breathing down my neck if I go against any of his intentions. Ah, but you do definitely need to work on your archery. Anyway, that is beside the point," Minaga began as he looked at Jake.

“I also don’t like to just give equipment as we all know that stuff becomes useless just as you begin to use it. You really had me wracking my brain, you know, until I remembered a special something. While this doesn’t really help make you stronger, it does assist you in potentially becoming so in the future. Plus, it is something Vilas is fine with you getting, so a big bonus in favor of giving it to you there.”

Minaga said as he took out an odd item. It looked like an urn of sorts and didn’t give off any special aura, but Jake still felt like the item was far from ordinary. Using Identify, he was not sure what to think or say as he saw the description.

Soulflames...

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 711: Nevermore: Cradle

Soulflames were something Jake had pushed to the back of his mind ever since he first learned about them. Primarily because in learning about them, he learned how screwed he was if Jake wanted a Soulflame that fit him, and since replacing one was incredibly difficult, he had just resigned himself to do without for the foreseeable future.

He was aware that having a Soulflame that fit you was strictly better than not having any. However, having a Soulflame not suited for your Path was worse than none at all. The issue with Jake was his arcane affinity. Soulflames were created from freak accidents where mana of a certain affinity gathered in an area and an elemental was about to be born, but for some reason, this process failed and mutated, resulting in a half-born elemental only retaining a bit of spirituality, effectively making a Soulflame a half-elemental, half-natural treasure.

This meant Jake’s only option if he wanted a Soulflame was to artificially create an environment for one to be born... or wait till he got strong enough to influence huge areas passively with his mere presence and Records, resulting in his arcane affinity appearing naturally throughout the multiverse, thus turning it into a true affinity. Even then, the circumstances in which Jake’s affinity would appear were probably few and far between, so Jake had just assumed he was fucked if he wanted to get lucky and just ever find a Soulflame.

So for Minaga to offer him a treasure related to Soulflames... Jake truly had no idea what to think as he read the description of the item.

[Cradle of Soul's Kindling (Mythical)] – The Cradle in which a flame may be kindled as it awakens its own spirituality. Nascent Soulflames of hundreds of affinities burn within the internal space of the Cradle, experiencing a cycle of life and death as they struggle and absorb one another while growing in power. Waiting for one of them to ascend to the world outside. Only a single Soulflame can truly be born from the Cradle, the item getting destroyed upon extraction as all others become fuel for the chosen one. The Cradle can be infused with energies to sustain and influence the internal world. The internal world of the Cradle cannot be entered by any being with a Truesoul, and any Truesouls born within will immediately find themselves destroyed, their energies only nurturing the Cradle further.

Requirements: Soulbound.

"This is..." Jake muttered as he looked at the odd urn that he guessed was made out of some ceramic material, though it was far from fragile, as Jake doubted anyone present, including the peak C-grade Minaga, could even leave a mark on it. Minaga held it out as Jake tentatively accepted it, not exactly sure what he was dealing with even after reading the description. Not because he didn't understand, but because it just felt too... good? Convenient? Jake wasn't sure.

"I noticed you didn't have a Soulflame, which is honestly pretty odd considering you are the C-grade Chosen of the Malefic Viper. At least, I thought so at first. The problem with people like you who are so heavily reliant on the one affinity that cannot be found in the wild is that no Soulflames can be found either. At least not before you get a lot stronger and create a special environment to nurture one... or cheat using an item like the Cradle," Minaga explained in a judgemental tone, the explanation more for the other four than Jake himself.

"Will I be able to create a Soulflame related to my arcane affinity using this?" Jake questioned. "From what I was told, it usually takes a very long time for one to form..."

"Of course you can form one; that is why I gave it to you. Duh," Minaga said, sounding almost offended. "After you bind the Cradle, just send in a lot of mana and keep feeding it once in a while to influence the environment within. You are ultimately still relying on pure chance that a Soulflame with your arcane affinity is born and then manages to rise toward the top, but the more time passes, the more attuned the Cradle should become to you. It isn't a quick and easy guarantee, but it is borderline the best solution you will ever find for a C-grade, and that Cradle is worth more than you can imagine. Not gonna lie, the other stuff I gave out is good, but the Cradle is probably the most valuable if we go by pure resale value, as it is rather unique. Way more unique than the actual unique Soulcore I gave my fellow Unique Lifeform, though I did make up for that by actively empowering that core."

"Huh," Jake nodded as he inspected the Cradle. He knew that getting a Soulflame couldn't be that easy, and it seemed he was right, as even the Cradle had a strong element of luck if he wanted to create an arcane Soulflame. However, it would

undoubtedly save him a shitload of time. As Minaga mentioned, then he would have had to set up a special environment to nurture one, which Jake did plan on doing at some point, but this Cradle made that unnecessary.

“Ah, also to add, since you can only ever extract one Soulflame from the Cradle, only go for one with good quality, alright? It would be a damn waste if you decided to take out an elementary or even a low-tier Soulflame,” Minaga said in an almost scolding tone.

Jake nodded along to the words. “Yeah, definitely not gonna accept anything below a pinnacle-tier Soulflame.”

Soulflames had the qualities of elementary, low-tier, mid-tier, high-tier, pinnacle-tier, and Supreme Soulflames. Elementary were ones that barely passed as Soulflames but actually did have the good thing about them that they were prime for growth, while Supreme Soulflames was the best that one could get bar-none. The reason why Jake wanted at least a pinnacle-tier one was due to the relative ease of raising a pinnacle Soulflame to a Supreme Soulflame. Relative doing a lot of heavy lifting in this case, as it was still bloody hard while raising a Soulflame of an even lower tier would be borderline impossible and more akin to gambling than anything else.

Getting a good Soulflame right off the bat was incredibly important due to their semi-permanent status. A Soulflame Jake got in C-grade would stick with him for the rest of his life and grow with him forever, so if he got a bad one, he would have to either accept mediocrity or spend way more resources than anyone would find reasonable to upgrade the one he had. In either case, Jake sure as hell wasn't ever going to fuse with a low-level Soulflame. He was way too much of a spoiled Chosen for that.

Naturally, Soulflames were still more complicated than simply being split into these qualities, but it was a good estimate. The way one decided what quality a Soulflame had was also relatively simple as it was just a question of Records, and Jake knew that one could easily distinguish good and bad Soulflames just using Identity. At least you could become able to. Jake didn't know if he currently could, but maybe with Sagacity...

“Hey... is he totally spacing out right now, or is it just me?” Jake vaguely heard Minaga whisper to the Sword Saint as he threw glances at Jake.

“He is simply stunned by your generosity,” the old man smiled.

Minaga nodded. “That makes total sense. I am stunningly generous.”

“Sorry for actually thinking about my reward so in-depth,” Jake said, faking offense.

“Oh, sorry, just not used to seeing you think, I guess,” Minaga shrugged. “Glad to see you unlocked that ability.”

"I do wonder about something," Jake began as he did that thinking thing again while completely changing the topic. "Why did you have a cooldown period after each of your combination spell casts? Is it some kind of special application of magic to make it stronger, or do you overload your body or something? I found it odd, especially considering it was the same amount of time every time. Well, there is also one more option why the cooldown was there, but..."

"Last one is correct," Minaga grinned.

"Seriously?" Jake sighed. "Well, fuck me."

"You would have been utterly fucked indeed," Minaga said cheerily. "And it was honestly kind of hard to get that five-second timing down every time!"

That's right... that entire cooldown period was entirely self-imposed.

Jake could already imagine it. A Minaga repeatedly using combination magic spells without any pause in between, potentially even using more than one at once, would be completely impossible for their party – if not any party. Considering he had a self-imposed cooldown, it was entirely feasible he also slowed down the casting speed, and Minaga likely completely avoided his most potent spells altogether.

It only made sense, considering he was a god. If Minaga was not doing free-casting but had used actual skills, Jake guessed many, if not all, of the combination spells would have been at least ancient or legendary rarity, with the strongest ones approaching mythical. That he would also have actual mythical skill-level magic and even beyond was only to be expected.

"Ultimately, one of the reasons the system doesn't allow anyone to die on this floor is because of the inherent unfairness of the challenge and not just the expected difficulty. If I decided that I didn't like someone and went all-out to kill them, or I was bribed by some faction to kill other young talents, then things could get bad real fast. The system put in a preemptive measure to avoid that ever happening," Minaga explained.

Jake slowly nodded. He – and likely most of the others – had already guessed this was the reason for the special rule of no deaths.

"Ah, but I did actually kind of screw up once during the fight," Minaga said, scratching the back of his head. "That last death explosion was a bit over the top and not really a part of the script... I just thought you also cheated, using that weird poison thing on me. That was totally cheating, by the way."

"Wow," Jake said. "I am shaken. Shaken, I tell you! How dare you accuse me of cheating when I am the beacon of honesty and fairness in all of my endeavors!"

"I felt the presence of the Malefic Viper from your damn mouth!" Minaga shot back.

“Done through entirely legitimate and normal means!”

“Based on your track record, cheating is normal to you,” Minaga refused to back down.

“Oh, wow, great argument.”

“Nothing about me cheating by using my Transcendence?” the Sword Saint raised a hand as he cut in.

“No, that one is okay and not cheating. Maybe if you had fully used it, I would have maybe called you a cheater, but as things are, only this guy with his stupid Bloodline is the cheater,” the Unique Lifeform said resolutely.

“You know,” Jake said. “I never thought you would be a sore loser.”

“We literally just discussed how I, the great Minaga, held myself back to not accidentally squash you into paste, with the system even recognizing I am too awesome to be allowed to kill you,” Minaga said with a deadpan face.

“Excuses, excuses,” Jake waved him off.

Minaga glared at Jake but didn’t say anything more as the Dryad in the room also spoke.

“Excuse me... but did you retrieve this reward yourself, or was it generated by the system?” Dina asked as she looked down at her box with the Branch from this Emerald Forest.

“Great question,” Minaga perked up again. “I got everything myself. Well, one of me did. For Nevermore, the system only helps that much as it is ultimately a created and not a natural dungeon, so...”

Casual conversation continued as Minaga stayed and chatted with them for a while, sharing tales of how he had obtained many rewards that he had either already given out or was still saving.

However, in the end, the Unique Lifeform couldn’t stay forever. They had completed Minaga’s Labyrinth, after all, and he was just there to give out loot. All good things had to come to an end, and Minaga appeared kind of sad as he looked at them with melancholy.

“Anyway... ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that despite our differences when it comes to the definition of cheating, it has been a pleasure having you experience my labyrinth. You are all pretty damn good seeds and have bright futures ahead of you, no matter how infuriating you may be. Either way, I hope you all have a wonderful descent going forward. Who knows, we might even meet again. If not in Nevermore, then the

vast world beyond,” Minaga smiled as he stood up and bowed as he threw them all a final snicker. “There are quite a few of me out there, after all.”

With those words, Minaga disappeared in a final flash of light, forever the showman.

Casper hid away and prepared as the two pinnacle beings fought each other, the ground below them utterly torn up from their constant exchange of attacks. Azal, the Ghost King, fought the third-phase Minaga in a nearly equal duel, though he was slowly losing out. Luckily, Maltrax, the beastkin Risen, was also there to provide support by occasionally striking from odd angles and making sure Minaga could not launch any major attacks.

Azal was truly a monster, moving with incredible speed as his large ghostly blade cut through the darkness of space in an eerie pattern as he clashed with Minaga. The blight energy burned on his body, making him look like an avatar of the Blightfather himself, allowing him to even push back Minaga and land blows. He had needed to consume many spirits to reach that state, but it was worth it as long as they won.

The lank abomination and the banshee woman had both been thrown out due to taking lethal damage, leaving only three people left to fight in the final phase. The banshee during the phase where they split up, and the abomination during this third phase to one of Minaga’s major spells after the rest of them had been thrown into mini-labyrinth cubes. Seeing as the banshee had functioned partly as their healer, it wasn’t overly surprising she had been unable to hold on, but the abomination had been a surprise as he had effectively been their tank.

During the phase where they had been split up, it had been pretty difficult for him, too, forcing Casper to use his Blightform and spend the entire time trying not to die. He went through all of his pre-prepared traps to slow down the Minaga clone long enough for Azal to arrive, and together they quickly finished off the clone, as Casper’s traps did manage to do some damage. Azal had wanted to help the banshee first but was too late. Maltrax handled her phase herself, making it clear she was the second strongest.

Fighting continued between Azal and Minaga as Casper did all he could to not allow the Minaga to catch him out, as he knew he was the weakest, and Casper did have to admit that the beams from the stars above were quite hard to dodge. It was only due to his link with Lyra he even stood a chance, as he was effectively two beings in one.

One had to remember that Lyra was not a normal Blightwraith but one created personally by the Blightfather himself. She was linked to Casper in a bond that made her something akin to a Guardian, yet her own being. Casper had no idea how it all worked... and frankly, he didn’t care.

“*Are you ready?*” Casper asked Lyra as Minaga unleashed a major spell, making the stars above shimmer as light descended upon Azal, forcing him to pull out a massive shield resembling a skull.

“Let’s show him!” Lyra’s cheerful voice echoed in his mind.

Casper smiled as his weapon was ready, and Lyra had completed her own preparations. Lifting the large wooden stake that resembled a spear, Casper prepared to throw it as his Blightform began to fade. The ghostly flames that embraced his body moved from him onto the wooden stake as Lyra embedded parts of herself into the weapon, amplifying it further.

Without hesitation, Casper threw. Dark runes of pure curse energy pulsed across the stake as it flew through the air, the greenish blight energy invading it mid-flight, making the cursed runes all glow in an eerie light.

“Heh, you really think I didn’t know you were charging up a big one!?” Minaga yelled as he turned, ready to block the stake.

Right as he did, Maltrax let out a ghastly howl as a massive projection appeared above her, depicting a white and black wolf howling towards the sky. For a brief moment, a rotting moon appeared, and the entire world seemed to be still. Minaga couldn’t move for that brief moment as the wooden stake flew straight by his staves and pierced into his chest just as he could move again.

Before he could do anything more, Azal’s sword slammed into the stake embedding it further as the blight energy and curse energy burst forth, igniting the Unique Lifeform’s entire being. Cursed runes spread all over his form as Azal took advantage of the curse’s restraining effect. Maltrax also soon joined in on the assault, and not long after, Casper saw Minaga stumble back as all magic on him faded, and his aura of life disappeared.

Casper stopped pushing the power of the curse from his hidden position as he sighed, utterly spent, and Lyra not responding as she had passed out from overexertion. Yet he felt like there could have been more to the fight...

“We missed some secret final hidden phase, didn’t we?” Casper questioned as he saw the boss fading away.

“You did,” Minaga’s fading form said. **“Wait, now it isn’t a secret hidden phase any mo-“**

He disappeared midway through the words as Casper and the others got the kill notification. A moment later, they were teleported to the in-between room, where they reunited with the two party members who had taken lethal blows.

Not long after, they got their notifications from completing the fight, and even if Casper knew it was damn good, he saw Azal look slightly disappointed.

Fortieth floor completed. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Grand Achievement earned: Complete the True Ending event by defeating a fully empowered Minaga. 7500 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 15% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

His disappointment was helped by Minaga appearing and handing out loot soon after, with Azal getting a mythical rarity natural treasure, while the rest of them got extremely high-quality legendary rewards.

As Casper was admiring his own loot – and mentally getting over the grand revelation that Minaga was actually a god - he couldn't help but wonder why he had never heard of Minaga before... if he was a god, it just felt weird his name wasn't more well-known.

Or... well, Casper could see him being a bit "much," so... maybe people just didn't like to talk about him? Read complete version only at ***novel★fire★net***

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Chapter 712: Nevermore: A Viper's Assessment

"Were you nervous?" the dragon god in humanoid form asked as he looked at the black-scaled god sitting across from him. "Your Chosen did look to be in trouble quite a few times there. He was lucky his teammates were able to assure their victory."

Vilastromoz looked at the Wyrmgod, who clearly enjoyed watching the recording. Yes, recording. A live feed was all well and good, but Jake knew when they were watching using that. With a recording, he would only know one person was looking while remaining unaware of all those who saw the recorded footage. It was a great workaround the Viper had noticed and begun taking advantage of a long time ago.

"If he hadn't won, I would have been disappointed, though I do question if perhaps the difficulty has spiked more than in previous years," Vilas wondered.

"Hey, I was being totally fair and equal!" the third person chimed in, sounding incredibly offended at the notion that he had upped the difficulty.

It was naturally Minaga, the creator of the floors. Though this version of him was of the divine variety.

"I never said you weren't fair, just that the difficulty has grown," the Viper shook his head.

“Maybe a bit,” Minaga admitted. “And, alright, you do have a point that not all challenges are equal, but I have to hold myself back too much that total equality is impossible, and slight variations can happen, you know? Or are you telling me to never have fun and do stuff like my little duel with the swordsman?”

The Viper looked at the Wyrmgod. “Have I complained about anything? Have I proposed any changes?”

“No,” his fellow Primordial shook his head. “You just made an observation.”

Minaga looked a bit between them. “Damn, you old guys teaming up against the poor unpaid dungeon engineer.”

“Do you wish to be employed?” the Wyrmgod asked with a raised eyebrow. “That could be arranged, with a proper contract in pla-“

“Figure of speech, figure of speech,” Minaga waved him off. “But hey, your Chosen is fun, if extremely infuriating. Though I guess you already know the suffering. That guy is just kind of crazy with that Bloodline of his.”

The Viper just smiled as he looked at the Unique Lifeform, not bothering to comment on how Minaga was the crazy one. Because in the eyes of many, himself included, Minaga was one of the craziest existences in the multiverse.

Minaga was a mistake born in the middle parts of the third era. At least Vilastromoz firmly believed he was a mistake, and the system seemed to agree based on no creature like him ever appearing again. Furthermore, the fact that the system had so uniquely limited the abilities of the Unique Lifeform meant that the sheer level of power from that one Unique skill was roughly estimated to be equal or superior to every single skill Minaga would have earned from when he was born in C-grade all the way to godhood. The only skills Minaga ever got were certain “earned” skills that were pretty much required, such as some related to godhood. However, he even lacked many basic skills and had things he couldn’t do, including giving Blessings.

However, he was still a Unique Lifeform. Just due to his sheer stats, he was able to overwhelm most foes at equal levels from birth, and even from birth, he could create clones of himself. About a dozen from what Vilastromoz estimated, with the number steadily growing as Minaga grew. By now, being a powerful god, the Viper had no idea how many clones he could have in total. However, if one included just the divine-level clones, he estimated it to be in the thousands.

And... this led to why the Malefic Viper believed Minaga was a mistake. The entire concept behind his existence was too much.

Vilastromoz had told Jake that Aeon was perhaps the hardest god in the multiverse to kill, and he still stood by that... but if he had to say who was the hardest to get rid of

permanently, he would say Minaga. Minaga himself was strong, yes, but he was not a pinnacle god. At least Vilastromoz didn't think so, but it was hard to know how powerful the highest-leveled clone was.

No, the problem was that in order to kill Minaga for good, you had to kill every single clone. There was the benefit that if you killed the currently highest-leveled clone, then Minaga would have to level up to that stage again, but that was in no way a permanent way to get rid of him. The source of this content is ~~novel~~**fire**~~net~~

Killing people with cloning abilities or avatar-creation wasn't a new thing, and Vilastromoz had many tools to do so. Eversmile was an example of someone who rarely cared if people had hidden ways to try and survive, even if they killed their main bodies. He could track down any failsafe, any contingencies, and any avatars left behind. But for Minaga, that wasn't an option.

Back when Minaga had just entered B-grade with his highest-leveled clone, he managed to piss off a god and, through that god, an entire pantheon. A late-tier B-grade ended up killing the Minaga clone, and they thought that was that... until a week later when a new clone appeared and wreaked havoc until it, too, was killed. A few days later, another clone appeared on a nearby planet and attacked the faction again. This kept happening with at least one attack every month. A few times, the Minaga clone did come to talk about maybe making peace, but every time he was killed. What exactly the faction believed they would accomplish, not even Vilastromoz in his infinite wisdom knew, but they clearly failed as the "war" continued.

Spanning four galaxies. Nineteen thousand years. More than a million Minaga's killed. Three gods hunting down Minaga for over ten thousand of these years, with their biggest accomplishment being a thousand years of peace after they believed they had killed off the final clone... only for a new Minaga to appear, stronger than ever before.

In the end, the gods had capitulated to a mere A-grade mortal and made peace with their heads bowed. An absolutely ludicrous scenario that had only happened due to the stupidest of reasons. The entire conflict had been due to someone telling Minaga he should bow in the presence of a superior, something the Unique Lifeform had not liked, and told the other guy to stick his staff up his behind. They had attacked due to this comment, and... well, the rest was history.

This was also the first time Vilastromoz had heard of Minaga's existence, as this story sent the rumor machine of the multiverse into overdrive. Many factions approached Minaga, curious gods investigated him, and quite a few even tried to kill him just to see if they could. Vilastromoz had honestly expected Eversmile to try, but the god hadn't and even warned others to perhaps reconsider.

Vilastromoz understood why this warning was given, as after Minaga became a god, he went on quite a revenge spree. He became a menace that ravaged dozens of

pantheons for half an era. This was also when he was given quite an interesting moniker: The All-God Legion.

Legion was... fitting. For Minaga was a faction by himself. Fighting a single god was already a nightmare, but they were ultimately limited by only being a single individual, even if they could make armies of avatars and whatnot. The reason why the Automata and True Royals were so feared was due to the armies they could spawn and mobilize.

Minaga was that but as one single creature. Many gods could kill a Minaga... but no god could destroy Minaga. No faction dared make him an enemy, as Minaga had never once in history lost a single conflict. He would be a relentless force of destruction that would bear down on you infinitely, impossible to ever get rid of. Not that many worked with him, as he was also known to be an actively infuriating character and refusing to ever do what others told him. Most thus chose to merely ignore his existence entirely, never antagonizing but not ever really interacting with him either.

The only hope the Viper could have seen to ever kill Minaga permanently was making sure he never made it to godhood. As he made clones, it meant that the age of the Truesoul was equal in all clones, so age would have still been his end if he failed to ascend. Now that he was a god, truly killing him wasn't something the Viper saw happening. Especially not after he teamed up with the Wyrmgod and picked up dungeon engineering.

Because the Unique Lifeform had one... side-effect of his ability. One that was utterly ridiculous from the Viper's point of view. One of the biggest reasons he firmly believed Minaga was a mistake, even in the eyes of the multiverse. Because his unique cloning skill had led to a "bug" in the system of sorts.

There could only ever be one unique Truesoul of a creature present in the multiverse at once, which meant that one could never bring multiple copies or prior versions of an individual out of a dungeon. However, at the same time, then having a prior version of yourself in a dungeon also didn't have any effects on you.

This turned out to have some seemingly unexpected effects when it came to Minaga. The way Minaga made clones was a bit similar to the energy Hive Queens used to create spawn or perhaps even what Jake expended to bring out Primeval Origins. That is to say, he spent a form of energy separate from anything else but still had a limited pool.

Here is where the issue arose:

Minagas in dungeons don't count towards his maximum number of clones, as they don't affect the other clones.

Minagas in dungeons can leave and remain unique, as their Truesouls are different.

Minaga is aware of all his clones in dungeons, and they are aware of every other Minaga.

If Minaga is already at his clone cap, the clone will die upon exiting a dungeon, but if not, it can simply exist from there as normal.

All of this is to say that Minaga had potentially billions of clones hidden in dungeons throughout the multiverse. No, it was certain he had that many just based on Nevermore. Clones hidden in separate dimensions that no one could ever access.

These things combined were why the Malefic Viper felt certain that Minaga was the most difficult being to kill off for good in the entire multiverse. Not for lack of trying either, as Minaga's personality had made him quite an infamous figure. However, there was one being who had managed to forge a mutually beneficial relationship with this unique Unique Lifeform.

"His Bloodline is indeed exemplary," the Wyrmgod said in a relaxed tone. "I have considered potential methods of limiting the scope of his powers within a given floor, but I find most solutions will have other unintended consequences. Seeing as his skills are mostly based on intuition, there truly are no simple solutions. I would not find myself surprised even if a procedurally generated floor was susceptible to his powers."

"Exactly! It's like trying to address a fundamental bug in a system by introducing more advanced systems to work around it, rather than just removing the bug... or ignoring it, I guess," Minaga said, sounding offended by Jake's mere existence.

"Ignoring it is the solution indeed," the Wyrmgod nodded as he seemed to switch his mental attention elsewhere for a second.

"So, Vilas, gotta ask, why the deceit about his Bloodline?" Minaga asked the Viper curiously. "That whole aura-resistance thing is a good lie and all, but we both know that the Bloodline is so all-encompassing it can't be hidden forever and... well, why hide a good thing?"

Vilastromoz smiled a bit to himself, fully aware that even if Minaga and the Wyrmgod had a lot more insight into Jake's Bloodline than nearly anyone else, they still only knew a bit of it. From what he had gathered, they were still unsure if the Primeval Origins aspects came from the Bloodline or if the Bloodline was just a catalyst allowing him to use some special item.

This wasn't even getting into the potential effects the Bloodline had on his own evolutions, resulting in him being a higher form of human, nor the most shocking part of it: the fact it included a percentage amplifier to a stat. One that was even growing with every evolution. Even Jake didn't understand why that portion mattered as much as it did, and luckily it was something no one could easily find out unless his dear Chosen spilled the beans himself.

“Minaga, do you remember the many factions who came to you in the early days when they learned of your ability? The many pantheons who wanted you to join the moment you became a god?” the Viper answered Minaga with a question.

“Well, yeah, they were pretty annoying, but Jake is already part of your social club, so I can’t see that being a problem,” Minaga shrugged.

“True, they may not try to recruit him outright... but that doesn’t mean they can’t become major pains in the ass,” Vilastromoz shook his head.

Minaga still looked like he didn’t get it as the Wyrmgod zoned into the conversation again and sighed. “They seek his Bloodline in the way it can be obtained without having him join them directly: through the act of procreation. Suppose they succeed in getting him sufficiently attached to a member of their faction. In that case, there is also a chance they might eventually recruit him, in which case it would be him voluntarily going over to their side..”

“How is that a pain in the ass?” Minaga questioned further. “Don’t humans like to procreate? Heck, most enlightened races seem to love it based on how they multiply so much, especially those who manage to get even relatively powerful. Based on his meetings with the Runemaiden, it didn’t look like he wasn’t a fan either.”

“It is not that simple and not something that should ever be done without plenty of forethought, especially not when you have a Bloodline like Jake’s,” the Viper shook his head as he looked at Minaga. “I could try to explain to you the nuances, but I fear they may be lost on a Unique Lifeform that, by definition, will be forever alone. No matter how many clones they can make.”

“Low blow,” Minaga grumbled. “But, fine. I guess you know him better than I do...”

“I would sure hope so,” the Viper smiled.

“So... you taking bets on how long it will take for him to create a Soulflame using the Cradle?” Minaga asked in a cheerful voice, changing the topic.

“I am not doing any bets with you after the bullshit you pulled last time,” the Viper refused.

“That was eighty-seven eras ago; you can’t still hold a grudge!” Minaga complained. “Also, that bet wasn’t with me but with another Minaga, so it isn’t fair to hold me accountable.”

Vilastromoz glared at the Unique Lifeform. “That is the exact excuse you used to not pay up last time.”

“Well.... It was also true then?”

The worst part was, due to how Minaga worked, there wasn't even any karmic debt to reap or take advantage of, as Minaga had gotten rid of the clone in question the Viper made the initial bet with.

"What if you make a bet with my highest-leveled clone?" Minaga asked with a smile as he pointed a thumb to his own chest. "In other words, me!"

"That isn't your highest-leveled clone," the Viper shook his head.

The Wyrmgod raised an eyebrow as Minaga looked defensive. "It totally is!"

"No, it isn't," the Viper insisted.

"It is!" the Minaga clone said as he flared his aura. True, it was far beyond the norm, surpassing Godkings by a wide margin, though not quite matching Snappy's, but...

"Odd, because Oras mention-"

"Anyway, Jake sure is overpowered, huh," Minaga cut him off with a smile as the Viper just shook his head. The Wyrmgod also seemed unbothered, knowing that arguing with the Unique Lifeform was an utter waste of time. The Viper did have to consider recent developments, though, some of which were out of his expectations. Primarily what exactly Minaga would do from here on out.

It was clear Minaga had taken an interest in Jake. More of an interest in him than Vilastromoz had expected, at least. He had even gone as far as to plant a clone of his with the swordsman in a covert way. If such developments were a good or a bad thing...

Well, only time would tell. With Minaga, it could truly go either way.

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Chapter 713: Nevermore: City Floor Forty

Jake and company spent a bit over two weeks just relaxing in the in-between room, as they all had exerted themselves perhaps a bit too much during the Minaga fight. The fact they had also just all gotten cool new items they wanted to either absorb or experiment a bit with was certainly also a factor.

During this time, the Sword Saint managed to set up the Sword Formation within one of the bedrooms and even had a light spar with the Minaga clone. They also tested and

discovered that only the Sword Saint could use the formation, so that was a bit of a bummer but probably a necessary limitation for Minaga to even give it out. If not, it could maybe even have been used as a defensive formation, as it quickly became clear the Minaga clone in the formation could pretty much exert whatever force it deemed necessary.

Dina was enamored with her wooden branch and instantly got to work on a formation that would allow her to properly absorb it, though it didn't seem like that would be a small project. Absorbing any kind of high-value item like that wasn't something to be done haphazardly, according to her. Jake's advice of just throwing it into a cauldron while mixing it with a bunch of high-rarity stuff and just seeing what happens was not taken seriously.

The King was more relaxed with his gift and ate the Soulcore of Minaga the moment he got it and promptly began meditating. The two weeks they waited before continuing was the time it took for the Fallen King to awaken once more. By the time he did, the cracks on the mask were fully healed, but nothing much seemed to have changed, though Jake reckoned he had good gains based on his uncharacteristically jovial mood.

Sylphie was the one who had gained the most precarious treasure, and Jake had to confess he was a bit nervous about her using it. He had insisted on being present the first time Sylphie infused energy into the nest-like treasure. So he had. The bird had just sat in it like a normal nest, and after infusing some energy into it, she seemed to get sleepy and dozed off.

It had taken nearly five hours before she woke up again, only to yawn, say the dream-projection of the Sylph was super weird but kind of nice, before going to sleep again. So, yeah, Sylphie was definitely loved by the wind, putting Jake at ease.

Speaking of Jake... with everyone else playing around with their loot, he naturally also got some alone time in with the Cradle of Soul's Kindling. At first, he had just been infusing some energy into it while – pretty stupidly – testing how durable it was by trying if he could knock the urn. He couldn't, and based on all the things he tried, he doubted any C-grade could even leave a mark. That isn't to say B-grades necessary could either, as Jake honestly had no idea how durable it was.

Ah, but he was also a bit productive.

Jake discovered that not only could he infuse his energy into the urn, but he could also look inside. And what he saw was honestly astonishing. The description of the Cradle had talked about a world inside, but Jake had seen that more as either a metaphor or perhaps just a small space like what could be found inside Sandy's stomach.

What he instead was met with could truly be described as a world. A massive space resided within the Cradle, making it look like a miniature solar system. At first, Jake thought he was looking at a sea of stars until he noticed it instead was actually tens if not hundreds of

thousands of Soulflames burning in space like small stars. Some chased each other, some fled, some did nothing, and some simply found themselves consumed by the environment.

The edges of this space weren't just emptiness either, but instead solid walls. These walls were of all kinds of varieties and had entire cave systems within them. Some of the walls were made of rock, others of metal, ice, wood, pure mana, water, lightning, clouds, pure light, pure darkness, and many more. Honestly, the entire place just didn't make any sense based on all the rules Jake knew of affinities. Yet it all seemed to be in balance, and on all of these walls and within all of these tunnel systems, Soulflames were moving about.

As he observed, Jake noticed what he believed was a Soulflame about to be born. He watched with excitement as the energy gathered, but he was soon left with wide eyes as the process didn't stop. The mana kept gathering until a fully formed elemental was just about to appear.

Right then, the entire world of the Cradle seemed to come down on it like heavenly judgment, and the whole elemental dispersed into pure energy once more, never truly born. Having seen it once, Jake looked for more instances of this, and within less than an hour, he saw hundreds of similar cases. Watching this had answered one of Jake's biggest questions. The Cradle wasn't actually doing anything he didn't already know was possible; it just did what was possible damn well.

The process of a Soulflame being born was the same within the Cradle as in the outside world, except for the environment being more primed than usual, and whenever an elemental was about to be born, it would be instantly killed. That way, the Cradle avoided actual elementals ever appearing, as they would be counterproductive. While alchemists loved their Soulflames, elementals loved to consume them even more as they were pretty much considered top-tier natural treasures.

Anyway, Jake felt a lot better after understanding exactly how the Cradle worked, and he infused plenty of his own arcane mana into it. After he had put in nearly his entire mana pool, he saw a pretty large sphere of it appear floating in the middle of space with some kind of protective film around it, keeping all other Soulflames away as it grew. Jake had a good feeling this orb would continue to grow as he poured in energy, and eventually, his arcane affinity would begin to invade other places in the Cradle than just this one orb.

From there, it would still be a matter of chance if a good Soulflame would appear with his arcane affinity. The entire purpose of the Cradle was to play into this chance and, through the sheer number of Soulflames born, create one that was really good.

This was how two weeks quickly passed before it was finally time to head onwards. Truthfully, they weren't all in peak condition yet, but considering they were heading onto a city floor and the fact that they assumed the difficulty of floor forty-one to be lower than the Minaga fight, they moved confidently through the gateway.

Congratulations! You have arrived on the eighth City Floor of Nevermore.

All violence outside of the arenas is strictly prohibited on all city floors. Challenge Dungeon(s) can be found in the central square. If Nevermore is left and reentered, you will automatically be taken to the latest city floor unlocked.

You have successfully completed the first portion of Nevermore, successfully entering the middle floors of the C-grade section. From floor forty-one onwards, all floors will be significantly larger in scope. All basic floor completion bonuses will be increased tenfold to compensate for the increased floor sizes moving forward.

“Did any of you know that Nevermore had portions like this?” Jake questioned after reading the message. He was mainly asking Dina but phrased it as an open question to be polite.

As expected, everyone shook their head except for Dina, who seemed to be in thought for a moment before answering.

“I didn’t know for sure, but I had heard that sections exist... but... I had expected Minaga’s Labyrinth to be viewed like one of these sections, not that there was any kind of official segregation,” she answered, looking a bit apologetic for some reason.

“Aight,” Jake nodded. “Well, can’t say I don’t welcome change as I hoped Nevermore wouldn’t go back to the usual stuff before Minaga’s Labyrinth. Let’s hope the difficulty is also higher on these floors.”

“If they are larger, there may be space for a wider range of difficulty on each floor,” the Sword Saint pitched in.

“Even if that is not the case, simply splitting up to complete the floors faster while facing challenges made for entire parties will naturally result in an increase in difficulty,” the Fallen King also added.

“Ree,” Sylphie contributed with an excellent point too.

“True, true,” Jake nodded as he smiled a bit at the others. “Before we move on...”

He got a few smiles all around as they all knew where they were headed.

Jake and company once more sought out the Leaderboards, curious if they had managed to take the top spot back. Jake had confidence they did, as they had thoroughly cheesed floors thirty-six through thirty-nine and did as well as anyone could on floor forty.

When they saw the Leaderboards, he could only smile at the current top record.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-40): 12521

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-40): 54373

The top Points Records was the exact score they had, meaning they had indeed reclaimed the top spot once more. The difference was for how long. As mentioned, they had likely been faster than many other parties, and there was a good chance they just hadn't arrived yet.

Looking at the average, Jake found it so low it was a bit silly, especially considering some people had less than this – it being average and all. Then again, seeing the more than four times higher Points Record that he and his party members held did put things into perspective.

Any party capable of even beating floor forty this early on in the integration and getting on the Leaderboards had to be pretty talented. A regular "elite" party from Earth likely wouldn't even be able to beat the average, at least not yet. They would likely also take far longer than Jake and company. There were many floors before Minaga's Labyrinth where one could just stay and grind levels for a while if they so desired.

This would also not be done while beating many of the events, skipping a few bonus objectives, limited achievements, and things like the Demon Lord or Minaga fights were entirely out of the question.

"We reached the top spot again," Dina smiled as she looked at the Leaderboards.

"For now," the Sword Saint nodded.

"It is no excuse to-"

"Yeah, yeah, no complacency, but keep going hard. You gave that speech the last time," Jake smiled at the Fallen King.

"Words that should not be forgotten," the Unique Lifeform still insisted.

Jake couldn't really argue against that as he looked at the Leaderboards for a while while the others chatted. He did also take note of how few people were on this floor. Compared to Minaga's city floor, this one was practically deserted. A few curious people had thrown glances their way, all of them far above their levels. Considering they were scouts from different factions, Jake reckoned they also knew who Jake and the others were and thus left them alone.

As he stood there looking at the Leaderboards, Jake did get curious about who else had passed them. Closing his eyes, he released a Pulse of Perception, scanning his surroundings and the people observing them. One of them wore a familiar robe and was

located within a large building in the middle of the city with several deserted houses around it.

“Say, wanna go check in with someone who might know a bit more about everything going on?” Jake asked.

“Oh, the Order of the Malefic Viper has someone here?” Dina asked, instantly picking up on what Jake was asking.

“That, or some creep stole a robe from the Order and is impersonating a member,” Jake smiled in response.

“I see no harm in that,” the Fallen King answered non-committedly.

“May as well,” the Sword Saint also nodded.

Thus Jake began to lead them toward the building with the scout inside. Not that it was needed, as Jake saw the scout already make her way over to Jake the moment he began walking toward the house. A bit before, even, showing she had decided to make contact already.

A few minutes later, a scalekin in a cloak with a familiar motif imprinted on it jumped down from a roof and landed in front of them, already on her knees. “This one greets the Chosen of the Malefic One and his comrades.”

“Hey there,” Jake nodded as he identified the female scalekin.

[Acidfall Wyvern – lvl 294]

Jake was a bit surprised at seeing a wyvern in humanoid form having taken up the job as scout and informant within Nevermore rather than just practicing themselves. He wasn't going to ask thou-

“Why is a wyvern with decent talent wasting their time playing attendant on a city floor like this?” the Fallen King questioned.

Before Jake could even throw the Fallen King a glare, she responded. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT *novel·fire·net*

“I am not competing on any Leaderboards and have no need to hurry. I have only stayed here for a year while nurturing a natural treasure and will continue my own descent in a few months. Thank you for your concern,” the scalekin smiled with that kind of smile that wasn't really a smile.

Jake just threw the Fallen King a glance as he turned his attention back to the attendant from the Order. "Ignoring that annoying interrupting Unique Lifeform, do you have somewhere we can discuss privately?"

"Would right here be acceptable? My current base of operations is under a protective circle due to an ongoing experiment," she questioned.

"Sure, go ahead," Jake shrugged as he whipped out a set of chairs and a table he totally hadn't stolen from one of Minaga's in-between rooms. Totally not. And if he had, then it was the furniture's own fault for being too comfortable.

After they all took a seat, Jake began questioning the attendant about the event as he made sure no outsiders were listening in.

"We don't know exactly how many parties have passed the True Ending event of Minaga's Labyrinth, much less how many have done it without suffering any losses, but it is estimated that the number will rise to at least in the dozens over the coming period as more elites make it to floor forty. The event is only doable by parties who are competing on the Leaderboards, and even then, it has other requirements we are not entirely certain of," the attendant said in a careful tone.

"I also believe there are other requirements that are purposefully obscured. We also need to consider that not all parties manage to have every member make it through the entire fight. In fact, there is often at least one weaker link that is eliminated or just someone who finds themselves ill-fit in the fight, particularly during the period where each combatant is separated into individual fights. If they are unable to hold on long enough themselves, that is an easy spot to lose a comrade," the Sword Saint nodded as he spoke curtly.

"That is true, but we have no good way of determining either case, and we can only make educated guesses on who passed the True Ending event unless they outright state if they did or not," the attendant nodded.

It quickly became clear that while the attendant would happily give out information, she truly didn't know much, and she wasn't even overly aware of the other big parties. Jake kept calling her an attendant, but in truth, she too was just doing Nevermore herself and had been asked to stay on this floor in case anyone from the Order came by with questions, as she could work on her project on any city floor. That was also why she had been hidden when they arrived.

Jake and the others left the city floor soon after, seeing no reason to stay there. A few Pulses from Jake also confirmed no one else they knew was there. The lack of reason to stick around was probably also why it was so deserted. Especially not for the stronger parties, as there was an assumption that the following floors would be easier than the Minaga battle or even whatever fight one would have if they didn't face Minaga himself. An assumption that was probably correct.

Alas, there was only one way to find out as Jake and company continued onwards with the hope that the following floors wouldn't be too boring.

Who knows, maybe they could even be fun?

Or horrible...

But hopefully fun.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

- Chapter 714: Nevermore: Floor Forty-One

Chapter 714: Nevermore: Floor Forty-One

Jake stepped through the gateway to the forty-first floor and instantly felt the sunlight upon his skin and the light breeze of the wind. Immediately, he knew he had come to a massive space, which honestly felt damn refreshing after Minaga's Labyrinth.

Greenish soil was beneath his feet as he opened his eyes and saw that they found themselves standing on a vast desolate plain of nothing but barren ground. The soil felt dead and bereft of energy, and looking around, Jake noted they were standing atop a small hill with a very slight incline, giving them a good look at their surroundings.

"A planet of some sort," the Sword Saint noted.

"Ree!" Sylphie added, saying that there was a lot of wind there, indicating it was a larger planet. Jake still remembered the planet they had been on during the very first floor, though he was unsure if that had even counted as a real planet or if it had just been a big meteor or something. Planets after the system just all seemed so damn big, though Jake had to admit he hadn't seen that many, and using Primordial-4 as any kind of frame of reference seemed like a horrible idea.

He also had to remember the message about these floors all being a lot bigger. As Jake was having these thoughts, the notification welcoming them to the floor appeared.

Welcome to the forty-first floor of Nevermore: Tri-World

You have arrived on Tri-World, a planet occupied by three major factions vying for control. First is the Beastfolk Alliance, a faction consisting of beastfolk and

beasts alike that have united after finding themselves suppressed by the two other factions for years. Original content can be found at novel●fire●net

Second is the Enlightened Republic, the most powerful faction of the three. Elves, humans, and dwarves used to be in conflict, but many years ago formed a republic to battle the two other factions, thus becoming the most powerful.

Finally, the Risen Kingdom is an offshoot of undead who have long lost contact with the true Risen Empire, yet they still retain much of the heritage from their faction. Despite being the smallest faction in both population and area controlled, they are considered second only to the Enlightened Republic.

These three factions have been at odds for millennia with no signs of stopping. As new arrivals on this world, you belong to no faction. Your actions from here on out shall be entirely up to you as you can explore and find all there is to Tri-World. Including the deep secrets of this planet. In this quest, you have only one objective:

Determine the fate Tri-World.

Main objective: Determine the fate of Tri-World

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: Fate Determined (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 54373

They all rapidly read it over as Jake was left with a feeling of uncertainty.

“What exactly are we supposed to do?” he questioned out loud, half to himself and half to the others.

“It does strike me as very open-ended,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Grandpa did mention that some trials like this exist in some dungeons, so it being present in Nevermore isn’t too odd,” Dina nodded as she seemed to be in thought. “In these instances, there usually isn’t a wrong or a right thing to do, as long as you finish whatever objective the dungeon gives, and I heard from Grandpa that many just use dungeons like these to experiment in. However, seeing as it is Nevermore and we earn Nevermore Points... I am not sure. I would guess some things would give more points than others.”

“Three factions all competing in a large world. I tentatively see a few approaches, but none of them are feasible before we know more. In either case, I would assume the most basic solution would be to assist one faction in completely taking over the planet, with another one being to wipe out every faction. All it says is that we must determine the fate of the world, not that the fate has to be good,” the Fallen King theorized.

“Those do seem like the most obvious scenarios we can choose,” the Sword Saint concurred.

“There... is one more,” Dina said. “We are on a planet, right?”

She asked that last part to Jake, who gave his surroundings a good look. “Definitely seems like there is some curvature to the place, yep. The place is quite a bit smaller than Earth, though, but still pretty big.”

“I don’t know how big Earth is, but all planets have one thing in common: their core,” Dina said.

Hearing her say this, Jake instantly knew what she was getting at. Villy had mentioned this more than once when they were drinking, every time in relation to planetary sacrificial rituals. “Are you sure we wanna destroy the planet?”

Jake knew that rather than destroy a planet’s surface, then one could doom a world by going straight for the core, bu-

“What?” Dina asked, looking horrified. “No! No, I was thinking we could take control of the Planetary Pylon in the core, if there is one, and then have one faction take control of the planet through that. Why... why would we just destroy a planet?”

“I do believe destroying the planet would qualify as determining its fate,” the Fallen King chimed in.

“We are not destroying the planet,” Dina said resolutely, staring daggers at Jake.

“You were the one who suggested it first...” Jake muttered.

“I didn’t!” Dina protested loudly.

“Pretty sure you did,” Jake smirked as he looked to the side. “Oh look, people.”

“I am not falling for that,” Dina said, still looking at him with piercing eyes.

“No, Jake is right; there are people,” the Sword Saint said as he followed Jake’s gaze.

In the distance, a caravan of sorts appeared, moving rapidly towards them. More than a dozen large wooden barges flew a few meters off the ground, with people standing atop

each of them. The one in the front looked bulkier than the others, and from a distance, Jake could identify the figure at the helm, along with those standing with him.

[Caravan Guard Captain – lvl 215]

[Caravan Guard – lvl 204]

Jake was a bit taken aback at the results, as they all looked humanoid yet identified not as humans. If not human, then at most elves or some other race that closely resembled humans. It wasn't entirely clear as they were all hooded or wore armor covering their heads, but they struck Jake as part of the enlightened races for sure. Ultimately, he wrote it off as system-fuckery, or more accurately, a sub-section of system-fuckery known as dungeon-fuckery.

Their levels were also disappointingly low, as in way too low for them to ever be supposed to fight them.

"I would assume that caravan is here to serve as an introduction to the floor in addition to the initial welcome message," the Sword Saint said.

"Very likely. We should interrogate-"

"Talk to," the Sword Saint interrupted.

"- talk to them and learn more about the different factions and decide if any is worth supporting. The fact that the welcome message clarified where each faction is in the power hierarchy makes it obvious that more points will be earned should we support a weaker faction. Though, ultimately, I feel that simply supporting one faction or another would be too simple of a solution," the Fallen King said.

Jake had to tentatively agree as the caravan got closer and closer. By now, they had also spotted Jake and company and decided to slightly change their course to move straight to them. It was a bit surprising they didn't decide to avoid the five strangers with higher levels than anyone in their caravan, but Jake wasn't their boss.

A few moments later, they got close enough for them to hear each other, and the Guard Captain at the helm of the caravan yelled out loudly.

"Be careful! You shouldn't just be standing there!"

"Is that a threat?" the Fallen King's voice echoed out in an offended tone. However, the other party didn't seem affected in the slightest, as he responded.

"No such thing! Some nasty Tunellers are found in this area, so I just wanted to warn you that standing on the ground can be dangerous. They react to vibrations and such,"

the Guard Captain shared. "Wait, how did you even get here? Where is your ship, or did you fly by yourselves?"

"Freak-accident teleportation," Jake responded.

"Oh..." the Guard Captain said. "Where from?"

Jake briefly shared a glance with the others and saw their unbothered expression as he just answered. "From another universe entirely, we think. Or at least another planet."

"Ah, alright, I got it," the Guard Captain said as he laughed, the other guards also chuckling along after he made a hand motion. "You should just have said you got isekai'd."

"I... what?" Jake stood with an open mouth.

"You teleported here from another world, right? Yeah, we call that getting Isekai'd around here," the Caravan Guard Captain explained casually. "Happens quite frequently. Heck, that is why we have so many different races on this planet. I myself was teleported here quite a few years ago."

"What kind of dungeon is this?" Jake questioned out loud.

"This planet is a bit peculiar indeed," the Guard Captain laughed.

"You do know we are in a dungeon, right?" Jake tried to ask, seeing as the guy seemed to have some level of intelligence.

"The planet is called Tri-World, though I think that name is still semi-recent as a few still referred to it as Quad-World when I first got here, but the fourth faction was eliminated a century and a half ago," the man answered, confirming something to Jake.

"Yep, dungeon-fuckery makes them not know they are in a dungeon," Jake communicated through the Golden Mark.

"An odd word that these Tri-World denizens have come up with to describe people getting teleported here," Dina commented.

"Yeah... you know what, I am just going to assume that the word I hear is not the same one you do, as that would be very weird," Jake said, blaming everything on the translation skill.

"If it is any comfort, then I hear the same word, I believe," the Sword Saint said. *"Takes me back to before the system. You know, one of my great-grandchildren was really into that sort of thing."*

"Let's please just move on and learn about this damn place and continue," Jake insisted. He felt like the system was trolling him with the kind of words it used sometimes, but... fuck, it fits in this situation, so what the hell could he do.

"Where do you folk plan on heading anyway?" the Guard Captain said. "Seeing as you got two humans with you, the Enlightened Republic seems pertinent, but as you are Otherworlders, you are pretty free to go wherever, though things may get a bit tougher there."

"Enlightened Republic? What is that?" Jake asked, trying to be smart and get information from the guy. He also thought it would be weird if they knew about the factions on a planet they had just been teleported t-

"System sure screwed up not even giving you the basic information package, eh? People usually get a notification," the Guard Captain said, looking a bit confused. "Oh well, I guess mistakes happen. Hey, kid, do we have an extra map somewhere?"

He said the last part to one of the other guards, who promptly saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

A few seconds passed before the Guard Captain spoke again in an impatient tone. "Then give it to me?"

"Yes, sir!" the guard said as he took out a map and handed it to the Guard Captain. The Captain proceeded to throw it down to Jake as he sighed.

"This world's natives are all a bit... odd. They don't really do much unless prompted and just move through their routines, so it is a safe bet that anyone who approaches you and speaks first with semi-normal conversational skills is Otherworlders like us," the Guard Captain explained. "This odd trait of the world's denizens has its ups and downs, but... overall, you get used to it."

He didn't sound entirely like he believed the last part himself.

"Where are you headed to?" Jake asked.

"The Enlightened Republic's capital, which was also why I proposed going there first, but we will make stops in the other faction's territories on the way if you five wanna tag along," the Guard Captain said in an enthusiastic tone.

Jake checked with his party and got agreements all around. Seeing as they needed to gather information, sticking with the Caravan guy for a while seemed like a good idea. Plus, the floating boat was actually pretty damn fast, making it not a horrible mode of transportation, especially considering the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Dina were not in absolutely peak condition yet after the Minaga fight.

"Sounds like a fine idea," Jake smiled.

"Then welcome aboard!" the guy smiled and laughed. "I am not going to complain about having five people stronger than myself along. Man, now I nearly hope we get attacked on the way so I can harvest some materials to sell to the Beastfolk Alliance. Having actual people to talk to isn't too bad either."

"Can't even say I would complain if we got into some fun fights, and we are more than interested in learning more about this world," Jake grinned as the boat began to move just as they all got on it, making them skirt across the landscape at impressive speeds.

The Caravan Guard Captain spoke casually to them all for a while before he adopted a serious expression. "I do have one warning, though. Make sure to follow local laws and customs in any territory ruled by a faction. These small villages are rather normal, but when we enter the bigger cities, and especially the capital, things change. The culture here may seem odd and different to you as new arrivals, but the nobles are set in their ways. Be careful, some powerful people are lurking about."

"Oh, what kind of differences are we talking about?" Jake asked curiously.

The Guard Captain sighed as he clenched his fists. "You'll see when we get there."

--

Three weeks later.

The large tower crumbled behind him as a massive pit opened up, consuming the streets below. Even now, the remnants of Jake's destructive arcane mana still ravaged what had once been a city as Jake stood there floating in mid-air.

Far in the distance, a golden pillar descended as the landscape lit up from the power unleashed by the Fallen King. Elsewhere, a massive tornado ravaged the terrain, leaving a wake of pure destruction as entire villages were sucked up and shredded to pieces.

In another direction, massive rainclouds hung far up in the sky as a drizzle turned the world below into Swiss cheese. Finally, an entire forest had overgrown and seemingly turned against any beings who lived too close or were unfortunate enough to have been present within upon their arrival.

Jake looked at the destruction with a steely look, not even bothering to look at the thousands upon thousands of notifications his actions had brought him.

"*So everyone's in agreement?*" Jake asked through the Golden Mark.

"*Yes... this seems like the only way to stop this... this... place,*" Dina said in an angry tone.

“And if your idea doesn’t work?” Jake asked.

“Then perhaps getting rid of the planet altogether is for the best,” Dina answered, not a shred of mercy in her voice.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 715: Nevermore: Karmic Plague

One had to skip back a few weeks to find out why Jake and company chose violence.

They had traveled with the Caravan Guard Captain and the caravan for around a week by then and had learned a lot more about the world. They had even entered the territories of two factions and traded with small local villages. The caravan they were on transported primarily people, but it also had foodstuff, herbs, and metals. All in all, everything seemed pretty normal. At least when they were on the road.

Sure, every other person than the Guard Captain didn’t ever say anything of substance and generally gave off powerful NPC energy. They just made small talk with each other, with the Guard Captain more than happy to only talk to the five of them, as clearly, he didn’t even view the people he traveled with as people worth interacting with.

One thing they did discover was that teleportation circles did not work on the planet. One Step worked as normal, and none of the others noticed anything either, but upon further inspection, Jake did find that the spatial mana in the environment felt slightly distorted. He reckoned it had something to do with the entire “isekai” thing.

Anyway, the truly odd things began to appear when they interacted with the Otherworlders.

Throughout this all, Jake thought things felt... off. He observed the natives quite a lot, and he did even question if they were slaves or something at one point, but the Guard Captain shot that down, saying there weren’t any slaves on the planet as far as he knew, and the nobles had strictly outlawed any kind of slavery.

Again, this just felt weird for a planet with a medieval style, but it wasn’t something Jake wanted to question. So he and the others just continued their travels.

In the first village they had arrived in, not a single person had gone to meet them. They just ignored the massive caravan with nearly a dozen C-grades and hundreds of D-grades on it. It was only when they had fully entered the village there was some

recognition of their presence outside of a few random stares when the biggest building in the village had its doors open.

Out walked a large man together with a woman, both of them showing intelligent eyes beyond the natives, making Jake instantly recognize them as Otherworlders.

“Captain! Good to see you come by!” the large man said as he laughed.

“Oh my, I see you brought friends?” the woman at his side spoke, looking curiously at Jake and company.

“Yeah, Otherworlders I met on the way here. They just got isekai’d to Tri-World before I arrived,” the Caravan Guard Captain answered with a light smile.

“Pretty rare for five people to come together like this, but I guess it happens,” the man shrugged as he greeted Jake and the others. “We are the Village Chiefs of this little place. Welcome to Tri-World; I hope you all enjoy your stay, even if it does take a bit to adapt to the planet.”

Jake nodded as the Sword Saint took charge and responded with courtesies. Jake was too busy using Identify and trying to figure out where this odd feeling of wrongness came from.

[Village Chief – lvl 230]

[Village Chief – lvl 232]

Their levels were a bit higher, but they were still low. Far too low to be any threats, which made Jake question why the Wyrmgod found it a good idea to guide them to this place using the caravan. Sure, they could just start blasting, but for now, Jake kept calm.

He looked as the female Village Chief kept chatting with the Sword Saint as the man walked over to one of the barges.

“So, people on barge three. You should all get down and settle down here,” the male Village Chief said.

Jake looked on with a frown, thinking that was the worst sales pitch ever to make someone move the-

“Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea,” the elderly man on the barge said with a nod as every single person there stood up and began jumping off. No one else spoke but just followed the elderly man down onto the ground as the Village Chief yelled for some of the villagers there to carry over large pieces of timber to load onto the barge.

Do they... just follow orders? And the Village Chief knew, considering he had already planned for that timber to take its place, Jake concluded.

Soon after, they bid farewell to the Village Chiefs and headed onward toward their next destination. The Sword Saint questioned the Caravan Captain on the way about the odd interaction there, but the Captain didn't really answer but just said that was how things were on Tri-World.

The next village was the same, and by the time they made it to the third, Jake and company were honestly pretty freaked out. At this time, right as they all agreed something was seriously wrong on the planet, they all got a notification.

Bonus objective gained: Discover the true nature of Tri-World's peculiarity.

It didn't seem like much, but the fact it had given them an objective meant it was something worth looking into and not just the natural setting of the floor. The "people" in Minaga's Labyrinth had also been one-hundred percent fake, but that was clearly done in a semi-jokingly manner, and it was so damn obvious and comical at times. This planet just felt weird. Different. Jake's intuition told him something far more insidious was going on.

After two weeks and several more villages later, they split up with the Caravan Guard Captain when he told them that they would stay in a small village for a few days as a shipment of ores was delayed. They didn't really complain as this was a good excuse to scout out the planet a bit by themselves and head towards one of the major cities marked on the map they had gotten.

Speaking of the map, it had given them an okay understanding of the planet's geography. The three factions controlled roughly seventy percent of the landmass on the entire planet, with the rest remaining unclaimed. The unclaimed area were due to there being too many monsters to make it worth trying to control, or simply land with little to no value. Of these seventy percent, thirty-five percent was controlled by the Enlightened Republic, twenty-five by the Beastfolk, and the final ten percent by the Risen.

Only about five percent of the planet was covered in water, with nothing that could be called oceans. From what they gathered, the most powerful beings on the planet were also only mid-tier C-grades, which should be more than manageable. Of course, it was possible that the people they questioned didn't know the true peak of power for the planet.

Their party of five continued their exploration for a while, and it was only when separated from the Caravan Guard Captain they could truly understand how fucked-up the natives were.

Jake and the Sword Saint had visited a small village by themselves and tried to talk to the people there, and while they had reacted, they only ever answered questions and never asked anything themselves. They also answered incredibly truthfully, as if lying wasn't even a concept to them. Moreover, they discovered one extremely odd thing.

They didn't seem capable of saying no.

Regrouping, Jake and company sat down to discuss what the hell was up with Tri-World.

"These people... they are practically not even alive. They are more like puppets than actual people. Calling them slaves wouldn't even be accurate..." Dina said in a slightly horrified tone. "... I don't know what it is, but something is seriously wrong. Something magical in nature."

"It is subtle, but I do feel a stark difference between the natives and Otherworlders. The natives have souls that seem almost incomplete. As if a part is taken out, or perhaps blacked out," the Fallen King said. *"Why or how that is, I cannot say, but I do estimate it to be from outside interference. Though it is odd that it affects everyone equally, including children. Perhaps it is a soul curse?"*

"This interference seems to have almost conditioned them somewhat," the Sword Saint muttered.

Jake sat deep in thought for a while, thinking until suddenly, a light bulb went off.

"I think I know.... No, I know, I know," Jake said with a deep frown as he shared his thoughts.

It was something he had only read about briefly after chatting with Villy about Eversmile once and getting referred to a book. It was a book that the snake god described as "very much not common reading material," even if a lot of what it said wasn't exactly secret. It was a book about a special kind of karmic magic that was outlawed in the multiverse and that even Eversmile no longer used, despite being the original creator.

It was something called a Karmic Plague. Others also called it a Lineage Curse due to its effects. A Karmic Plague was – as the name implied – a type of karmic magic that spread like a plague once a person was "infected."

The Lineage Curse name came due to the effect this ultimately ended up having. The biggest direct transfer of Records and karma came from parents to children, so if someone infected with a Karmic Plague ever reproduced, the child would inherit the Plague. In summary, it would spread from a source to something created.

In fact, it was possible to infect entire planets...

Most types of magic would expire once they ran out of energy, but if someone or something kept feeding the original power source of this magic? Moreover, each infected person became their own power source.

Jake was still explaining as they all got a notification.

Objective Completed: Discover the true nature of Tri-World's peculiarity. 400 Nevermore Points Earned.

"I guess that confirms it," the Sword Saint said, looking at the notifications. "But how was anyone supposed to figure this out?"

"Karmic Plagues and plague magic, in general, has not been used in any official capacity for many eras..." Dina muttered. "And if they are used, it will be hidden. I did know about them, but I never imagined we would encounter one."

"Ree?" Sylphie also chipped in, usually not the most active in these kinds of discussions. She questioned why anyone would even make this kind of magic.

"I think this variant of a Karmic Plague was originally made in an attempt to create more loyal soldiers," Dina answered, shaking her head. "But I am not entirely sure. A lot of these things aren't made with an express purpose but just to see if the creator could. Also, I don't think we needed to figure out it was a Karmic Plague, just that it was some kind of soul affliction or karmic affliction."

"It's also possible we would encounter some Otherworlder who knew," the Sword Saint added.

On a side note, Jake did not share the part about Eversmile having originally made it. Nor that Villy had admitted to maybe being an advisor on the project.

Jake was about to talk again when another prompt came up.

Bonus objective gained: Locate the source of the Karmic Plague.

"Well, I guess we know what we are doing, then," Jake said.

Luckily, they were pretty close to a major city. Not the capital of the Enlightened Republic, but a pretty major city that, according to the map, had around fifty-thousand living there. Yeah, populations in this world weren't overly large, and even the capital only had around a million living there.

Soon after, they arrived at the city, and after only a bit of exploration...

Well...

This was where they would encounter the impetus for Jake ripping apart an entire city, with the others spreading out and annihilating surrounding villages and towns. On the way, they had already discussed that there likely only was one way to “cure” the natives of the Karmic Plague, but they were still not entirely sure.

That changed with one of their first encounters after entering the city.

From a distance, they had observed to try and find some more Otherworlders. They soon spotted two walking together, a man and a woman. They were walking down the street, chatting, when three natives walked toward them. It was a man, a woman, and a small kid. All five in the encounter were humans.

The parents and daughter walked down the street as the kid walked into the leg of the Otherworlder woman. It was obvious that the woman had, on purpose, walked into the kid, and Jake already thought she was an asshole for that... but what followed exceeded his expectations for horribleness.

“How dare you walk into me? Apologize right now,” the woman said with a smile, clearly enjoying the scenario she herself had created.

“We are sorry for any inconvenience we have caused the noble and will do anything to make up for it,” the father said promptly as he bowed, the woman Jake assumed to be his wife following suit.

The noblewoman still looked smug as the man leaned over and whispered something in her ear, making the woman grin even more.

“In that case, slap each other and the kid.”

Without any hesitation, the two natives slapped each other hard enough to spill blood before also hitting the kid, making her fall to the ground; the slap being so hard that the skin on her cheeks was ripped up, spewing out blood. Instantly, the girl started crying as the noblewoman rolled her eyes.

“Make her shut up right now,” she said in an annoyed tone.

What happened next nearly caused Dina to kill the noblewoman right then and there.

Once more, without even a second of hesitation, the father of the girl walked over and stomped on her head twice, killing her. He then turned to the noblewoman as if waiting for her to approve, with the mother just standing there with empty eyes.

“I... Wow, you didn’t have to kill her, just shut her up,” the noblewoman said, sounding surprised.

“I apologize. Is there anything we can-“

“No, it’s fine,” the noblewoman waved him off before suddenly giggling. “That sure was something.”

“I told you that you need to be more direct with your orders as they can still interpret your words somewhat, and the immediate nature of your order made him choose the most extreme, yet fastest, option,” the nobleman laughed before looking at the father, who stood with a bloody boot next to his daughter’s corpse. “Clean your spawn up and get out of here. Oh, and everyone around, stop staring and get a move on.”

The father nodded as he began cleaning up as ordered, the mother joining too, with the nobleman and noblewoman strolling away, all the native onlookers also continuing their day like nothing had happened. No one around had really reacted to the fucked-up thing that had just happened outside of stopping up and staring.

Seeing this left all of them just silently sitting there until the Fallen King spoke.

“There is no cure to this kind of soul mutation,” he said, Jake, nodding along. He already knew that.

The problem was that the people were fully one with the Plague by now. Fully infected. It wasn’t really something one could fix, at least not a bunch of C-grades. A plague could be cured, but no fucking way they or any other C-grade could do it, as Jake had never heard of anyone below A-grade ever creating a plague. Much less a Karmic Plague. The way the Karmic Plague worked was akin to Jake’s own soul mutation in the form of Anomalous Soul, but rather than give extra mana, theirs made them unable to reject carrying out anything asked of them or to truly ever question anything in general.

“I... why would the Wyrmgod even create a floor like this?” Dina questioned.

“I don’t know, but I have an idea,” Jake sighed. He did agree it was bloody weird, and he wondered if the Primordial wanted to teach them some lesson or something. Perhaps it was a fucked-up social experiment. At least for the usual party. The thing is, he and Dina knew a bit more about the multiverse than the average Joe.

They had initially discussed that this floor would turn into some political situation where they had to find a faction to support or maybe even start their own. That was likely still an option if they wanted to just complete the floor and move on... but... no. That would be the “wrong” choice. Official source is [movel✕fire✕net](#)

This planet was fucked. Something had to seriously change, and if their party was to decide...

Well, Jake’s “idea” of a planetary sacrificial ritual was legitimately back on the menu.

Because while they had been unsure of what their objective was on this floor originally, they knew for sure now. Plagues were outlawed in the multiverse for a reason, but that

didn't mean some didn't still create them. And the course of action, once one encountered a plague, was pretty damn clear.

The way to get rid of a plague was to remove the source. That wouldn't help those already infected, as they would still be able to spread it, even if the plague would begin to slowly weaken with the source gone, being slightly weaker every time it spread.

Even if this floor seemed open-ended, Jake knew there was only one "right" decision, and he didn't doubt it would be the one that gave the most points, seeing as the Wyrmgod had been one of the people involved in outlawing the creation of plagues. Ultimately, even if they removed the source of the Karmic Plague, for those already infected, there was only one reasonable cure:

Extermination.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 716: Nevermore: The Only Cure

Jake had never been a big fan of killing humans, or any humanoid beings for that matter. However, he also wasn't directly averse to it. It was more that if he had to choose between fighting a giant bear or a human to get levels, he would prefer the bear, even if both had the same level of intelligence. This chapter is updated by **novel•fire•net**

What he definitely didn't like and did feel averse to was killing low-level humans. That just felt wrong on a fundamental level... but... Jake did so anyway. The four others did too. Dina was reluctant, the Sword Saint seemed neutral, like it was just something that had to be done, and the Fallen King and Sylphie honestly didn't sound like they gave two shits about doing a massacre.

Their reason for this purge of life was an experiment of sorts. A grisly one. They wanted to see the response of the Enlightened Republic and the rest of the world. Hopefully, they could even bait out some of the Otherworlders in charge. Because it was clear that only Otherworlders had anything to say in this world and that "noble" was just a synonym for Otherworlder.

The killing proceeded smoothly as the big city didn't have anyone above level 240, making it a quick and easy endeavor to wipe out, and their group met up once they were done. They proceeded to wait in the area for nearly half a day, with not a single person showing up, before they decided to travel more toward the capital as it became

clear there would be no response. Throughout everything, the natives didn't even fight back either but just stood there like mindless drones. Jake had the feeling that if he had just yelled for them to lay down and die, they would have done so without question.

To repeat, the place was fucked up.

Ultimately, one also had to remember that they were in a dungeon, and nothing was truly real. All the people there didn't have any future, and their only fates were to be challenges on a Nevermore dungeon floor while potentially teaching the people doing the floor some kind of lesson. Which, if Jake had to be honest, was probably a very good thing, as he very much wouldn't like this kind of place to exist in the multiverse outside, fully aware that such a place probably did exist somewhere. He just really hoped to not encounter it.

Flying toward the capital, Dina wasn't in the best mood as she spoke.

"Will... will we need to kill everyone there too?"

"The Karmic Plague is so ingrained within their souls that getting rid of it would mean death. The choice we stand before is to either leave them be to their meaningless lives or end their existences. I care neither way," the Fallen King said.

Dina already seemed to know, but Jake understood she wasn't happy about it.

"We should scout out the place a bit first," Jake said. "Maybe even talk to some of the Otherworlders to discover what the hell is going on from people who display some level of independent thought. But I do think that our course of action will ultimately not be a peaceful one. No matter how friendly they are... well, you already know."

On a side note, Jake hadn't bothered speaking to the two nobles he saw in the other city after the shit they pulled with the native parents and kid. They had died without even knowing what had hit them.

"There is likely some kind of leader there," the Sword Saint said. "That it is called a Republic does strike me as odd, considering that usually indicates some kind of democratic process or elections, which makes no sense considering the state of the natives."

"It is only the Otherworlders who can decide anything. It can also be because it is a merged faction of different races, each then having a representative, but who knows, it's just a name," Jake answered. "Either way, we will have answers when we get there."

Two weeks passed before they arrived at the Enlightened Capital, showing the sheer size of the planet. They passed by dozens of large settlements on the way, and while they did scout some of them out, it was just the same shit everywhere.

Every single place had one or more Otherworlders in charge of everything, and in many of the small towns, the one Otherworlder lived like a king surrounded by slaves. They did talk about it but decided not to wipe out these places immediately.

They did also see a lot of the natives and how they lived. For the most part, they seemed normal. They talked with each other, they lived their lives, and if not for the fact they couldn't really decide things themselves, Jake couldn't spot any differences. He even saw a party C-grades hunting down a large beast within a valley, working together, using skills, and being normal.

The mere fact they had even reached C-grade was astonishing, considering their shortcomings due to the Karmic Plague. But it did also show why experiments like this were performed. Making someone a slave would always harm their Path and limit any and all potential they had significantly. The Karmic Plague did too, but in a far less severe manner, plus it removed any need for contracts and such. It didn't make it any less fucked up and insidious, but Jake could see how someone who didn't care about other living beings outside of how useful they could be would perform this kind of experiment.

As the capital appeared in the distance, still a few hundred kilometers away, Jake scouted it out visually by squinting his eyes a bit. It was a large settlement with tall walls surrounding it, most of the buildings inside of the walls, but some outside. In the center of the city, a large tower soared higher than anything else, though he did spot a lot of large impressive buildings behind the walls. Especially this official-looking building with really impressive carvings on the pillars. The place was definitely bigger than any other settlement they had seen, but to confirm and get some information, they made use of the rules of Tri-World, even if it felt wrong.

Rather than enter the capital right away, they sought out a farm outside of the walls where a man was working the fields. He was only E-grade and instantly turned and looked when Jake and the others landed only a few meters from him.

"Who is the most powerful person in the Enlightened Capital?" Jake asked, knowing small talk was a waste of time.

"The Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic," the man answered with a smile.

"Are they also the most powerful person in the Enlightened Republic?" Jake followed up.

"Yes, I believe he is."

"Where does this Lord Protector live?" Jake continued to question, not wanting to talk to the robot more than necessary.

"In the Grand Spire at the center of the capital. You can't miss it," the man explained.

"What level is he?" the Sword Saint asked curiously.

"I apologize, sir. I do not know. However, I can go ask others if they know, and if not, go see for myse-"

"No, you can just continue on with your day as if you never even spoke to us," the Sword Saint interrupted him, knowing Jake was also very much done with the "conversation."

Jake was already looking at the capital wall as Sylphie let out a small screech, the farmer back at work, acting like they didn't exist.

"Ree?"

"Yeah, no way in without being discovered," Jake nodded. A large formation covered the entire city before them, and based on Jake's quick scan, it was a dual-purpose defensive and detection formation. The defensive part was not active at all times, but the detection was.

As things were, they didn't really care about being detected as they had gone there to talk with the most powerful person present anyway. Entering the city, Jake instantly felt a presence lock onto them as a voice echoed out from the spire towering over the capital.

"Newcomers, huh? I guess I can entertain you a bit," a male voice said as a small opening appeared in the spire, giving Jake and the others access. Jake had already released a pulse and found a single man waiting for them inside the spatially expanded building. He looked humanoid but had longer ears than normal, making Jake guess he was a half-elf.

Entering the tower through the small portal, Jake and company found themselves in a large spacious living room with fancy decor. Sitting on a large couch was a middle-aged half-elf, and Jake naturally identified him, finding his level impressive.

[Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 291]

"Not very polite of you to come barging in like this... I take you five were also the ones who caused a ruckus in the outer regions of the Republic?" the man asked, looking relaxed.

"We were," Jake answered, having already gone over the game plan with his party before coming. "Hard not to after seeing the disgusting state of the place, and we knew purging them was the only cure."

"Oh?" the Lord Protector smiled. "You speak as if you know what the cause of this planet's peculiarity is?"

"We do," Jake confirmed. "A Karmic Plague."

"I did get the feeling you five were rather extraordinary the moment I felt you enter the city... you truly have proved me correct. Few have any knowledge of Karmic Plagues," the Lord Protector said as he summoned a wine glass and took a drink.

Jake just looked at the man for a while before he sighed.

"I have lived here for more than two thousand years already... nothing has changed during all this time. For so long, I had no idea why Tri-World was so unique, and I, too, struggled with the thoughts I see you have now. Let me just clarify... there truly is no cure, as you say. But that doesn't mean killing them is the only choice."

"Do you know the origin of the Karmic Plague? Who caused it? Or... maybe how to get rid of it?" Jake questioned. He knew the last one wasn't very likely unless there was some dungeon-fuckery going on, which was one of the reasons they wanted to check out a major faction.

"Hah, there are some theories, most of which stem from one person. A couple of centuries ago, an Otherworlder arrived who wasn't a fan of how things were run and created her own faction. She was the very same one who informed us all that a Karmic Plague was the cause of Tri-Worlds peculiar nature. She was insistent that the Karmic Plague placed upon Tri-World could be stopped as long as we sought out the core of the planet. That we should unite and create an expedition down there, risking our own lives fighting monsters all the way down on some vain hope that we could change the status quo," the middle-aged man said, shaking his head.

"Was she right? That the key to getting rid of the Karmic Plague lies at the planet's core?" Dina asked.

"Who knows?" the Lord Protector shrugged. "And who cares? Tri-World isn't broken. No, this place has its perks and downsides both, but overall I would say the benefits outweigh the negatives."

"Could you elaborate?" the Sword Saint asked diplomatically.

"The Karmic Plague has resulted in the populace indeed just being drones, but they still retain proper Truesouls and whatnot, making them prime subjects for experimentation. It also doesn't mean they are less competent, at least not by much, and finding new assistants isn't too difficult. As for downsides... well, it can get a bit lonely here. The natives are not exactly interesting conversational partners, and trying to settle down for a family is out of the question. The Karmic Plague means that even if two Otherworlders reproduce, the child will also be fully affected."

"So it is the planet that is the source," Dina said with certainty as she nodded thoughtfully.

"We will have to confirm that," Jake sighed before turning back to the half-elf. "I am curious... you didn't mention being stuck here and the forced teleportation that brings the Otherworlders here as a downside?"

"True, that is a problem for some," the Lord Protector smiled. "At least it used to be. Having been stuck here for a while, we figured out a method to leave the same way we came in. Of course, things aren't that simple, and I am one of the only ones who know the spell..."

The Lord Protector continued with what Jake felt pretty damn sure was, if not a practiced speech, then at least something scripted by the system, as he explained what they would have to do in order to pass the floor.

Bonus Objective Gained: Retrieve ten Beastcores from the mysterious space beasts. Then use them to create a portal, allowing you to travel to the next floor and any Otherworlder to leave Tri-World. WARNING: This will complete floor forty-one and forfeit any additional rewards.

The Bonus Objective that appeared very clearly outlined all they had to do, and Jake and company quickly understood that the other factions likely had similar objectives available. In fact, this was probably the way to speedrun the floor if you just wanted to pass it quickly. Of course... it wasn't that simple with the plague.

"What happened to the woman who wanted to cure this world of the Karmic Plague?" Jake asked.

"Well, what do you think happened? We got rid of that damn witch. Things aren't perfect here, but we make them work and use Tri-World's nature to our advantage. I myself have had quite good progress while living here, and so have many others. Even if you want to leave, I would at least advise sticking around a bit," the Lord Protector smiled. "There are many things you can enjoy here not available elsewhere. You know, have some fun."

Jake nodded slowly as he looked at his party members. He especially looked at the Fallen King, who had been busy scanning the Lord Protector during all this time. The Unique Lifeform made it clear one of their suspicions was confirmed as Jake looked at the Lord Protector.

"Do you know why it is called a Karmic Plague?" Jake questioned.

"Due to it spreading through karma. At least, that is how that witch explained it. That is also why we Otherworlders are unaffected, as we are not connected to the planet like the natives. Such is its design, which makes sense if you want it to create subservient citizens while maintaining a powerful ruling class," the Lord Protector shook his head. "Why the trivia?"

"It does spread through karma indeed," Jake nodded. "But, did you know it was a failed experiment? That it was too hard to control for anyone not with enough experience in both poisons and karma to handle. Too complicated. Too prone to freak mutations as it went through being after being. So, do you truly think you can escape from it? Whatever caused the Karmic Plague to take hold on this planet was the same thing that brought you here... because it needed you. You don't see, and you don't feel it, but you are a carrier. As long as any strain of the plague remains, there is no way to fully address it."

The Lord Protector stared at Jake with confusion for a while before scoffing. "What an absolutely ridiculous notion. I will have you know that I researched the effects of the Karmic Plague for over a thousand years before I even knew what it was called. It directly affects the Soul's perception of choice and critical thinking. The mere fact I am able to tell you how ridiculous your accusation that we Otherworlders are affected is, should be proof enough it doesn't work on us."

Jake just sighed as he looked at the man. "You say that you researched the Karmic Plague for so long... how many natives did you kill during this time?"

"I don't keep count, but probably a few thousand only. I didn't research it all the time," the Lord Protector answered.

Dina looked angry as Jake raised a hand before she could say anything. "By the way, I can't see your level... which level are you?"

"291," he said, a bit proudly. "Which makes me one of the most powerful people on this planet, in case you were wondering."

"Curious," Jake said. "Why would you just answer that?"

"Why would I have any need to not answer such a simple question?" the man questioned.

"Why would you?" Jake pressed.

"I saw no reason not to," the Lord Protector kept arguing.

Jake sighed as he threw the Fallen King a glance. The Unique Lifeform confirmed what he already knew.

"Then tell me how to destroy the Karmic Plague. Tell me the method that witch had made up," Jake questioned.

"Hmph, she thought that as long as the core was addressed, it would be possible to... to..." the Lord Protector's words trailed off as he suddenly frowned deeply. "Do you truly seek to get rid of the Karmic Plague?"

"Yes," Jake merely answered.

"Can't you just simply leave? I gave you a path. One you and any other Otherworlder who wishes to leave Tri-World can make use of. With the portal I can make, you would be able to go home and act like you never came here," the Lord Protector said.

"I think we both know that isn't going to happen," Jake sighed, already knowing what was about to happen based on the nature of the Karmic Plague. "The Karmic Plague must not be allowed to spread, so would you help us destroy it?"

"I would.... Wouldn't.... I..." the Lord Protector said as he looked confused for a moment before suddenly sneering.

Bonus Objective failed: the Lord Protector has turned hostile.

"I will not allow you to disturb the balance of Tri-World!" the man yelled as he stood up, the entire space imploding as he collapsed the spatially expanded room in a fit of rage.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 717: Nevermore: To Raze a Republic

Jake was pushed back by a wave of dense space mana as he quickly stabilized himself. The entire tower had erupted, sending stones falling to the ground below as the Lord Protector imploded the entire expanded space they had been sitting within, throwing them out.

The Lord Protector had an oddly empty, yet enraged, look in his eyes. His body was burning with power as a sword appeared in his hand. Yet he seemed to hesitate as if the gravity of his situation only hit him now that he had actually gone and attacked. His mind was clearly still a mess, and he genuinely looked confused, as if unsure why he had such an emotional outburst.

"Alright... it is confirmed now," Jake communicated through their mark. "The Otherworlders are quite heavily affected, too, though the effect is slightly different. I guess this settles it."

Rather than make them lose all ability to question anything, it just made them, what was the word... accepting of the status quo. They didn't see the need to say no. Like with the natives, it was an insidious kind of magic. The kind Jake really hated to think about even existing.

Karmic Plagues didn't always look like this... in fact, most plagues in general, didn't. Most just killed people or made them weaker; the Karmic part was only related to how something would spread. A plague could be anything, and this Karmic Plague on Tri-World was just of the mental-magic variant. It fucked up your head.

He remembered all the way back when he had fought the Minotaur Mindchief when he was only in E-grade. Jake still remembered the slimy feeling that the mental magic of the Minotaur had given him. He remembered feeling like he was the friend of the Minotaur and questioned himself why they were even fighting. This Karmic Plague was like that, except people never snapped back to reality.

Mental magic did have the weakness that it had limited energy and wouldn't work forever. If you made someone think they were your friend, that illusion of the mind would pretty quickly begin to unravel even if you kept applying the magic. The target would build resistance, and the illusion would break, making long-term mind control not really a thing... unless it was something like this Karmic Plague.

The natives had been infected from their birth. What made it worse was that the source of the mental magic was not viewed as coming from another entity. It was coming from your own soul as if they had tried to influence themselves. The closest thing Jake had was comparing it to getting possessed by Eternal Hunger. That curse also wouldn't just wear off. Of course, with Jake, the effect wouldn't be permanent as he would just have been sealed away in his own Soulspace and eventually break out and regain control, but there were plenty of instances where people fell to curses or the like in the history of the multiverse, never breaking out and changing their entire being permanently.

These Otherworlders were in a similar state to someone possessed by a curse. They could potentially be cured. Potentially being a strong word here. Jake guessed that someone at least at A-grade made this strain of Karmic Plague. Probably even higher. That is to say, he had no way of curing people already infected. Considering they were in a dungeon, there was no way to bring them out and have someone actually able to find a cure look at them, either. Well, the right way would be to bring that powerful person to the planet, but that obviously wasn't an option either.

Moreover... the Karmic Plague made them heavily resistant to anything that would "hurt" the plague. Another potential nasty as fuck trait of a Karmic Curse. The ones infected felt protective of it. Happy they had it. Close to it, like family, and any mention of a "cure" was like telling them to kill their best friend. The ones infected didn't even notice this unless directly put in a scenario where they had to choose if they wanted to be cured. Which is what Jake had done with the Lord Protector to confirm.

That entire thing about a teleportation gate to leave the planet was also just bait. Jake reckoned they could even have been punished with a point penalty if they made it, considering they had just broken one of the few multiversally approved laws in existence, dictating the isolation of any plague-infested areas.

"We all know our objectives, then?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Yes," Dina said with determination. *"Sylphie and I shall head towards the marked spot on the map where the fourth faction once resided."*

"Ree," Sylphie confirmed.

The Fallen King merely made a noise as the Sword Saint sent a mental nod. Without any further warning, the swordsman took off in one direction, the Fallen King going in another, each towards one of the other two factions on Tri-World. Sylphie and Dina hesitated for a moment as they stared at the enraged, yet conflicted, space mage calling himself a Lord Protector. The source of this content is *novel•fire•met*

"He is mine," Jake just spoke out loud.

Sylphie didn't need any more prompting as she took off, Dina following after.

The Lord Protector seemed very surprised as he looked at Jake.

"Do you truly believe you can defeat the entire Enlightened Republic alone? There is still time to reconsider... fighting like this is useless. We are both Otherworlders. If you want to end the Karmic Plague, doesn't that mean you would also have to end yourself? You, too, are infected now that you have set foot on Tri-World," the Lord Protector tried to argue.

Jake just shook his head. "It takes more than fifty years before it begins to infect people. That is the incubation period where it slowly builds up, and as long as you leave within that time, you are good."

After they had discovered the nature of the Karmic Plague, Jake noticed that all five of them had indeed been infected. At least, kind of. It was so non-existent that Jake hadn't even noticed before he did a thorough scan of his body. He had then promptly removed it using *Palate of the Malefic Viper*, which is also why he knew of the fifty-year incubation period. That fifty years was also the maximum time you could be in *Nevermore* while at C-grade certainly wasn't a coincidence.

"I... even so," the Lord Protector tried, Jake's party members already long gone. "Tri-World is fine as it is. Why... why do you need to ruin it? Why not just accept that life is good here? With time, you will come to understand that-"

Jake sighed loudly, not seeing any sense in talking. It was just the plague talking. If Jake had to guess, then the Isekai-function was likely there to make up for population-decline while also introducing people who knew about the wider multiverse and could potentially leave at some point, thus spreading the Karmic Plague further. While a planet could infect people, so could people infect a planet if there were enough of

them... so a single individual could end up dooming an entire planet over a very long period.

Pulling out his bow, he looked at the Lord Protector in the eye. "You either kill me here and chase after my party members, or we will end the Tri-World as you know it."

The Lord Protector's mouth was still halfway through a word arguing that they didn't have to fight the plague as Jake said his piece. The man just froze as his face turned cold, the conversation truly over.

"Then you must die."

An edge of highly condensed space mana coated the edge of the Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic's sword. There was no hesitation in his movements as he slashed toward Jake, releasing a massive crescent wave that cut through the air, making everything vibrate.

Jake looked at the more than a kilometer-wide blade heading toward him as wings sprung from his back, making him fly backward as he shot an arrow toward the space mage. A barrier blocked it instantly, but Jake easily dodged the large opening strike. A few more attacks followed, only confirming Jake's first thoughts. Through that first attack only, he had already gotten a good idea of what he was dealing with. It wasn't simply overconfidence that had made Jake choose to face this Lord Protector alone.

He's a fucking houseplant.

He was someone who had leveled not through fighting but by sitting indoors and doing his own experiments. His moves were big and flashy, not at all efficient, but made more to look cool than actually be useful. Sure, those kinds of attacks would still work against other people who sucked at fighting or people far weaker than himself... but Jake was neither of those.

A dozen of slashes went past him as Jake released a barrage of arrows that curved around the space mage. The Lord Protector struggled to erect barriers that could block them all and failed to react when an Arcane Powershot blasted his passive barrier apart, sending him tumbling back through several buildings before he hit the ground, structures tumbling down upon him.

Jake did not let up but continued with a barrage of arrows as the entire capital city of the Enlightened Republic rapidly became aware they were under attack. Many presences appeared all over the city as figures began rising into the air.

Jake glanced around and rapidly noticed four individuals of note, all of them Otherworlders.

[General of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 271]

[Elf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 266]

[Human-Queen of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 268]

[Dwarf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 264]

“How dare you declare war against the Enlightened Republic!” the only elf among them yelled. “For this transgression, you will-“

Jake spun around, an arrow already nocked and ready to go. His Perception of time slowed as he pulled back the string, and Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, freezing all the figures surrounding the elven king, along with the king himself. An Arcane Powershot sent an explosion of arcane energy blasting out of him as the arrow hit the Elf-King right in the chest, blasting him back. Jake gave chase as he used One Step several times, making distance from the Lord Protector, who was already emerging from the rubble, and any of the other notable figures.

The Elf-King ended up landing on the outskirts of the capital, leaving a giant crater. Yet before he could even properly stand up, Jake was upon him. From above, an arrow pierced down, hitting the unprepared nobleman in the head and blasting it straight off.

****You have slain [Elf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 266] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Weak, Jake semi-complained as he turned to the other figures of interest. They had all given chase but stopped the moment they saw the Elf-King slain. Looking at them, Jake scoffed as the General yelled:

“To arms, soldiers of the Enlightened Republic!” he proclaimed loudly as hundreds of small groups began floating into the air. They were all C-grade, but most of them were low-tier... and none of them were impressive.

These squads all yelled as the General released some group buff. Jake knew there were several Otherworlders mixed into these squads just from a cursory glance. In fact, it seemed like all the “leaders” of these groups were Otherworlders.

The many large groups flew toward him at unimpressive speed as Jake looked their way and opened his mouth while infusing his voice with Willpower. **“All soldiers, kill the closest Otherworlder.”**

It took a second for them all to process what he had said. Some of them were faster than others. The Otherworlders mixed in were taken by surprise as they were attacked by the ones right next to them, as they screamed for them to stop, something the natives also promptly did.

More orders were barked at them, but before they had any time to even turn toward Jake, he yelled again.

“Kill any Otherworlder that is not me.”

Once more, they attacked, and once more, they were told to stop. The entire situation was funny if you didn't think too long about it. This repeated several times as the natives in the Enlightened Republic only became a source of chaos. Something that was clearly noticed.

The Lord Protector, who had reemerged, looked on with anger as he screamed loudly:

“Anyone part of the army: kill yourselves.”

What followed was them doing just that. An eerie sight played out as thousands began falling out of the sky, their eyes glazed over as they had extinguished their own souls. There had not been a single moment of hesitation, no trace of doubt or questioning. No survival instinct.

Jake only felt reaffirmed in what they were doing as he looked at the Lord Protector with killing intent. His job was to wipe out the powerful people in the Enlightened Republic, and he planned on doing just that. They had also clearly realized that it was either him or them, as the Lord Protector and General attacked as the remaining King and Queen began using some kind of magic. Neither seemed like a threat, and the Lord Protector seemed annoying to kill fast, so he went for the General. He was a dwarf wearing heavy armor, and while that did make him durable, it also made him slow.

Space mana warped in his surroundings as he knew the Lord Protector was trying to trap him, but Jake had seen better before. Compared to Minaga, the Lord Protector was an amateur, and Jake easily used One Step to break through and continue toward his target as he released several potshots.

The General responded by taking out a large axe to block, as his body began burning with some red energy. Jake didn't particularly care much about what he did, as the dwarf wasn't even good enough to block all of the arrows he shot, getting hit in the shoulder and arm. What made it worse, Jake felt something he rarely felt from his opponent when fighting these days.

Fear.

An emotion far too easily exploitable.

Pride of the Malefic Viper was unleashed as Jake attacked the psyche of the dwarf, making him temporarily hesitate as he closed in. He entered melee due to the three others fighting him and how they all sucked at using magic offensively. They had no

confidence in not hitting their comrade, and if they still tried... well, dwarf-shields were totally viable.

While everyone hesitated, Jake managed to attack. Eternal Hunger struck the dwarf in the chest as he used Penetrating Fang, blowing the aesthetically pleasing but not very functional armor of the General apart.

Blood spewed out from his strike - the General's eyes wide open as Jake used his other katar to stab through the opening in the dwarf's helmet. Pulling out Eternal Hunger, he got ready to strike again as he prepared another Penetrating Fang.

Before Jake could finish off the General, his danger sense warned him of an incoming attack. A fast one. He barely managed to twist his body as an arrow flew by him, the wind warping and cutting in its wake, leaving several tears in his armor. It was some evolved form of Powershot, no doubt.

Turning his gaze, he spotted a figure a few dozen kilometers away, standing outside of the city borders. An elven woman wearing a cloak and holding a bow while already halfway through nocking another arrow.

[Ranger Commander of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 278]

Jake also felt something else from her. He had become quite attuned to the Karmic Plague after learning about it, and Sense Poison was constantly detecting it. Yet when he looked at the elven Ranger Commander, he didn't feel any trace of the plague at all. No... did feel it like he had felt it within himself and his party members. Still in incubation.

Still saveable, Jake concluded. Another curveball by the Wyrmgod, no doubt.

Jake looked her way as he made eye contact and projected his voice. **“Stand down. You are new on Tri-World, I can feel it, and the Karmic Plague has yet to fully take root. You do not need to-”**

He had to stop talking as another arrow was fired after him. Jake dodged as a massive pillar of pure space mana descended upon him, slamming him into the ground. With a groan, Jake dug himself out of the pit created by the massive pillar as a rain of arrows fell on him.

“Relax, for fuck sake!” Jake yelled very diplomatically as he used One Step to get away. He also had to keep an eye on the Lord Protector and dodge another attack as he tried one more time. **“Do you get what is going on with this planet? The Karmic Plague is-“**

“I fucking know you self-righteous piece of shit,” the Ranger Commander yelled back. **“And while these pathetic natives aren't as good as the slaves I used to**

have, they are sure as fuck better than not having any slaves at all. Now shut the fuck up and die already.”

He realized he had misunderstood. Rather than a moral curveball... perhaps the Ranger Commander was instead a lesson that some people did just suck.

Jake sighed loudly as he looked toward the sky and the second massive pillar of space mana gathering. “Well, okay then.”

The pillar of space mana stuck down as Jake pulled out his bow and let loose, Arcane Awakening fully activating as his body exploded with energy. He was confident he had drawn out all the powerful people of note. Now, it was just cleanup time.

An arrow of arcane mana shot upwards as the entire pillar of space mana exploded like a tower of glass. The purple-colored fragments from Jake’s arcane mana were flying everywhere as the fallen shards fell upon the broken capital as Jake finally got serious.

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Chapter 718: Nevermore: An Inspirational Experience

“There was much debate if we should include this example of a Karmic Plague within the dungeon, but ultimately we agreed it would be for the best,” the Wyrmgod explained to the Viper as they observed the slaughter going on in the Enlightened Republic. “Many mortals don’t even know about them these days, so this can serve as... what did you call it? A public service?”

“Yeah, definitely a good idea to teach the masses. I can attest to how horrible those things are,” Minaga shuddered. “I lost quite a few clones to plagues throughout the ages. I insisted we got the most insidious kind while also allowing it to serve as a nice mental screening of anyone who does the floor.”

“You are still doing all that, huh,” the Malefic Viper said. “I take it Umbra continues to pay well?”

“We can’t reveal privileged information about what we do with the data of Nevermore attendees,” Minaga waved him off with a smile.

The Viper shook his head, not bothering to argue. Combat information was usually difficult to come by, and it was a bit of an open secret that you could obtain some intel

and potential recordings from Nevermore if you were in good enough standing and had the funds. Two criteria the Court of Shadows easily met.

“Oh?” the Wyrmgod said after a few hours of silence as he turned his gaze to Minaga. “Another flawless completion of floor forty?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Minaga grumbled.

“Ah... I see... quite a group indeed. One of them appears to be from the same planet as your Chosen, too,” the Wyrmgod noted as he threw a glance at the Viper.

Seeing that Minaga looked annoyed and the timing of it all, Vilastromoz had a very good idea of what party it was. He also understood Minaga’s annoyance... for those who had embraced the powers of the void were truly annoying.

The Wyrmgod waved his hand, and another screen appeared, showing some clips from the battle. An impressive showing if Vilas said so himself. Beings who were blessed by Void Gods were always interesting and powerful creatures – at least those that managed to stay sapient. This party was definite proof of that.

A corrupted elf that could heal by removing the very concept of the person having even taken damage. A cyclops with chains that appeared unbreakable as it managed to seal away even Minaga’s magic for several seconds at a time while landing incredibly powerful physical blows.

The corrupted Shapeshifter, with its many faces in flux, was incredibly unique, too, somehow seeming to contain far more souls than a single being. All bound together by the void into one Truesoul, which allowed it to fill its vessel anchored to reality with one soul at a time, effectively changing stats and likely even skills, making it an incredibly versatile creature.

When it came to the Void Shade – the most “normal” creature in the group – this one was still quite a specimen. An incredibly powerful caster and assassin both, able to merge into the gap between space itself. This was the kind of creature that came to be when something truly became stuck between a state of life and death and only embraced the emptiness of the void. Void Shades were creatures that would cease to be if they ever lost their Blessings, hence why Void Shades were regular agents of the Void Gods.

Finally, there was the human scientist. All of the others were beings made for combat and personal survival. Apex creatures of slaughter and destruction that could strike fear into nearly any being around their own level. This human was quite the opposite. His body was weaker than any of the others, not even reaching the level of other low-tiers of similar levels. In fact, when it came to any combat situation, he seemed relatively useless. He was a craftsman and a creator, but such skills would not save someone when in a direct confrontation. His mind would not save him from a descending blade.

Yet one had to remember... he was blessed by Oras. Not all Void Gods were equal, and the reason the others seemed to view him as their leader was precisely due to the one who blessed him. Oras the All-Seeing, Oras the Eyes of the Void. Out of all the Void Gods, he had the strongest connection to the world outside of the void due to his gaze being able to pierce through the veil separating the void and reality, making him an incredibly respected figure. For someone recognized by Oras, excellence was the baseline, and the human did not disappoint.

The moment he appeared on the fortieth floor and the fight was about to begin, the Viper saw what the human planned to do. Vilas could only flash a small smile as the scientist summoned a golem before his entire body flashed out of existence.

Vilastromoz saw it clearly. His entire soul became one with the machine in a fashion that reminded the Viper of how the automata gods operated. His soul was primed to be hidden within a pre-prepared core of the golem as the human himself resided elsewhere: within the nothingness of the void.

His weak body was entirely hidden, and the only way to force him out was to destroy the core of the golem that had a design reminiscent of the Altmar golem designs. To make matters more extreme, when Minaga was about to finish his speech, two more golems appeared. The Malefic Viper saw they were all linked through one mind controlling all three like puppets at once, and when the fight truly began, he did not doubt more mechanical constructions would appear.

What is more... this link the human had created was extended. It did not just link together the scientist's machines but all of his party members, allowing them to nearly operate as one being, independent yet guided. There even appeared to be some level of resource-sharing with his party members. When the fight began, Minaga was instantly pressed, and while the party did face trouble... they ended up doing the entire event more cleanly than Jake and his group had, if only by a little. It was also significantly less flashy, which wasn't surprising considering void magic wasn't exactly synonymous with colorful.

"Impressive," the Malefic Viper said, seeing the recording. "Definitely contenders for some of the top ten spots. I guess quite a few figures are."

"In the end, it shall come down to the Challenge Dungeons for the very peak. As always," the Wyrmgod said.

Somewhere the Viper had great confidence in Jake doing extremely well.

"So... to talk about something more fun, do you think Jake will do a planetary sacrificial ritual?" Minaga asked with genuine curiosity, clearly also more than happy to change the subject away from the void-touched. Again, understandable. Based on the clips of the fight, it had been an infuriating experience for the Unique Lifeform.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Vilastromoz smiled, liking to see Minaga not have his curiosity satisfied.

“Manually slaying every single infected being is not feasible unless they want to spend the next many years on floor forty-one,” the Wyrmgod chimed in. “I do reckon that a planetary sacrificial ritual is on the table if your Chosen is well-practiced in the art and dependent on how they wish to approach the end of the floor. I believe we will have to see if they perhaps want to make use of the other methods provided by the floor they wish to make use of. These floors are very much open to creative solutions.”

“Are you insinuating my labyrinth didn’t have a lot of creative solutions?” Minaga questioned.

“Yes, naturally, it was very limited,” the Wyrmgod answered. “Your desire for control over scenarios and the inability of the system to offer assistance through skills make any and all floors you create inherently limited. Moreover, you made a labyrinth. Labyrinths having too many creative solutions at once would be bad design.”

“Wow, just calling me out like that in front of our mutual friend,” Minaga grumbled. “Look at Jake; he is a way better friend. He knows about the Viper’s relationship with this little plague thing, right?”

“He does indeed,” the Viper nodded. The books he had given Jake were very much restricted knowledge, after all, and had things in them that only a few gods were even aware of.

“And yet he hasn’t shared it with everyone. How nice of him,” Minaga said, shaking his head as he turned his attention back to the screen showing what was going on in Jake’s dungeon instance of Tri-World.

Vilastromoz smiled wryly. Yeah, that was pretty nice of Jake, as it would be problematic if that knowledge spread too much. In hindsight, he maybe shouldn’t have given Jake access to restricted knowledge so freely, but... eh, it was probably fine.

Jake had definitely also figured out by now that the Karmic Plague seen on Tri-World was originally a strain created by Eversmile as part of an experiment... and that the Malefic Viper had been a consultant on that project, Eversmile cashing in a favor to make him help.

But who could blame him for asking the Viper? Who was a better consultant than the original creator of plagues?

Jake wasn’t sure how to feel when he stood far up in the sky and looked at the ruins beneath him. Not a single other living being was anywhere in sight, with every single powerful person in the Enlightened Republic dead. Most hadn’t even been a threat... but this was a purge. Be they Lord Protectors, military personnel, or random squad

leaders, all had been wiped out. Even the citizens who had survived becoming collateral damage were gone.

Is this my first time doing a full-on massacre like this? he questioned himself.

Sure, there had been the Deepdwellers in the dungeon near Haven and probably a few other instances of Jake killing a lot of creatures of the same race in a limited area, but destroying an entire capital city like this still felt different.

What's more... it had been so effortless, to a disturbing degree.

He sighed as he condensed an orb of destructive arcane mana and sent it flying downward to clean away the rubble to prepare for what he had to do later. The second it hit the ground, it created a massive explosion that consumed most of the city below him that hadn't already been destroyed in the earlier fight. It continued to expand as the destructive arcane energies annihilated anything it got close to, creating a massive crater.

It was an odd feeling he rarely reflected on, but being able to casually create an orb of mana with more destructive potential than a nuclear bomb was just something he and other C-grades around his level could do. Jake rarely, if ever, did it because there was truly no need to under normal circumstances. Large-scale attacks were a waste of energy and often far less potent as the intensity of the energy that hit your enemy would be wasted by just destroying the environment. Yet he had to remember that he could. Sure, an attack like the orb he just did wouldn't even injure anyone he considered worth fighting, even if he hit them point-blank, but if he wanted to wipe out a lot of weaker people... it was incredibly effective.

For a long time, Jake had wondered exactly how the Malefic Viper managed to wipe out all life on a planet while still in C-grade, but honestly, Jake understood why. Given enough time and a lack of foes capable of challenging you, it was just a matter of spending enough time on the task.

Jake tried to shake the thought out of his head as he turned to his notifications and saw the expected flood of notifications. Hundreds of thousands. The majority he really didn't wanna see, so he filtered out all but three.

****You have slain [Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 291] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [General of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 271] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Ranger Commander of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 278] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

*****DING!** Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 226 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

*****DING!** Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 227 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

*****DING!** Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 227 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Jake read them through as he flew a good distance away from the capital, away from all the destruction, as he looked for a nice place to take a breather. He soon came across a forest, where he promptly landed and found a nice clearing to relax in. After a quick Pulse to confirm there were no threats, Jake sat down and deactivated his Arcane Awakening, feeling the wave of weakness wash over him. This chapter is updated by novel●fire●net

The fight with the Lord Protector and Ranger Commander hadn't been incredibly difficult, but not overly easy either. Both were a lot higher level than him, and their pure stats were nothing to scoff at. The power of their attacks had been more than enough to severely threaten him, but it was clear they had severely limited experience fighting life-and-death battles with people of near-equal power.

If they actually knew how to fight properly, Jake would have had a far harder time and probably just fought them all with the party, but... they had sucked. Well, the Ranger Commander had actually been kind of okay, and Jake did get some inspiration from some of her skills, which also made him realize something else.

He seriously hadn't fought a lot of archers, had he? Were archers rare in the multiverse or something? He had faced so damn many with other weapons – even the bloody space mage using a sword - which had helped him a bit with his melee skills and learning from the fights, but, yeah, not really any archers.

As he sat there thinking to himself, he also quickly checked in with his four party members to see how things were going on their ends. To the surprise of no one, they were all just traveling to their destinations with likely weeks, if not months, to go before they would reach their designated targets. The planet was ultimately pretty damn huge, and they had to travel from deep within the Enlightened Republic. Well, former Enlightened Republic.

That left him with some time to recover fully, ponder a bit on archery stuff, and look through the capital for anything of value. Maybe even clues about the Karmic Plague. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but it was his current plan for now. The Sword Saint would handle the Risen while the Fallen King took on the Beastfolk, with Sylphie and Dina going to where the fourth faction had once been located.

The territory of the witch's faction was marked on the map, making them all certain that the place held some meaning or clues to handling the Karmic Plague. Jake didn't believe that wiping out the entire population manually was the go-to method for this floor, nor did he believe that a sacrificial ritual was the only way to go. No, the floor had to have some methods built in.

Sitting in meditation, Jake pondered a bit more on potential solutions to the floor before switching to replaying the fight with the Ranger Commander in his head. That she was the last of his kill notifications was no coincidence, as Jake had fought her for longer than he needed to in order to bait out all of her skills.

Jake was the kind of person to not really learn much combat-related from reading books or getting taught but instead did best with some live demonstrations. The only other archer he had really ever seen fighting was Maria, but her Path was far too intertwined with using fire magic in everything that it didn't help Jake much.

The Ranger Commander had been a lot more standard. She did use wind magic – probably the most common form of magic to combine with archery – but otherwise just stuck to the basics. Both of them had Splitting Arrow skills, and both of them had variants of Powershot, but the elf did also have some interesting skills he didn't.

One of them was a skill he had seen but skipped that allowed her to blast herself all over the place by amplifying the energy that pushed herself back after every shot, which turned out to be quite a nice way of dodging when combined with wind magic. She also had bouncing arrows that could redirect themselves mid-air, which was another skill Jake had skipped, but he felt pretty confident he could somehow bake that functionality into his archery skill with time.

But the skill she had used that interested Jake the most initially wasn't really any of her "flashy" attacks. It was the normal arrows she fired. Jake reckoned it was her archery skill, but every single arrow she fired spun around with impressive speed and appeared to have small whirlwinds around them, increasing their stability in flight, and wind mana also seemed to increase its penetrative power. He noticed how the wind magic would strike first before the physical arrow would make contact, which got him thinking.

However, it was only when he saw her big finisher he truly got an idea.

Jake knew that her method wasn't the way for him, considering he didn't really do wind magic, but the idea of packing mana around it was interesting. All of Jake's other attempts of infusing an arrow with magic had always been difficult due to the arrows often being poisoned, but also due to the arrows already being arcane arrows.

So, seeing as Jake had some time, he began working on an idea he had. Honestly, he had been thinking about this for a while and worked on the idea a bit prior. Seeing that Ranger Commander had convinced him to try and bring it to fruition as he aimed to improve a skill that he should probably have improved a long time ago:

Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

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Chapter 719: Nevermore: An Upgrade With Layers

Jake still remembered the day he got the skill. It was the signature skill of his first proper class and had been damn awesome when he initially got it. He got a bit nostalgic when he remembered bombarding that massive Storm Elemental atop the cloud continent with Hawkie. The orb from that kill had even helped give birth to Sylphie. To say that the skill had been important would be an understatement... which is why it was just a shame to see the sorry state it was in these days.

[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] - The signature skill of the Ambitious Hunter: An arrow to strike down a fated foe in a single shot. Grants the skill to summon a powerful arrow designed to strike down a specific foe. The Hunter must envision his foe and, with great focus, channel all of his desire to slay it to summon the arrow. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target while ineffective on anything else. Damage increased further based on level disparity. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, and Perception when using Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter

Yeah, looking at it, the fact he hadn't upgraded it yet was just downright shameful. Even at rare after the downgrade from the evolution, the skill was still pretty powerful, but it also had some severe drawbacks. First of all, it only worked against the designated target, and while he didn't think he could or necessarily even wanted to get rid of this level of specialization, it did suck that it was also ineffective against barriers or someone just throwing a big rock at it. He had gotten around the barrier problem by always shooting it with Arcane Powershot and having the destructive arcane energy sticking to the arrow break the barrier before the arrow could physically strike it, but that wasn't exactly optimal.

This was naturally only the start of the improvements he made.

He meditated as he pondered on the issue and began to form a proper plan in his head. After about a day and a few potions, Jake was back in peak condition and sadly had to delay his arrow-improvement plans a little bit. Before he could focus his attention solely on upgrading the skill, he had to be done with his other obligations, which included looting. That way he could work on the skill without feeling guilty. Thus he began to scour the ruined capital of the Enlightened Republic for anything useful he or his party members could potentially use.

Jake was pretty sure there would be, considering his Pulse of Perception revealed several hidden underground chambers throughout the once-large city. He even found people within some of them, all acting like the entire city above them hadn't just been razed to the ground a day earlier. Having to begin somewhere, he started out with these occupied chambers first. He quickly discovered all of them were quite nicely sealed and blocked out pretty much everything going on above ground, including sound.

Within half a day, he went through all of them and found only natives within every single one besides one that had served as a bunker for Otherworlders to seek refuge. There were eleven of them in there, and, well, their fates didn't really have to be described. Neither did the fates of the natives, many of whom had been down there as experimental subjects. Subjects who – based on the journals and recordings he stumbled upon – were often tortured and involved in fucked-up experiments, yet never had any reactions. They didn't even need to keep them trapped, as they just followed the order of not leaving without permission.

None of these rooms with what was effectively just a bunch of slaves interested him, and the records on how they had experimented on the natives there less so. Turning his attention to the other rooms without people in them, he finally found an interesting one directly below where the Lord Protector's spire had been. It was pretty obvious in hindsight, and once he broke in, he found a large archive. Looking through it briefly, he quickly noticed a small safe with magical locks placed on it.

After a bit of tinkering, he thanked his beloved Puzzle Box for the practice before he unraveled the locks and opened the safe. Within, he found just a single journal simply named Dark Witch. He took out the journal and began flipping through the pages as he quickly got a good idea of what he was dealing with.

The Dark Witch was apparently the official name they had decided for the former leader of the fourth faction. Probably because she used dark magic based on the descriptions in the book, but also because she aimed to spread "corruption and chaos" throughout Tri-World, and thus had to be purged.

Most of the content of the journal was just boring history about the fourth faction and how a bunch of Otherworlders who also wanted to get rid of the Karmic Plague had gathered there. The truly interesting part came toward the end after a far too self-gratifying section about how awesome the Lord Protector had been during this entire conflict.

"Defeating the Dark Witch proved a strenuous task, but with the unification of those who saw her corrupted ideology, we managed to end her evil reign and burned the capital of her fledgling faction to the ground. However, even if we defeated her, ending her life proved difficult, but we firmly believe that the fight left her crippled as she fled underground. May the monsters down there consume her, so she can at least give something back to the now-renamed Tri-World. Note: Do keep the area under observation, especially the entrance to the cavern system she fled into."

Update: Recent data suggest the witch still lives even a decade after the fall of her faction. Designate area as a no-go zone.

Update two: The influence of the witch has spread more than we hoped. Diving into the cavern system is an option, but too risky. Erecting countermeasures using other means is heavily advised. I will bring it up at the next summit.

Update three: Countermeasures successfully deployed. We decided to enter the cave system and discovered what she was trying to do, but we managed to stop her by sealing away a treasure of corruption she had brought with her when she arrived on Tri-World. Unless the three Living Seals are destroyed, that damn witch shall never be able to ruin Tri-World."

Jake read the journal and was about to contact his party when suddenly a notification appeared.

Bonus Objective Gained: Find and deactivate the three Living Seals to unseal the "treasure of corruption" brought to Tri-World by the Dark Witch. Warning: doing this will make it impossible to escape Tri-World with the assistance of the three major factions.

Current Progress: Living Seals (1/3)

Well, turns out the system wanted to tell them before he could. Moreover, they had apparently already unlocked one of the Living Seals. Jake was unsure what exactly a Living Seal was, but the journal provided a few more snippets of information. Living Seals were honestly pretty self-explanatory, as they were seals rooted within living beings. The journal even included the fact that the Elf-King of all people had been the Living Seal from the Enlightened Empire, with the two other Living Seals placed within individuals from the two other factions.

"An unexpected but welcome bonus," the Fallen King communicated through the Golden Mark after Jake was done explaining the rest of the content in the journal.

"Considering we already planned on purging the entire power structure of these factions, this extra objective is indeed of little consequence and only benefits us," the Sword Saint agreed.

"So, she was indeed still alive and is called the Dark Witch. Did you find more information on her, and do you think she will prove hostile or amicable when we make contact?" Dina asked. As she and Sylphie were heading toward the Dark Witch, this information was obviously quite a lot more pertinent for the two of them than the two guys.

"Hard to say," Jake honestly answered. *"It has been more than two hundred years since they defeated her, and chances are the Karmic Plague has quite the hold on her now. I*

think it is more likely that this treasure was left behind before she was fully infected by the plague, with her maybe being a boss guarding it or something. Either way, proceed with caution. If the Dark Witch was strong enough to require all the factions to work together, then she is likely the most powerful opponent on the floor."

*"We shall keep that in mind,"*Dina assured him. *"And, to clarify, you remain confident in meeting up with us on short notice if required?"*

"As long as Sylphie stays with you, yes," Jake confirmed.

"Ree!"

"Yep, take good care of Dina for the rest of us," Jake chuckled a bit to himself. The other four continued talking a bit, primarily out of boredom, as they were all just traveling. Not exactly the most entertaining pastime.

Jake, on the other hand, did a final scan of the ruined capital city before flying back to the forest, where he could finally get back to what was truly important:

Improving Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Something it would hopefully not be called much longer.

He had already mentally gone over many of the downsides of the skill, but for now, he didn't actually bother to try and address any of those directly. No, instead, he wanted to solely focus on adding onto the basic properties of the skill while only ridding it of the negative aspects that there were absolutely necessary to remove for his new arrow idea to work.

Without further delay, he got started, and he began with the most straightforward improvement. Jake was an arcane hunter, through and through, yet his Ambitious Arrow didn't have a hint of arcane energy to it. That was definitely something he wanted to touch upon and improve. However, he didn't just want to do it in a basic way but in a way that would assist him in what he wanted to do later.

There were also some other aspects he wanted to improve upon right away for his idea to even work, and one of those was the rule of how the arrow couldn't hit anything that wasn't the target. He didn't need it to be an arrow that would hit everyone equally, but just the option for it still to harm targets it wasn't specifically made for. Even if it wasn't more than just a packet of harmful energy that dealt pretty shit damage, it would still be enough, as all he needed was the conceptual change.

In the forest, Jake began to look around for any beasts and quickly found a few D-grades lurking about. They were good enough, and Jake got practicing. He started experimenting by summoning arrow after arrow while he focused on them while moving towards the improvements he wanted. This also quickly revealed another of the "bad" things about the skill now only being rare: it was too cheap. When he first got it, the skill

had taken a lot out of him, but that was no longer the case. That he also just needed to up all the specs of the skill was a given.

His practice continued uninterrupted for five more days as he had rapidly moved from choosing different targets to constantly summoning arrows for the same D-grade – a goat of some kind - repeatedly while feeling for slight changes. On the third day, he managed to create an arrow that he then promptly used to kill another D-grade than his initial target, proving that the strict requirement for only working on the targeted foe was gone. The only reason it had only taken so long was that he wanted to ensure the skill wouldn't lose any efficiency in the process, and luckily it hadn't. In fact, it had overall gotten slightly more power from other minor improvements he had added.

Towards the eve of day five, Jake was done.

He held out his hand as an arrow appeared. Its design was that of a simple bolt that looked straight off a small ballista, with runic carvings covering the shaft. This was all pretty standard, and one only truly saw the changes when looking at the arrowhead. It was slightly larger than normal and had the hue of Jake's arcane mana. If one looked really closely, one could see what looked like small lighting bolts bouncing within the arrowhead from the intense infusion of destructive arcane energies. The runes covering the body also now carried slight hints of arcane energy, making the entire arrow slightly more powerful. This was not necessarily due to it getting inherently stronger but now being a better fit for his Path.

Jake nodded, satisfied as he got a notification. For now, he ignored it as he shot the arrow toward his designated target. It flew true as the far lower-leveled monster naturally didn't stand a chance to dodge. He carefully observed its effect when it hit. The stable arcane energy covering the tip of the arrowhead pierced into the goat like a true physical arrow – something Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter usually didn't – and a flood of destructive arcane energy came out. However, rather than simply exploding, it rode the curtains of the true Ambitious Arrow beneath that hit right as the stable arcane barrier shattered.

The arrow sank into the body of the monster as Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter usually did, releasing a flood of pure damage into the goat. Some of the destructive arcane energy snuck its way in, too, directly impacting the soul of the goat along with the inherent energy of the Ambitious Arrow for a substantial increase in overall damage. The goat's soul was instantly extinguished just as he saw the destructive arcane energy that couldn't enter through the "hole" created by the Ambitious Arrow continue onward like normal, blasting a hole in the goat's physical body.

It was complete overkill, but good data. Jake also finally checked his notifications and saw the upgraded skill.

Skill Upgraded*: *[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] --> [Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)]

The name had gotten super long to the level of it being kind of dumb, but nevertheless, he read the full description to see what he had changed.

[Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – An upgraded version of the signature skill of the Ambitious Hunter. Grants the ability to summon a powerful double-layered arrow to strike down a specific foe. The Hunter must envision his foe and, with great focus, channel his Willpower to slay it into the creation process. The arrowhead will possess two layers, allowing the Hunter to inject destructive arcane energy into a stable arcane layer surrounding the true arrowhead. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target. Damage increased further based on level disparity. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, Intelligence, and Perception when using Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter.

So, it now also had arcane energy infused into it, resulting in it scaling with Intelligence. It had changed the wording when creating the arrow to include Willpower, indicating some scaling with that too. Additionally, the strict target requirement was indeed gone, and it included the description of the layers with destructive arcane energy within.

Jake nodded, satisfied as he sat down and took a breather. It was a good upgrade, and the only downsides from the upgrade were the increased energy cost and slightly longer time to summon. The upsides were pretty much all the changes to the skill, along with significantly increased damage to all aspects of the skill, even the pure Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter part. Yet Perhaps most importantly, the skill was now far more aligned with his Path.

However... Jake wasn't done with this upgrade session yet.

One of the things he had never liked much about the former nor current skill was his lack of input on how the arrow would end up looking and its overall design. Sure, the skill tried to design the arrow to be better against a specific target, but in all honesty, as long as the end was pointy enough, the actual effect of this system-assisted customization tended to be negligible. What customization the system did assist with was also dependent on his own insights into the target, so who's to say he couldn't just do that customization himself? No, he definitely didn't need that part of the skill... so if he could replace it with him designing the arrow himself, that would be swell.

If he could do this, that meant he could make use of the larger form factor of the arrow compared to his normal arrows. Considering he often conjured an arrow and kept it hidden in his quiver until he needed it, he could even have the entire creation process be a bit more involved. When he first got the skill, Jake needed to spend well over a minute focusing all he could to make one arrow without being able to do anything else, while now he could create it pretty fast within his quiver without affecting him. He was fine with it taking longer for a better effect, and with his C-grade mind and soul, he could easily split his attention between a pretty involved summoning process and fighting.

There was also the downside of him even needing a high level of insight related to his target for the skill to even activate. He could always summon arrows for humans or other beings that he was already familiar with, but he often faced unique opponents he had never seen before. So unless he wanted to spend a good week stalking his target to analyze it, he was shit out of luck. This was particularly a problem when one factored in how it was pretty much anti-synergy with Stealth Attack that Jake couldn't make his strongest arrow from the get-go.

To summarize, the primary thing he truly wanted out of the skill was more control. Back when he got it, the level of automatization in the skill was great. He only had to focus on a specific target the system ruled he knew enough about, and bam, the arrow would be summoned. The link to the origin of this information rests in **novel·fire·net**

Now he wanted to truly be the master of his own skill. Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter was a fine upgrade... but it was just the first part of his plan. Because if he had to upgrade it, he wanted to upgrade it properly.

In all honesty, Jake had long wanted to do a lot of things with Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. However, he always hesitated. One of the reasons he hadn't upgraded it before was definitely because he didn't know what direction he wanted to take it. He knew that opening one door would close another, and while just infusing the arrow with arcane energy was an easy solution to instantly upgrade it, Jake wasn't certain if that was what he wanted. He was pretty confident it would be part of the upgrade, but he feared making his arcane affinity too prominent and creating a skill that no longer made use of the quite frankly awesome innate concepts within the original Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Now he felt more confident, and he believed he had found a good solution.

Because if he couldn't decide which direction to take the skill... why not all of them at once?

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Chapter 720: Nevermore: Better Arrow = Better Person

Upgrading skills was indeed something one had to do with a lot of forethought and consideration. Well, that didn't really count for most Legacy skills as, ultimately, they all led toward the same Origin, so even if you misstepped once, it was easy to realign. However, with skills like Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter that had no set progression path, it was easy to fuck up the skill's future potential.

While it was true that entirely removing a concept from a skill was difficult, what was even more difficult was adding it back again, especially if it was a concept you didn't truly comprehend. As an example, then adding dark mana to something or taking it away again wasn't overly hard for Jake, but what if he, let's say, tried to upgrade Big Game Hunter? What if he fucked up and removed the passive ability that straight-up gave him stats when fighting stronger opponents? If that happened, he would be shit out of luck with a skill that was likely just worse than what he had before.

Jake was certain that something like Big Game Hunter relied on some concepts Jake could eventually learn to manipulate himself – just look at Yip of Yore, who somehow manipulated insane concepts to make himself stronger to a ridiculous degree - but for the current Jake, there was no way in hell.

That means if he lost that conceptual aspect, he had no way to add it back. That had been Jake's biggest fear with upgrading Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, as his arcane affinity tended to be somewhat overpowering whenever he applied it to anything. Thus he had decided to avoid messing with the true core of the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter by adding an arcane layer all around it to keep all influences from other concepts away from it. He would still affect these concepts a little, as not doing so was impossible if he wanted to improve the overall capabilities of the skill, but he did so with a steady hand.

The upgrade to epic rarity had been easy enough, but going beyond that would be quite a challenge. One once more had to remember that this was all Jake working on improving the skill. There was no pre-defined way to upgrade the skill; he was going purely by feel and what he wanted to do.

Jake didn't know how much time he would have before he was needed elsewhere, so he got to work right away. He informed the Fallen King that they shouldn't contact him through the Golden Mark unless it was an emergency or they needed to ask something vital. The Unique Lifeform naturally didn't argue but understood that Jake was working on something important, leaving him wholly alone to improve the skill.

Well, he was not entirely alone as he was surrounded by a bunch of innocent beasts that would become test subjects. There were also a few nearby villages of natives if that became relevant... Jake would have no shame using those as test subjects either, considering they planned on cleansing the planet anyway.

After meditating a bit on the subject, Jake began to draw a mental map of what he wanted to do. The very first thing was to deconstruct the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter - part of his newly upgraded skill. More accurately, he wanted to isolate the concept responsible for the skill dealing more damage to more powerful foes. After that was done, he would work on improving. Jake already knew that one potential direct improvement of the Ambitious concept was the Avaricious one, so that was an obvious contender. The Horizon-Chasing concept from his new class was also an option as that seemed even higher-tier... but Jake did sometimes know when to limit himself.

The reason he needed to isolate this concept was to make sure he would place it at the very center of the skill. Right now, Jake didn't need to "place" it anywhere as the skill had an automatic summoning process, but if his improvements worked as he desired, then he would have to design the entire arrow by himself with minimum system assistance. There would still be some system assistance – if not, it wouldn't be a skill – but it would be far from an automatic process.

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In addition to this Ambitious or Avaricious concept, there was whatever made him deal more damage to foes he was more familiar with. That one was equally confusing and difficult to understand, so he also had to make sure he isolated that. Honestly, he wasn't sure how much he would touch it; he just hoped to successfully retain the concept with everything else he planned. If things did work out, it would change from being a requirement to something that would allow him to make a better arrow if he knew more about his opponent.

Essentially, these two concepts were ones he would isolate but not really touch much besides just trying to give them some overall improvements. Those improvements would likely come naturally from him just infusing more energy into the skill and the system coming in with an assist when the skill upgraded in rarity, but he still had to keep an eye out.

Now, when it came to the arrow itself... well, the idea of having a layered arrowhead was useful, and Jake did consider going forward with this same concept but ultimately decided against it. The reason he had even made the Double-Layered arrow upgrade was to confirm that this next part of the plan would work. And it had. Also, if Jake wanted to design and summon the entire arrow from scratch, what could he possibly create it from, if not his own arcane affinity?

If he did this, he would also have more leeway when it came to what he would add with this upgrade. The reason he was so insistent on being able to design the arrow himself in such detail wasn't just due to his desire for control but due to what he would add to this creation process. What he would mash into the arrow during its creation.

As for what he wanted to add? Well, this was where his desire to make the arrow go in all directions at once came in.

Jake could have chosen to go an upgrade path where he would infuse the arrow with a shitload of destructive arcane energy attuned to the inherent concepts in the skill, and he didn't doubt that would be very powerful. He could also have chosen to instead lean into his poisons... or dark mana. Maybe even curses.

He had considered getting a skill using curse energy as an example, but it was hard to dedicate a skill for just that, especially if the skill could only be used in limited circumstances. Of course, skills being hard to use could also lean into also making them stronger, Touch of the Malefic Viper being a prime example of a skill that was limited by design in its current grade to optimize power. This wasn't exactly what Jake wanted, but

he did purposefully add complexity to the skill, making the summoning process longer in trade for a better final product – and a more customizable product.

In fact, part of Jake's inspiration for this upgrade path he had chosen was a way to shore up a potential weakness: what if he faced an opponent he knew was weak to something but didn't have a good way to deliver the super-effective attack?

Well, that is what he hoped this new skill could become: a way to deliver whatever kind of arrow he thought suitable for the specific situation he found himself in.

In summary, Jake wanted to create an arrow he would build from its very core.

A core would be created, consisting of stable arcane mana locking in conceptual energy related to the Avaricious, with the arrowhead containing the "better against an enemy I know" concept. Around it would be a second layer of arcane barriers housing energy Jake could choose entirely on his own. Blood from the Malefic Viper, poison mist from Wings of the Malefic Viper, curse energy from Eternal Hunger, destructive arcane mana, dark mana, or even just fire mana or whatever else he decided to toss in there. The point was he wanted it to be customizable.

It seemed simple enough in principle, but Jake liked to keep it that way. Of course, he knew that, in reality, it was far from easy to accomplish what he wanted. So he did the only thing he knew how to do:

Repeatedly try shit until suddenly everything somehow works out.

Jake wasn't the kind of guy to sit down with a notebook and sketch out different hypotheses while scratching them off one by one as he slowly found the right solution. He was instead the kind to fail spectacularly while leaning into his absolutely massive Perception stat to spot what was wrong while relying on his intuition to decide his next course of action.

Thus Jake got started as he quickly found a target and held out his hand. He fought back as the skill began to activate as he tried to get a good read of what exactly was happening when he summoned it. With some effort, a single string of arcane mana formed, followed by a few more that began to create an outline. He then tried to infuse a bit of-

And it broke.

He went again and tried to-

Broke again.

Alright, what if he-

Shards of arcane energy fell all over the ground.

Ah, but-

Energy feedback was a bitch, and now Jake had quite a few burn-like marks across his hand as it got frayed. Luckily, he had two hands!

Okay, a few hours later, he was down to one hand, but in his defense, he had tried something new that could have totally worked. Nothing a potion couldn't fix!

Given enough time, things were sure to turn out just like he had imagined, right? He should have sufficient time with his party members traveling to their respective destinations, so he just had to keep on keeping on. Sure, it could get a little dangerous at times, but hands could always be regrown, so was it really that dangerous?.

Besides, he had confidence. It wouldn't take that long, right?

A long time later.

Jake held out his hand as the air just above his palm seemed to shimmer as a film of extremely thin arcane mana appeared, showing the outline of a shaft. Stamina, health points, and mana left his body as this shimmer condensed into barely visible energy within this fine film. Once it had reached a certain threshold, Jake sent out thousands of strings with a mental command. They all wrapped around the arrow like he was weaving something, spinning around what would become the arrow's body.

Quickly, a solid purple-ish shaft was created as Jake turned his attention toward the tip of the would-be arrow. Another fine barrier of arcane mana appeared as Jake focused on the native Tri-Worlder in the distance. An odd energy Jake could not truly describe gathered within the arrowhead as Jake summoned a ball of stable arcane mana around it to make sure it couldn't escape.

Once he felt certain the energy was properly sealed within, faint destructive arcane energies licked across this ball as it sheared off parts until, finally, a broadhead tip was formed. Jake nodded, satisfied as he moved on with the next part. Another firm fill covered the entire arrow at once as Jake focused.

Pink-purple destructive arcane energy crackled to life within the thin barrier of arcane energy, entirely locked away from the energies sealed in the shaft's core and arrowhead. He kept pouring in destructive arcane mana as it became denser and denser until he stopped just before it would explode. He had a lot of experience with the entire thing exploding at this point.

Another web of arcane strings appeared, spinning around the entire arrow as it was nicely wrapped up and strengthened. Studying the arrow, he checked for any imperfections and saw nothing outrageous. He had to constantly focus on all of the

different energies and keep them stable throughout this process while not letting any of the conceptual power leak out.

So far, so good, Jake told himself.

Jake reached out with his hand and touched what he had just summoned, barely able to fit his hand around it. It was more than two and a half meters long and quite thick, with a large broadhead that didn't look especially sharp, but Jake knew looks could be deceiving. Giving the shaft a good squeeze, he felt for its constructional integrity, and seeing that his hand didn't get blown up, he nodded in satisfaction.

Now it was down to the final part.

With careful hands – but not too careful, as he wanted to make sure the entire thing wasn't too unstable – Jake nocked the frankly too-large arrow, the size so stupidly big he had to use some light telekinesis to keep it level. As he stood there with it nocked, he took a deep breath and felt for the final concept he wanted to introduce. One that he hadn't really thought he would add, but when he had reached this point before, it had just felt right.

Focusing, fletchings began to slowly grow out of the arrow. They were subtle and looked plastic, but Jake knew they were far from simple as they practically radiated with a familiar energy. It was true that Jake didn't have confidence in infusing the concept from his class into it... but he still had confidence in using some of the concepts from his archery skill.

Jake did a final lookover at the frankly massive arrow he was barely holding up. This was far from his first time getting to this point, and he took a deep breath as he prepared for the final part of the process.

Here goes nothing.

Focusing all his will, Jake exerted pressure on the arrow from all sides as he willed it to condense. A loud crack sounded out as, in an instant, the entire arrow was smashed from a two-and-a-half meter long arrow down into one just a bit over a meter and twenty. Jake stood frozen with bated breath as he carefully observed every part of the arrow.

A few seconds passed, as nothing happened.'

Nothing happened was good.

Fuck yeah, Jake grinned as he knew he had succeeded, a notification confirming it right after.

***Skill Upgraded*: *[Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)]* -
-> *[Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)]***

Smiling, Jake read the notification and was honestly surprised at seeing an all-new word used in the skill name. Protean. That was not one Jake had run into before, but it was one of those words that sounded powerful. As far as he recalled, it was pretty much a synonym for versatile but probably considered a level higher. It also tended to mean something with being the “first” or something... which gave Jake pause. Arcane was not mentioned anywhere in the skill name, so what if that was mixed into that Protean word? Or was he just overthinking things, and the reason it didn’t mention his arcane affinity in the name was because it was a less-significant building block than the other parts?

He was unsure and exited his thoughts.

Jake looked at the random native in the distance he had designated his desired target when creating the arrow. He stared for a few seconds before he sighed, shaking his head. He lowered his bow and, with a simple mental command, dispelled the arrow. It had been difficult to make, but he knew that with the skill upgraded, it would be far easier the next time. Plus, he found no joy or satisfaction in slaying a random E-grade farmer.

What he did find joy in was reading the description of his new skill.

[Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)] – An arrow born not of a single desire but to create something that could encompass all of them. Grants the skill to design and summon a powerful layered arrow to strike down a targeted foe. The Hunter may envision his foe and channel his Willpower into the creation process. The arrow will possess extra layers, and the Hunter can inject desired energy into these stable arcane layers surrounding the true arrow. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target dependent on Willpower and your familiarity with the target. Damage increased further based on level disparity, Perception, and distance traveled. Due to the Hunter’s powerful connection to the arrow, he can influence its flight path. Stat bonuses are applied depending on the nature of the summoned arrow.

There was a lot to unpack, but all in all, Jake had gotten exactly what he wanted. Plus, there was clearly room for growth. The description mentioned he could do multiple layers of energies, but Jake was pretty sure he could only do a single one right now. He also kept all the things he wanted and added some nice extra scaling to the arrow with the Horizon concepts. It even mentioned he could influence its flight path, something Jake hadn’t explicitly aimed at becoming able to do but something he was excited to test out.

All in all, this arrow truly was an amalgamation of so many different concepts, and he was all for it.

Seeing as he was done with the upgrade, Jake decided to return to the real world and contact his party members, which he had neglected for... he wasn't sure how long.

"I am done with the skill upgrade," Jake communicated through the Golden Mark, quite happy with himself.

"About time," the Fallen King sent back in a slightly judgemental tone.

"I wasn't that long... was I?" Jake questioned. He had a tendency to lose track of time when really focusing on stuff like this, but he couldn't have been that long if his party members never contacted him during his training, right?

"You should check your notifications," the Sword Saint just sent.

"What? Have you guys managed to... oh..."

Yeah, alright. Looking at the missed notifications, Jake could see he had mayhaps taken a bit longer than expected.

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Chapter 721: Nevermore: Dark Witch

When Jake said he was good at zoning everything out when he focused on something, he meant he was *really* good at zoning everything out. Even the notifications he had gained during this time had gone unregistered. Luckily he hadn't pissed off this party by missing some crucial messages, as the Fallen King had honored his wish of not contacting him outside of emergencies. Something that the Unique Lifeform hadn't found necessary to do a single time.

Still... Jake could see why the Unique Lifeform was a bit unsatisfied when he finally checked his notifications.

Opening them up, the first thing he saw was that they had apparently gotten another bonus objective without him even noticing.

Bonus Objective Gained: Find a way to unlock the seal obscuring your path into the Dark Descent created by the Dark Witch leading toward the core of the planet.

Current Progress: Dark Descent unlocked (0/1)

So this one confirmed the theory that the Dark Witch had indeed gone toward the core and even created a way to get down there. Of course, they likely had to also get rid of all three Living Seals before-

Bonus Objective Completed: Destroy all three Living Seals. 1000 Nevermore Points earned.

Right, they had also gotten that done, but hopefully, Jake could at least help with that seal on the-

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Descent unlocked. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, Jake was beginning to realize he had indeed taken a bit longer than he probably should have, but it seemed like things were going well!

Though there was still much to be done if one looked at the remaining bonus objectives they had gained during Jake's minor mental absence.

Bonus Objective Gained: Discover the fate of the Dark Witch.

Current Progress: Dark Witch's fate discovered (0/1)

Along with:

Bonus Objective Gained: Assist the New Beast Alliance in taking over the faction formerly known as the Beastfolk Alliance by helping to eliminate all enlightened beings remaining in their territory.

Current Progress: Enlightened Beings Remaining (2.093.778/9.421.400)

His party had clearly been up to quite a lot, with the Fallen King seemingly mid-genocide in the area formerly controlled by the Beastfolk Alliance.

"So... I apologize? Anyway, where are we? What is the status of things?" Jake questioned. *"I am especially interested in what is up with this New Beast Alliance."*

*"The two other factions are entirely destroyed. Well, mostly destroyed. We found out that beasts are actually entirely unaffected by the Karmic Plague. It only works on those considered enlightened, so the Fallen King formed an alliance with the beasts there to wipe out all the enlightened, especially the Otherworlders,"*Dina explained.

"Are you sure they are unaffected? The Fallen King and Sylphie were both affected when we first got here, as far as I could feel," Jake asked, a bit confused.

“Only in its inactive form. The Karmic Plague cannot properly affect anyone not considered enlightened, so once it exits hibernation, it will just fizzle out. The Fallen King already confirmed the beasts that were part of the Beast Alliance were not affected,” Dina continued explaining as the Fallen King jumped into the conversation.

“Beasts that were all suppressed by the beastkin otherworlders summoned here. They did manage to reach some level of balance with the otherworlders but never liked them. My arrival became their impetus to claim power and wipe out the enlightened. To reject such a purely beneficial objective seemed foolish, so we naturally accepted it. Should we fail, it is doubtful the Wyrmgod would penalize us, and should we succeed, it is merely bonus points,” the Fallen King explained.

“And the Risen Kingdom?” Jake questioned.

“They had an unexpected case of heavy downpour. Sadly, the maniacs there who sought to find a way to corrupt the Karmic Plague into something that would effectively mind control every enlightened being into desiring to be Risen did not survive such unfortunate weather,” the Sword Saint answered. *“As for a status on current events, the Fallen King and I are both on our way to Dina and Sylphie right now.”*

“Got it,” Jake sighed. Seemed like he had missed a lot. *“How long was I unreachable?”*

“Seven weeks and three days,” the Fallen King answered.

“See, honestly, from my point of view, this is as much on you as me for flying so slow you didn’t need me during all this time for anything,” Jake argued.

“That isn’t how things work,” the Sword Saint just stated.

“Fair enough, I zoned out a bit too hard... so, Sylphie, how are things?”

“Ree, ree, ree,” Sylphie explained, making Jake nod. Seems like they had done quite well too. Found the old faction the Dark Witch had created and killed a bunch of beasts that had taken over the area, including a mini-boss monster that guarded the former capital. From there, they gathered a bunch of intel, discovering a bit about the Dark Witch’s plan, including the location of the dig site she had created to reach the core.

From there, they found the Dark Descent and discovered it had been sealed off by someone – likely the Dark Witch herself. They had then spent some time finding a way to unseal the barrier by researching what the Dark Witch had left behind and were now making their way down the long winding tunnels leading into the core of Tri-World. A task made quite a bit harder by the hordes of monsters in the way they had to fight through, but Dina had at least left clues along the way, so once the Fallen King and Sword Saint arrived, they should be able to follow quite easily.

“So, considering even I can see the finale of this floor will play out down at or around the core, I guess you all figured it out too?” Jake surmised.

“Naturally,” the Fallen King stated. *“And based on our estimates, I shall arrive at the entrance to the caverns in roughly a week, while the Sword Saint will be four days.”*

“Aight,” Jake nodded to himself. *“Want me to join Sylphie and Dina as soon as possible?”*

“Was that not your original intentions?” the Sword Saint asked. *“Or do you need some more time to practice? Perhaps familiarize yourself with your new skill? I wouldn’t want to rush you.”*

“No, I am fine with testing it out properly in real combat, so I will make my way to Sylphie,” Jake answered, not responding to the slight tone of sass in the old man’s voice.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, just wanting to make sure.

“Yep, it shouldn’t take that long... but can you find a kind of open area? I get you are underground, but if there are any big caverns or anything, it would be great. Not entirely sure how accurate I will be,” Jake said with a light smile.

“Ree.”

Jake nodded as he began to prepare himself, waiting for Sylphie to give the signal.

Now, one of the reasons his party had been fine with leaving Jake behind was because of what he was about to do. This text is hosted at novel.fire.net

When it came to long-distance travel, the best in their party was, surprisingly, the Sword Saint. Well, he was the best circumstantially. Through his profession, he could paint an area and “save” a moment in space that he could then travel to. This meant he was the fastest at returning somewhere he had been before as long as you gave him a dozen or so hours to create a painting first.

Second-best was Jake. However, his means of travel were not as restricted as the Sword Saint’s, though his means also came with downsides. Accuracy was one of those downsides, especially considering Jake didn’t have a lot of practice with this method of travel, and the method wasn’t really designed as a long-distance travel skill anyway. Instead, it focused on distance, speed, and ability to just get the hell away from where he currently was.

He was naturally talking about the special ability of his Wings of the Malefic Viper. An often-ignored aspect of the skill but one incredibly useful. Usually, Jake wouldn’t use it as a means of travel, but the circumstances of floor forty-one made it seem like a good

idea. Plus, he could reduce many of the skill's downsides by using a certain little hawk as a direction marker.

Jake and Sylphie still had a powerful connection through their Union Oath, allowing Jake to easily zone in on her. Over long distances, things like the Golden Mark or even his Hunter's Mark sometimes got a bit fuzzy, but the Oath had no such problems – something that shouldn't be surprising considering its Primordial origin.

After a while, Jake got the signal from Sylphie and a slightly worried comment from Dina if he was sure things would work out as he planned.

“Relax, even if things go slightly sideways, what's the worst thing that can happen? That I get stuck in a wall or something? I'll be fine,” Jake said, trying to calm her down as he got to work.

Wings sprung from his back as he also summoned scales all over his body. Taking a deep breath, he began to charge them with energy as he activated the escape method of Wings of the Malefic Viper. Mist poured out and began to stick to his body as his entire form turned greenish.

The entire world seemed to distort as Jake flapped his wings once. Everything warped as Jake allowed his instinct to guide him. Sylphie's location felt so close, yet so far away, as Jake flapped his wings several more times as he went through a distorted world where even the concept of space was subverted and eroded.

Jake's mana dropped by just over ten thousand points every single time he flapped his wings, his two-hundred and thirty-thousand large mana pool rapidly depleting. Luckily, it took less than ten seconds before Jake stopped the skill at the behest of his gut, telling him now was the time.

Unluckily, he had waited a fraction of a second too long to disengage the skill. The entire world turned dark as Jake felt a deep pressure all over his body the second he faded back into reality. Jake kept his cool, having expected this to potentially happen.

Didn't miss by too much, Jake sighed in relief. Sylphie was only about a kilometer above him, and from a quick Pulse, he saw that there was even a small cave on his path upwards.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, having felt Jake nearby.

“Yeah, just a little stuck. Gotta take a second to-”

Before he was even done talking, he felt a thick vine wrap around his body as he was dragged upward through the path it had created. He did still have to deal with rock and soil scraping him all the way up, but such was a minor sacrifice for quick travel.

“How did you miss and end up within the earth like that?” Dina asked the moment she dragged him out of the ground. “It was like you just appeared, yet I feel a distorted path...”

“I flew there, duh,” Jake smiled, having not really gone into detail about how Wings worked.

She just looked at him for a moment before looking back at the vine she had dragged him up with and the signs of it rotting from the remnant poison left after the use of Wings. “Fine, a Legacy skill from the Malefic One. Are you ready to go, or did the skill take a lot out of you?”

Jake was down to just a bit above a quarter, but after popping a potion, he was all good to go. He wouldn’t be able to summon his Wings of the Malefic Viper for a few days, but that should be fine, considering he was underground. The slight feeling of weakness after using such an escape skill also wasn’t that big of a deal either, as Jake had joined them more as a guide than a fighter, Sylphie and Dina more than capable of defeating all the beasts on the way down.

From there, the trek towards the center of Tri-World continued. Sylphie and Dina had already gotten pretty damn deep by the time Jake arrived, nearly thirty percent of the way already, but that still meant there was a lot to go. Luckily for them, Jake was a good guide when leading them through the elaborate tunnel system created by the Dark Witch.

Rather than natural tunnels, it was clear these ones had been dug. Magical reinforcements could be found here and there, and waymarkers were placed at certain intervals, with there even being a few sealed-off rooms hidden away off to the side of the cavern at times.

However, it was also clear the tunnel was heavily neglected. No one had been there for a few hundred years, so the beasts had taken over again. Most of them were worm-like beasts called Tunnelers – the same creatures the Caravan Guard Captain they met upon first arriving on Tri-World had warned them about. These Tunnelers came in many variants and sizes, and they could be threats if one was taken by surprise or got swarmed, especially in an environment that was so beneficial to them. Being stuck in a cavern surrounded by earth while fighting creatures using earth magic was always problematic.

Ultimately, these damn Tunnelers did little more than slow down their descent, especially when they decided that trying to collapse a part of the tunnel on them was a good idea. Even when mini-boss versions appeared, the three of them easily handled it. It was kind of monotonous, but at least the beasts they met got stronger the deeper they got.

They even began encountering other things deeper down. Elementals of the earth and lava variety, some insectoid monsters, and even a few fucking mushroom bastards that Jake called dibs on as he utterly annihilated them. The only bad thing during all this was that using his new and improved Protean Arrow wasn't ever necessary.

Days turned to weeks as they kept getting deeper and deeper, and Jake hoped that they would soon face enemies worth fighting.

Sadly, before that could happen, the Sword Saint joined them, having been able to reach them a lot faster by following the path they created. With him there, the fights naturally only got easier. A few weeks later, the Fallen King also rejoined the party proper, as the entire gang was back together for what would hopefully be the final trek of floor forty-one.

Picking up their pace now that they didn't fear getting surrounded by the constantly lurking monsters, they rapidly made progress, and only about a month later, they finally reached their destination. Through a Pulse of Perception, Jake saw a trapdoor of sorts leading into a giant expansive space. Rushing down, they soon made it to the trap door. He had kept the huge space below scouted with Pulse all throughout, but only after they dismantled the pretty simplistic seal on the trap door and opened it could he truly appreciate the sight.

This was the first time for them all – even Dina – to see the core of a planet. Jake stared as he saw a giant red molten orb floating in the middle of the chamber, more than five kilometers across, absolutely pulsing with power and pure energy. Surprisingly, it only gave off a little bit of heat, despite looking like a miniature sun.

The cavern that housed this massive core was even more enormous. It was nearly entirely spherical and about five hundred kilometers in diameter, no matter where one decided to measure it.

Jake and the others stared for a while... but Jake also felt like something was wrong as he looked at the orb floating there right in the middle. Looking closely, he saw what looked like small runes flashing on the orb for a few seconds at a time, and from within it, he got an incredibly intense response from some of his skills.

Sense of the Malefic Viper, along with Palate, were both practically going insane. Something was hidden within the core... no, it was merged with the core. It had become one with it. For a moment, Jake had hoped that maybe the core was just corrupted by some item... but no.

Tri-World was fucked; no two ways about it. The core itself was completely filled to the brim with the Karmic Plague of such intensity that Jake didn't doubt that the people involved in infecting the planet had been at least A-grade.

As Jake and the others stared at the core, there was movement somewhere down below. There, Jake saw a creature wandering. A hunched-over hooded being walked, seemingly without any aim, as it mulled about, something staring up at the core. Jake used Identify while still at an angle where she seemingly hadn't spotted them.

[Dark Witch – lvl 300]

"Level 300, I think the theory of her being the strongest on the planet is entirely correct," Jake communicated to his party.

"So what is the plan?" the Sword Saint asked.

Before anyone could respond, a system message popped up in front of them.

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Witch's fate discovered. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

"I... I see a path..." the Dark Witch muttered. **"Heart unsealed... there is... a path..."**

"My gut is telling me a fight is unavoidable here," Jake spoke through the mark.

"You can't know that..." Dina said, unsure. Right then, another message popped up.

Bonus Objective Gained: The Dark Witch has been corrupted by the Karmic Plague, and her mind is lost, yet a part of her seems to still hold onto her sanity and original goal. Now choose her final fate and, through that choice, the fate of Tri-World.

Current Progress: Dark Witch killed (0/1) OR Dark Witch defeated (0/1)

A dark pulse of energy suddenly went through the entire massive cavern sealing in the core. The moment it passed through him, Jake felt the attention of the Dark Witch below lock onto him. Him and the four others with him.

"NO! More plague bearers! No!" the Dark Witch's screeching voice rang throughout the massive core room. **"Infected... but, monster not... also... human not? He... no, no, risky, risky. Only one choice acceptable..."**

Behind them, the trap door leading into the core room slammed shut as a massive dark seal appeared on it. At the same time, the color scheme of the entire core room turned a shade darker as tens of thousands of black runes lit up over the walls. The only area not covered in darkness was the red core at the center.

Jake threw Dina a look. "Told you."

“I will save you! I will cure you! I will kill you!” a mad screech came, the Dark Witch’s body erupting with energy down below.

Dina just sighed. “Restrain, not kill.”

“Sure thing,” Jake nodded, pulling out his bow. He had to admit, he was a bit excited about this opponent.

This was his first time fighting a witch, after all. Could be fun.

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Chapter 722: Nevermore: A Witch's Plan

Jake could admit when he was wrong. Sometimes, at least. This was one of those times.

Witches aren't fun to fight.

Dark tendrils lined the walls, all of them semi-ethereal as they sought not to physically attack people but leave them with some odd dark affliction that wasn't a curse but seemed a lot like a curse. This particular affliction did damage and fucked with your senses, throwing them for a loop. Jake could definitely feel the roots of the magic in the dark affinity, but outside of that, he had no idea what he was dealing with.

“Hexes, try to avoid them. They are difficult to dispel,” Dina warned after Sylphie was hit and proceeded to smash into a wall as she became unable to tell up from down.

Okay, so they were dealing with hexes. Great.

Jake tried to claim the upper hand right off the bat when the fight had begun and activated Arcane Awakening at the stable 30%. The Sword Saint and Fallen King had also joined him – with Sylphie trying but getting hit by another few tendrils.

The first barrage of arrows released from Jake got blocked by a black disc of pure energy that popped into existence not close to the witch, but only five or so meters in front of Jake, making him nearly blow himself up if he hadn't reacted fast enough to make all the arrows stable.

It wasn't like the old man or Fallen King did much better. Rainclouds began to condense all around the room, but dark magic instantly influenced them, and the rainclouds became clouds of black smoke that flew toward the swordsman and encircled him.

Out of all of them, the Fallen King did have the greatest success as he released a golden wave of force that the Dark Witch seemingly couldn't do much to influence. Yet the moment it was about to strike, the witch seemed to just disappear into nothingness, leaving nothing more than a pile of black smudge behind that absorbed the Fallen King's golden wave.

Within the first ten seconds, it was established this fight would be annoying, and in the following minute, it was made extremely clear it would be very annoying. They were caught within the domain of a witch, one she had spent more than a century in. And it showed as their party found themselves bombarded by magic from all sides. Magic of varying kinds, from simple black bolts to odd hexes that did nothing but try and mess with you in some way. The Sword Saint even ended up getting hit by one that just made everything smell like absolute shit.

However, it wasn't all bad.

"She is running out of energy or at least spells," Dina said through their Golden Mark. *"Look, the runes on the wall are fading with every second."*

"And her mind clearly isn't all there," the Sword Saint added.

Jake had to agree. The spellcasting was complicated due to its inherent nature, and yet it felt sloppy and clearly not performed by someone with a plan. Usually, the most annoying opponent was someone who could string attacks together and claim momentum. This Dark Witch just threw everything and the kitchen sink at them, hoping something would hit them in the head. What was kind of weird was how her focus obviously shifted from Jake, Sylphie, and the Fallen King throughout the fight, instead focusing nearly all of her offensive magic on the Sword Saint and Dina.

This did confuse them initially until Jake realized why.

"You two are the only ones affected by the Karmic Plague."

Sylphie and the Fallen King were considered monsters and thus immune, while Jake had Palate of the Malefic Viper, which he had already used to remove any semblance of the plague from his body.

"Great, good to know," the Sword Saint grumbled as he found himself surrounded by odd eye-shaped objects that didn't look like they were doing anything except just staring at him menacingly.

The old man sent out an omnidirectional cut, making everything warp around him as he pushed away the eyes, only to find several of them appearing again, this time covering

his sword and robe, freaking him out a little. Dina cast some spell on him that made the eyes instantly disappear, but this only seemed to pull the attention on her.

Sylphie and the Fallen King tried to do something to the Dark Witch, but she was seemingly impossible to lock down. To make matters worse, the dark aura in the room wasn't just there to limit visibility and enhance her own magic. Jake had activated Arcane Awakening at 30%, yet he felt himself dropping in power ever-so-slowly, down to a level where it felt like the boost was only at 20% now.

In other words, they were in a race to deplete the Dark Witch's power before they themselves were depleted. The best way to deplete her seemed to be attacking repeatedly, but none of them had managed to land a blow yet. Jake had a plan, though.

"Next time she reappears, I will try to land a hit," Jake said right after the Sword Saint shot out a beam of water, the Dark Witch once more turning herself into a black sludge.

Jake had managed to place a Hunter's Mark on her before she had disappeared, but when she disappeared, so had the Mark. It wasn't gone, though... just scattered. He nocked an arrow and drew the string as he held back on doing anything as he allowed Dina to protect him while waiting for her to appear. Not that she had to do much to protect him, considered the Dark Witch would rather attack the dryad over him.

A few seconds later, he felt the energy from the Hunter's Mark begin to gather. Without any hesitation, he turned and shot a hastily charged Arcane Powershot toward where she was about to pop into existence. While the arrow was in flight, her form coalesced, and before she could turn into sludge again, Jake hit her with Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

It worked. Kind of. The Dark Witch was frozen for a moment, allowing the extremely fast arrow to strike her, and she only managed to turn herself into a sludge again halfway through the following explosion. What did not go that well was what happened to Jake.

The moment he had used Gaze on the Dark Witch, so did something gaze back into him. His vision entirely disappeared, blinding him. Next went every single one of his other senses, even his sense of touch and balance. Everything felt wrong, and if not for his sphere, he would have been entirely disoriented, as if stuck in a black space of emptiness, trapped within his own mind.

Fucking hell, he cursed internally, feeling more insulted than anything. Through his sphere, he saw pockets of energy gather close to him, but before they could even fully appear, the dark aura clinging to Jake's form was dispelled as his eyes gave off a deep orange glow.

Dina hadn't even had time to start casting something to dispel whatever had affected Jake before he had overcome what he assumed was some kind of hex through the power of pure Perception. Jake's feeling of indignance for her daring to attack his wonderful Perception would not go unpunished as he quickly nocked another arrow.

If she wanted to play hide and seek, Jake was gonna show her he was the best damn seeker around.

The next time she appeared, Jake instantly struck, hitting her once more. A few seconds later, Sylphie slammed into her after following Jake's direction, with a massive golden beam hitting her at the next place of appearance. With every strike, the Dark Witch didn't seem to take much damage, but the many dark runes lining the wall did disappear at a far more rapid pace.

Meanwhile, Dina and the Sword Saint were having a less-than-pleasant time as weirder and weirder magic began to appear. At one point, Dina even had to struggle as Bobo accidentally shot a thorn into her stomach; his senses somehow switched around, making him think he was shooting a thorn away from her and not into her.

The old man had it even worse, as he didn't have a Bobo to defend him, forcing the Fallen King to step in a few times to avoid the swordsman taking a dangerous blow. His senses seemed entirely off, his attempts to parry inaccurate and not at all like him.

This annoying battle of perseverance continued, and Jake soon knew that holding back was not an option. Arcane Awakening activated at the offensive 50%, with his other party members also using their boosting skills to try and weather the storm of dark magic.

Throughout this all, Jake was also doing one more thing: creating an arrow.

Within his quiver, a Protean Arrow was being constructed carefully. Jake was approaching this carefully, condensing a very special arrow just for the Dark Witch. Killing her was not the objective, just weaken her, so Jake wanted to make a poison aimed to do just that. The internal layer would be with the usual concepts, even if his knowledge about the Dark Witch was pretty much non-existent. When it came to the second layer, Jake would lace it with quite the dose of neurotoxins, making it a true knockout arrow.

All he would need was a bit of time, and his Protean Arrow should be able to-

"I got it," the Fallen King spoke.

An explosion of light erupted from the Unique Lifeform as the outline of a crown appeared floating above him. In the very next moment, the crown shattered, sending out a shockwave of pure golden energy through the entire core room.

The Dark Witch had just reappeared as the golden aura washed over her. The hood covering her hunched-over form was blown back, revealing her true form. She was some kind of scalekin, and her empty black eyes suddenly seemed to regain focus.

“What... where...” the voice of the Dark Witch echoed throughout the hall as Jake threw the Fallen King a look.

Damn asshole just had to take away Jake’s cool moment.

The Dark Witch below looked completely out of it, but the remaining runes covering the cave walls had all stopped glowing, and the dark aura making them all lose power was gone. Jake’s danger sense also told him there were no hidden threats. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [novelfire.net](#)

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Dina said, sounding pretty exhausted from having dealt with the attacks from the Dark Witch but happy the Fallen King had succeeded.

“The effects of the Karmic Plague on her were soul-related in nature. Is it not only natural I would find a solution considering my station?” the Fallen King answered, sounding cocky as hell.

Which to Jake was code for the Fallen King not actually knowing he could do it either. He had just suddenly figured out a potential solution halfway through the fight and now wanted to flex on them like he had known all along.

As Jake was still grumbling about not being allowed to use his super cool new arrow, they got a notification they had completed a bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Witch defeated. 1500 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake checked the message and was a bit surprised at getting 1500 Nevermore Points. The number felt both too small and too big. They had fought a level 300, true, but it wasn’t a true level 300 witch. It was more like they had fought the mostly passive defensive spells cast upon this domain before she went insane. If they had actually fought her for real... yeah, that would have been a lot more annoying.

Speaking of the Dark Witch.

“You... you are Otherworlders?” she spoke as she looked up at them with confusion. The witch took a few moments to gather herself as she bowed. **“I apologize; I lost myself. When I felt the Karmic Plague begin to take hold of my soul, I attempted to avoid it by warping my psyche and sealing away the influence... obviously, that didn’t go well.”**

Seeing as things had calmed down, Jake and company floated down toward where the witch was standing. She patiently waited as she cast some kind of magic on herself. Her body warped slightly as her crooked back straightened, and she stood up straight. Her flayed robes were also changed out for a newer one, which was when Jake noticed something else.

She didn't have any real equipment on during the fight either... yeah, definitely not gonna try and fight a witch dozens of levels above myself within her domain again, Jake told himself. Well, not anytime soon anyway.

The Dark Witch observed them carefully as they floated down, her eyes especially on the Fallen King and Jake.

"I greet the Unique Lifeform. From your aura, I suspect it was you who managed to awaken me from my stupor?" she spoke toward the Fallen King.

"It was indeed," he said, full of smugness. At least Jake interpreted it that way.

"Then I must thank you," she said, bowing toward the Unique Lifeform before turning to Jake. "But... you... why are you unaffected by the Karmic Plague?"

Jake was a bit surprised she could feel if he was infected or not... but then again, he really shouldn't be. The lady had spent a long-ass time trying to get rid of it, so being able to identify it wouldn't be weird.

"I was affected," Jake answered honestly. "I just got rid of it."

She stared at him for a few seconds before frowning. "That... shouldn't be possible. The origin of this Karmic Plague was an early S-grade. A C-grade should not have the ability to resist it unless... are you in any way related to the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

Jake was once more taken aback at the question. Mainly that she knew about the Order of the Malefic Viper. Usually, these dungeon characters didn't seem to know much about the outside world... but then again, she did also know that the Fallen King was a Unique Lifeform.

"I am a member of the Order, yes," Jake decided to answer truthfully.

"Were you sent here to deal with the Karmic Plague, too?" she questioned curiously.

"Wait, you are a member of the Order?"

"No, I am not. But the faction I belong to was hired by the Order to be on the lookout for instances of plagues still out there, and I got unlucky and ended up here when I flew too close to the sun with one of my divination attempts, triggering whatever ungodly teleportation the maniac who planted the Karmic Plague also placed on this planet," the Black Witch shook her head.

Jake nodded as Dina also stepped forward.

“We heard you were working on some way to address the Karmic Plague but got stopped by the other factions... can you tell us a bit more about that? Is it possible to save this planet?” the dryad asked with quite a bit of hope.

“The planet... yes, it should be possible,” the Dark Witch nodded. “But the people on it... that is another story. Though I can see you already managed to get rid of some of those old bastards. Back then, they came to me and said they wanted to help me to get rid of it. I thought it was odd with the Karmic Plague and all, but I felt desperate. Halfway through the ritual they were supposed to help me with, they all suddenly turned on me. The backlash from the failed ritual weakened me significantly, and when they all attacked at once... I had to flee down here. I was unconscious for a while, but my passive defenses managed to keep them away, and when I awakened, I found my methods unable to be used due to the Living Seals placed on it, and my mind already heavily deteriorated.”

Ah, there we go, Jake thought with relief. The Dark Witch was beginning to feel a bit too real, so it was nice to see she still had some pretty clearly scripted dialogue. Or maybe she just really liked to talk about her own background while giving out exposition.

“How do you plan on addressing the Karmic Plague? If it was truly placed by an S-grade...” Dina muttered.

“Usually, I would agree, but I got lucky. Before I was sent here, my master had already given me an item and a method to address planets infected I came across. Those other bastards sealed it away, but now that the Living Seals are gone, it is useable once more,” the Dark Witch explained as she held out both her hands.

Energy gathered as a stone only about twenty centimeters in diameter appeared, floating above her palms. Jake used Identify and was taken aback.

[Mimicry World Core (Unique)] – A mimicry of a true World Core, able to mirror another true World Core.

That... definitely seemed like a special item, and Jake already had a good idea of what the Dark Witch was about to say next.

“Using this Mimicry World Core, my original plan was to mirror the World Core you see before you and then transfer the Karmic Plague into it, away from the true core of this planet. I have researched the Karmic Plague, and it should be possible. I also discovered that this specific strain of the Karmic Plague does have a built-in failsafe: as long as the source – in this case, the energy within the core – is destroyed, a chain reaction will occur, wiping out anyone infected,” the Dark Witch explained.

Well, that sounds convenient, Jake nodded.

“So... I ask of you. Will you assist me in this ritual?” she asked with hope in her voice as an objective appeared.

Bonus Objective Gained: The Dark Witch has been awakened from her failed attempt to circumvent the influence of the Karmic Curse. She has asked you to help her in ridding Tri-World of the Karmic Plague once and for all through a ritual that will also slay all those infected if the Mimicry World Core is destroyed afterward.

Current Progress: Assist the Dark Witch in the ritual to cleanse Tri-World of the Karmic Plague.

Jake saw the objective and quickly exchanged glances with his party members. It was clear they all knew what they were doing now. And, hey, even if Jake didn't get to use his cool new arrow, at least he would be able to do some ritual magic to get one over on the Fallen King.

He was a bit sad about missing out on a prime opportunity to do a planetary sacrificial ritual, but oh well, he would probably get another shot at some point.

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Or don't, I'm not your dad.

Also, I want to leave a reminder that I am taking all of October off and that there will thus be no chapters (Patreon payments will also be paused, but that doesn't mean new people can't sign up, just that there won't be any new chapters). As mentioned, I am doing this not only because I need a break once in a while, but because I am getting the keys to a house I bought the 29. of September and will have to move... so will it even be that much of a break?

Alright, I'll also be watching a lot of Dota 2, but as a LitRPG writer, that is pretty much research, thus work.

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Chapter 723: Nevermore: Something Reckless

When it came to rituals, their group only really had two individuals who could be of any use. Dina and Jake both knew quite a bit about rituals and formations, while the other three were just sitting ducks incapable of assisting with anything of substance.

At least not in the beginning. Jake and Dina helped the witch set up the initial parts of the ritual but soon hit an issue that they should have honestly seen coming.

“Many of the ingredients I wanted to use are no longer capable of supporting the ritual... we will need some replacements,” the Dark Witch said with a deep frown. “Would it be possible for some of you to perhaps acquire them?”

That’s right, there were fetch-quests. That at least gave the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Sylphie something to do while Jake and Dina worked on the ritual circle with the Dark Witch. Jake had feared this would add a lot of time to this final part of floor forty-one considering the long trek the three of them would have to go on for each item, but luckily the Dark Witch had a way to alleviate that.

While space magic was distorted on the planet, she had found a way to faintly tap into this concept and set up a few teleportation points across the planet, all of them underground. Some had been broken with time, but most were still functional. The only bad thing about these teleportation points was that they were one-way only. So the three of them would have to make their own way back.

This was a problem for all of them except for a certain old man who got to painting straight away. Considering he would have the easiest time getting back, Sylphie and the Fallen King were tasked with retrieving the items closest to the entrance of the Dark Descent, while the old man would go for everything else. All in all, the Dark Witch needed five items from powerful mini-boss monsters spread across the planet. A totally random number of items and not at all one corresponding to the number of people usually in a Nevermore party, Jake was sure.

With everything hard at work, time rapidly passed. Jake and Dina managed to get in plenty of conversation with the Dark Witch during this time and learned a lot about the history of Tri-World, as well as all the knowledge she had about Karmic Plagues. What was most interesting was just how much she knew, especially when it came to stories about how plagues had done harm to the multiverse.

She was practically a living lexicon of horror stories brought on by plagues, making it very clear how bad they were, and several times mentioned how plagues were the closest thing to being outlawed that anything could be in a lawless multiverse. How if one of them decided to ever try and create a plague, they would be hunted down and killed. That last part was aimed at Jake only for some reason, not giving Dina enough credit. She could totally make a plague if she put her mind to it.

During this ritual construction process, Dina and Jake did discuss a few times how they had to keep an eye out for anything hidden within the massive magic circle they were making. Something that would allow the Dark Witch to do something they had not discussed or were planning on.

Perhaps they were being paranoid, but getting double-crossed was kind of the expected outcome. Jake would lie if he said he didn't predict she would somehow change the ritual halfway through to absorb the plague for power or maybe spread it far and wide, as she – in a massive plot twist - had actually been entirely corrupted and was doing all this to assist the Karmic Plague.

But nothing seemed to be wrong with the ritual to either of them, no matter how far they got in the process, and after a bit over two months, the ritual circle was completed. The Sword Saint had made three trips during this time, teleporting back through his weird painting magic, with the Fallen King and Sylphie fetching one item each.

With everything ready, Jake was still hesitant. Because there was one part of this entire thing they hadn't quite addressed.

If everything went as planned, the Karmic Plague would be destroyed. Destroying it would kill anyone infected with said plague, so both the Sword Saint and Dina would be fine as they weren't actually infected yet due to the fifty-year incubation period. But... the Dark Witch was. This meant that while Jake didn't get to do a sacrificial ritual for a planet... he had been helping a witch construct a ritual for her own suicide.

Something he and the other four weren't going to leave unmentioned as this was the biggest cause of their suspicion the Dark Witch would try to pull something. However, if she was honestly willing to sacrifice herself...

"We are done," the Dark Witch smiled happily, seeing the entire ritual circle Jake and Dina had helped make. It was directly below the core, but once the ritual began, the Karmic Plague from within the World Core would detect the Mimicry World Core and, due to its design, be unable to resist infecting what it thought was another planet. Once

it transferred just a little energy, the ritual would allow the rest to be dragged into the Mimicry World Core and thus dispel the World Core of Tri-World entirely. All of this was naturally only possible due to the Mimicry World Core, which was honestly overpowered in Jake's eyes and clearly an item designed for something just like this.

"We are done indeed," Jake nodded as he looked at the circle before looking at the witch directly. "I am not going to beat around the bush. Based on your own words and what we designed this ritual to do, if we successfully pull this off, you will die in the process."

The Dark Witch looked at Jake and the others as she smiled. "I know. Don't get me wrong, I am not a fan of dying, but I knew from the very beginning this was a risk I would be running when I walked this Path. Even now, I feel the influence of the Karmic Plague gnawing at me. I can suppress it for now, but in just a few years, I will be back to being the mindless monster you fought when you first encountered me. Death is preferable to that. Going out taking this damn plague with me isn't the worst death, at least. I do wish you five luck in getting off the planet, though. While I have no future, it is not the same for you all."

Her words seemed sincere, at least to Jake. He knew he, at times, messed up, but he still felt like he could get a read on people's vibes, and the Dark Witch gave off the vibe of someone who truly would do anything to get rid of the Karmic Plague. That small speech she just gave only reaffirmed his thoughts and made him feel a bit bad about being so suspicious.

"When immortality is not on the table, a good death is the best end for a well-lived life," the Sword Saint nodded respectfully.

Dina clearly didn't like it but still nodded solemnly. Jake didn't know if this entire floor was about teaching them moral lessons, but he didn't like that the only "right" decision was one where not everyone could be saved. For original chapters go to

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"Let us not delay more than necessary. While my mind is still mine, I want to finish this once and for all," the Dark Witch said in a resolute voice.

All that was left was to respect her wish as they got to work. All six of them were necessary for the ritual, though the Sword Saint, Fallen King, and Sylphie would only serve as energy sources and stabilizing elements, while the Dark Witch was the primary controller. Jake and Dina would directly support her, which would help the ritual to proceed faster. Usually, it would take about a week, but with Jake and Dina there to help, the Dark Witch estimated no more than a single day would be needed as she wouldn't need any rest periods.

With everyone in place, the ritual began. Right below the true World Core floated the Mimicry World Core, ready to mirror the giant molten orb above and become the new

host for the source of the Karmic Plague. Jake still had to admit he wasn't entirely clear on how the ritual would proceed; he just knew he would be supporting the Dark Witch in whatever she did.

Runes covering the entire chamber lit up, not with the usual darkish light, but a deep red. Energy instantly began filling the core room, their party of five providing much of it, along with all the items prepared by both the Dark Witch and what was recovered by the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint.

These runes then began to send light toward the middle point right between the true World Core and the Mimicry floating many kilometers below it. Over the next many hours, a large flat surface was summoned, resembling an odd black and red mirror, reflecting both the Mimicry Core and true World Core.

At the twenty-six-hour mark, Jake felt the ritual approach completion. Two World Cores were reflected in the mirror, overlapping perfectly. The Dark Witch sent them all a signal as they prepared for the final part. With a push of power, the entire chamber began rumbling.

For a moment, Jake saw the true World Core flicker out of existence, replaced by the Mimicry Core, only for the real one to return instantly. Two realities were overlapping, both true and false at the same time, until suddenly, the mirror they had summoned shattered. All the runes across the room also broke at the exact same time as the Dark Witch fell to her knees, exhausted.

Without even seeing the notification, Jake knew they had succeeded.

Bonus Objective Completed: Assist the Dark Witch in the ritual to cleanse Tri-World of the Karmic Plague. 2500 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake checked the notification and smiled a bit at their success. He threw his gaze toward the Mimicry World Core and nodded as he read its updated description.

[Mimicry World Core (Unique)] – A mimicry of a true World Core, able to mirror another true World Core. A mimicry of the Tri-World's core has been created from this item, and the source of a powerful Karmic Plague now resides within. This item has a built-in self-destruction sequence that can be activated at any time, utterly destroying the core.

The ritual was complete and had gone off without a hitch, just as they had planned. There was no deceit, no double-crossing. The Dark Witch didn't even make a move for the Mimicry World Core that now had the Karmic Plague in it. She did not do one shady thing throughout, which weirdly enough felt... weird. To see someone – especially someone called the Dark Witch – be so honest and truthful throughout, making a selfless sacrifice...

It rubbed Jake the wrong way about how this was all supposed to go down. He didn't like this ending.

No one had to say anything as their group gathered right in front of the floating Mimicry Core. The Dark Witch was the last one to arrive as she looked entirely spent, though she had a proud smile on her lips.

"We did it," she said in a melancholic voice. "Now all we have to do is destroy the core, and this will be over... don't worry, the self-destruction is not an explosion but a built-in implosion of sorts, more or less just erasing the entire core from existence. It was made for cases like this, after all. All that one needs to do in order to activate this feature is to infuse energy into the formation on it..."

Jake sensed her hesitation, as she didn't make a move to do what she had just said was oh-so-simple. Simply doing an action you knew would be the end of you wasn't easy. That one moment was enough hesitation for Jake to sigh.

"Ah, fuck it," he muttered as he looked at his party. "Am I allowed to be a little reckless here?"

"This is a dungeon; nothing done here truly matters. But I believe that goes both ways... if there is a time to embrace recklessness, perhaps now is the time. Fine, go ahead, perhaps there will even be bonus points for such a thing, but do not end your own existence for a stupid sense of vanity," the Fallen King said, clearly understanding Jake wanted to do something potentially moronic.

The Sword Saint also just shrugged, with Dina looking confused about what Jake planned to do. Sylphie didn't seem to care overly much either way.

"Well then," Jake said as he looked at the Dark Witch. "Wanna take a risk and see if we can get that Karmic Plague out of you?"

She stared at Jake for a moment before shaking her head. "While the thought is appreciated, I am well aware of the nature of this Karmic Plague. It has merged with me already, and my fate is sealed. Nothing short of a god could change that outcome."

"It isn't that bleak," Jake said. "The Karmic Plague is infecting you, yes, but differently than others. You managed to almost segment it away from the most vital parts of your soul, so while getting rid of it won't be easy, it isn't impossible either."

The Dark Witch just sighed again. "Once more, I am aware. It was done in an attempt to save myself, but it didn't work properly. The Karmic Plague is designed to destroy me if the source is destroyed, and my feeble attempts will do nothing to change that."

"If you are so confident you are going to die, just let me give it a shot," Jake shrugged. "The worst outcome is what you expect anyway."

“The worst outcome is you ending up also infected or sharing my fate,” she said sternly.

“I’ll be fine,” Jake waved her off.

He then turned toward the Mimicry World Core and opened his mouth. Palate of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake used the skill in a fashion he hadn’t for a while, as he quickly took out the item he had in his Palata – one of the treasures given by the Risen during his ceremony – and prepared to consume the fake World Core.

“What are you doing!?” the Dark Witch yelled as the core shrank and flew into Jake’s mouth. “That core isn’t something a C-grade can suppress! The innate will of the world is mirrored too, and... and...”

Jake stood there, rubbing his stomach as he felt the tremors of energy go through his body as the rowdy fake World Core complained. At least it did for a moment before Jake clamped down on it hard. One had to remember that the “stomach” of Palata was within his soul... and once it was in there, Jake felt the plague resonate with something else in there as it calmed down entirely.

Within his Soulspace, the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper pulsed with energy only once, suppressing the corrupted World Core entirely before going silent once more. This hadn’t even been a necessary part of Jake’s plan, but it was a nice surprise. What was even more of a nice surprise was what had come with that pulse of energy from the drop of blood. Knowledge of plagues had flooded his head, courtesy of Sagacity, saving him quite a bit of time, having to slowly absorb it from Palata.

The Dark Witch just stood there staring at Jake for a few moments. “Who the hell are you?”

“Someone with a plan,” Jake smiled as he turned and looked at the Sword Saint. “Could you give me a hand?”

“What do you need me to do?” the old man asked.

“When I give the signal, could you be nice and stab me in the head with that Glimpse of Spring: Erosion thing?”

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Chapter 724: Nevermore: Fate Decided

"You know we can't allow him to actually bring that Mimicry World Core out of that floor, right?" the Wyrmgod questioned the Malefic Viper.

"Does seem kind of counterproductive if he decides to reintroduce a Karmic Plague that was wiped out a long time ago back into the multiverse," Minaga nodded in agreement.

"Relax, he isn't gonna actually bring it out," the Viper waved them off. "He is just going to eat it and consume all the knowledge of how to make plagues within."

"And... that's a good outcome?" Minaga said in a deadpan tone. "Totally seems like a good idea to teach him about them... especially considering his track record of always making well-thought-out decisions."

"Come on, would he really be my Chosen if he didn't at least know how to create a plague?" the Viper smiled. "Not saying he should make one, but nothing wrong with learning how to."

"I am confident nearly every other faction in existence would disagree with that assessment," the Wyrmgod sighed.

"And I am confident at least half of those have a rule written somewhere that one of the reasons they shouldn't fuck with me is out of fear I will throw a plague at them," Vilastromoz shook his head.

"Hm," the Wyrmgod thought for a while. "I will reclaim the World Core if he brings it out, but should he consume it or sufficiently alter it, I shall allow him to leave with it as long as there is no chance of reintroducing the plague."

"Sounds fair enough," Vilas shrugged.

"Also, to be fair, I think most factions wouldn't fuck with the Malefic Viper even without the plagues," Minaga said. "And I do guess there is value in knowing how to make one, as there are some very interesting concepts at play. Speaking of which, seeing as you are the expert here... would it be possible to make a plague that wipes out Bloodlines that allow those possessing it to ruin any and all interesting labyrinth experiences? Asking for a friend."

Just to clarify, Jake wasn't planning some over-the-top double suicide or anything when he asked the old man to stab him. He just knew that what he was about to do wouldn't be something he had confidence in pulling off under normal circumstances, so he decided to indulge in a bit of clever use of system mechanics.

"You want me to trigger that defensive skill of yours that activates from a lethal blow?" the Sword Saint questioned, having quickly picked up on what he was getting at.

"Ah, *that one*," the Fallen King nodded in understanding, having also experienced that one himself.

“Exactly,” Jake smiled. “And I reckoned that Erosion thing is the best skill to use as it seems pretty easy to dodge compared to the slash, considering it is just one line of water. True, using the Transcendent skill may be me overestimating my durability, but I want to assure the system will consider it a lethal blow.”

The Sword Saint considered for a moment before nodding. “Fair enough.”

Jake thanked him as he turned to his other three party members. “Better make some distance to not get hit by anything. Ah, but Dina, probably stay close. Someone might need healing. On second thought, someone will definitely need healing.”

“What exactly are you planning on doing!?” the Dark Witch butted in rudely. “And what exactly did you do with the Mimicry World Core? It needs to be destroyed, or all of this is in vain... wait, do you plan on keeping it? If that is the case, I will-“

“Relax, jeez,” Jake waved her off. “Trying to figure out a way to destroy the Karmic Plague without you dying in the process.”

“I... I already told you I am fine with my fate,” the Dark Witch said dismissively. “And unless you can call down a god, do you honestly think you or anyone else here can do anything?”

“Eh, I tend to be overconfident and reckless, yet I still turn out to be correct and have things work out for me in the end. And my guts are telling me I can pull this off,” Jake tried to assure her. Not very effectively, mind you.

“Trusting your gut? Don’t be ludicrous. If the Karmic Plague is unleashed within you, death is the only outcome,” the Dark Witch criticized him.

“Again, show some trust here. I also know quite a bit about plagues and even Karmic Plagues. At least, let me give it a shot. Worst-case scenario, you die; best-case, you survive. Doing nothing is literally the same outcome as your worst-case scenario, so why the hesitation?”

“Because if something goes wrong, the Karmic Plague may not be destroyed, I-“

“This entire argument is getting circular and is wasting everyone’s time,” the Fallen King said in an annoyed tone. *“Jake here is the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, so you should show some trust. If any C-grade can rid you of the Karmic Plague, it’s him.”*

The Dark Witch was about to protest as the Unique Lifeform mentioned Jake was the Chosen as the lizard woman’s eyes opened wide. “I... I didn’t... I apologize for my-“

“So you’re on board?” Jake asked. He was a bit annoyed at the Fallen King spilling the beans like that, but things were getting tedious.

"I... yes. I shall trust you, Chosen of the Malefic One," the Dark Witch nodded resolutely as her voice slightly cracked. Jake even saw a hint of hope in her eyes, which only reinvigorated his desire to pull this off. Deep inside, he knew it didn't really matter as they were in a dungeon and all... but he still wanted to do it.

"Great," Jake smiled. "Now, here is my plan. While in physical contact with you, I will break the World Core inside of my stomach right as the Sword Saint hits me with a lethal blow. This will make time slow down for me as the Karmic Plague is destroyed, at which point I will manipulate the karmic energy going from within my stomach into you. Before this, I will infuse the plague within you with a toxin that will react with this karmic energy to only destroy the Karmic Plague along with the part of your soul you isolated together with it. This is still destroying the Karmic Plague, but it is more like cutting out an infected tumor before it gets a signal to spread the cancer to your bloodstream."

"I am unsure what you mean with that final analogy, but I believe I understand what you mean. Will I need to do anything?" she questioned.

"Don't fight back and focus on protecting your own soul. It may get hairy, and it will definitely be a thoroughly unpleasant experience," Jake said.

She nodded as Jake motioned for her to sit down as he looked at the Sword Saint. "I will need to set up some stuff before I begin, so it may take a bit before I need you to try and kill me."

"Happy to try and stab you through the head any day," the Sword Saint smiled as he stood to the side of Jake, making sure that his stab wouldn't also hit the Dark Witch. Follow current novels on **novel★fire★net**

Jake sat down with his legs crossed as the Dark Witch sat in front of him. He put both his hands on her back as he subtly activated Touch of the Malefic Viper, pouring in a tiny bit of poison as he scanned her body through Sense.

With her not resisting at all, even suppressing her natural vital energy, Jake quickly found the portion of her Soulshape infected. Her case was by far the best of anyone Jake had seen, but she was still in a precarious situation. Usually, the Karmic Plague would inhabit the entire soul, but the witch had managed to isolate it to somewhere around her stomach region. At least most of it. Small slithers also hit other areas. Removing it would lead to some serious damage... but likely survivable.

With intense focus, Jake did two things at once. Firstly, he pumped more poison into the witch using Touch as he "infected" the plague. This was to allow him some influence over it as he more or less tried to usurp control over the Karmic Plague. This was sadly also where his lack of power came in.

The reason why he couldn't just destroy the Karmic Plague his own this way was due to the innate difference in level between Jake and the creator. If Jake was A-grade, he

was confident in being able to cure her entirely without having to take any major risks or even needing something like the World Core. However, as things were, all he could do was try and nudge the destruction process in a favorable direction. Something that should be enough if his second objective went well...

He needed to influence the Mimicry World Core within his stomach. Something he couldn't really do currently. Of course, Jake already knew how he wanted to do this: through Touch of the Malefic Viper. His problem was that the only skill his Palate only allowed him to use on a swallowed item was Cultivate Toxin, a shitty common rarity skill.

But... for the longest time, Jake had known that shitty common rarity skill wasn't really necessary. He never used it. Instead, he used Touch of the Malefic Viper for most things. So, the question was: why even keep them separate? The answer was even more obvious. He wouldn't. And he believed that if Cultivate Toxin became part of Touch of the Malefic Viper, then Palate would allow him to use Touch of the Malefic Viper on any item swallowed.

Jake needed to do little more than will for a fusion as he tried to influence the swallowed World Core. It barely took any effort on his part, almost as if the system had been waiting for him to stop being a moron and just get it done, as shortly after he began, a notification popped up.

****Skill Fusion Detected*:***

[Cultivate Toxin (Common)] + [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] -->[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

Jake chose to not check out the updated description right away as he knew it worked the way he wanted it to. He didn't dwell on the unchanged rarity either or the fact he felt like he had just gotten a bunch more Intelligence out of nowhere. Instead, he focused on Palate and the Mimicry World Core.

Instantly he felt Touch activate on the Mimicry World Core, proving he had been correct. He looked within his Soulspace and observed the "stomach" of Palate and the core pulsing within as Jake slowly influenced it. It was naught but a slight nudge, and he felt the Karmic Plague fight back at every step.

Focusing on the core thoroughly, he put a lot of pressure on it as he exerted as much control as he could. With his mind split, it was difficult, but Jake refused to back down. He knew that truly changing anything wasn't going to happen, but as long as he could slightly influence the plague to act differently when it encountered the other influenced plague energy within the Dark Witch, it should be enough. With a deep breath, he moved on to the next stage once he felt that trying to prime the core more wasn't gonna happen.

You got this, he assured himself. The next part was where everything would be decided. Jake began to feel slight doubt about his plan as he slowly absorbed knowledge about the Mimicry World Core, becoming aware that things weren't entirely as he had hoped.

It was true that destroying the core could be done by activating the formation on it. It was also true it would just collapse and not actually explode and harm anything around it. The problem was that Jake had decided to eat it... and imploding it within his Soulspace was not something it was designed to do. In fact, he couldn't even activate it.

So Jake decided that rather than use the built-in destruction formation, he would slightly alter the formation on the core himself and change it from a harmless explosion to something a bit more destructive. This did still mean one thing, though: Jake would have to bear the brunt of effectively having a World Core explode within his own Soulshape.

"Be ready," Jake communicated to the Sword Saint as he saw the old man get in position – sword raised and all.

He was worried about handling the fallout of an exploding core. Luckily for him, it was going to happen within his Soulspace, and as long as the resulting explosion was something he understood, he was confident in handling it. Well, having a part of him handle it anyway. The amount of energy that would be released was substantial, but Jake had an even more substantial and powerful source of pure energy he could make use of to suppress it.

Within his Soulspace, a version of Jake covered entirely in a black shadowy aura appeared right in front of the space that occupied the stomach of Palate. It looked like a massive orb of glass with the World Core floating in the middle, yet the shadow simply stepped through this glass and entered the glass bubble. This version of Jake then pulled back his arm as a katar appeared on its hand.

"Now."

The moment he told the Sword Saint to attack, so did his Eternal Shadow stab the katar into the World Core, triggering its destruction.

Right as the katar pierced the core, Jake also heard the rumbling sound of Words as Power as his danger sense exploded, and a thin beam of water shot straight for his head. Both things happened within the same fraction of a second as the destruction of the core slowed down within his Soulshape, as the concept of time was momentarily seized.

And seize the moment he did. Jake barely registered the notification he got upon the destruction of the core as a shockwave of ethereal energy pulsed out from within his body, slowly spreading from the confines of his Soulshape.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] --> [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

Jake ignored this one, too, as he focused on the task at hand. An invisible aura he could only sense through his Sphere moved out of him at a rapid speed, even with Moment active. It washed over the Dark Witch, and instantly the Karmic Plague went haywire – or at least it tried to.

It tried to spread and destroy to take the Dark Witch with it, but Jake controlled it. Barely. The lizard woman's body was ravaged internally, as several parts of her literally rotted away near-instantly. Jake barely had time to react to the function of the early S-grade Karmic Plague that told it to spread and stop it from infecting her entire soul at once. Emphasis on barely.

Whipping his head back, time resumed, and Jake felt a tinge of pain as his nose was cut off, but it was nothing compared to the screech that came from the Dark Witch as half of her stomach rotted away, along with one of her arms and several of her internal channels. Black spots of pure rot covered her body as Dina slammed her staff down, a green veil of energy covering Jake and the Dark Witch both.

Jake also quickly took out a healing potion and practically forced it down the throat of the Dark Witch as he also kept a hand on her to handle any fallout from the Karmic Plague that may have lingered. However, it seemed like the entire Karmic Plague had just self-exploded, consuming any part of the body and soul it had been a part of, leaving the Dark Witch with severe soul damage and physical damage taken. But... it was nothing that wouldn't heal with time.

Several seconds passed as all that was heard in the core room was the deep hum of the true World Core and the heaving pained breaths of the Dark Witch. Dina was focusing as much as he could on healing, while Jake kept just staring at the Dark Witch, Sense of the Malefic Viper on full alert. The Fallen King even joined in as a soft golden light fell upon the Dark Witch, lessening her pain from the looks of it.

Seconds kept ticking by, but no matter how much Jake searched, he couldn't find a single trace of the Karmic Plague anywhere. Not within any of his party members either.

They had succeeded... and the Karmic Plague was gone.

The notification that came a few seconds later nearly made Jake laugh as he had to admit he had forgotten about it.

Bonus Objective Completed: New Beast Alliance assisted with eliminating all Enlightened Beings in their territory. 1000 Nevermore Points earned.

He still smiled as the notification had pretty much served as a confirmation the chain reaction caused by the Karmic Plague had indeed led to a mass extinction of all the

enlightened on the planet. An odd thing to celebrate, but something worth celebrating nevertheless.

"Are you okay?" the Sword Saint asked, and Jake was about to respond that the Dark Witch should be fine. That is when he noticed the old man was staring at him.

Jake did a quick scan of himself and noticed nothing that much out of the ordinary. At least not outwardly. Looking inside his Soulspace, things were a bit more messy. The stomach space created by Palate was filled with cracks all over, with intense curse energy lingering all over as Jake had been forced to deploy Eternal Hunger to suppress the energy backlash to not risk damaging himself.

What's more... the stomach was filled with energy still. It looked like an inferno was sealed within, trying to break out but luckily restrained by the curse energy, along with what was left of the stomach's structural integrity. Jake was worried about the energy until he noticed it depleting at a noticeable pace as some of it did leak through the cracks of the stomach, only to be instantly consumed by the curse energy.

Seems like Eternal Hunger is having quite a feast... but it's gonna take a while to heal Palate's stomach space, he concluded as he finally returned his attention to the real world and smiled. "I'm fine. Honestly, better than I thought I would be."

What was more important was the woman who was rapidly healing in front of him. The rotting flesh had slowly been removed or renewed, and while she still looked like shit, she was alive.

"I... I still live..." she muttered in a hoarse voice as she stared at the ceiling of the core room. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she began to sob. "I live... how... I didn't think..."

Jake just smiled, not saying anything, as he allowed Dina to keep doing her work.

Not far away, right below the true World Core, a gate had already popped into existence, making it clear they had passed the floor. The fate of Tri-World had been decided. However, Jake wasn't in that much of a rush, and neither were the others. For now, they just savored the moment before it was time to move on.

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Chapter 725: Nevermore: Rewarding Good Behavior

Their party of five only ended up staying on the floor for an hour or so more as Dina finished healing the Dark Witch as much as she could. Some of the soul damage would have to heal on its own, but the scalekin was more than elated at just having survived.

"I don't know how I can possibly thank you," the Dark Witch bowed as they stood in front of the teleporter leading them off the floor. "I hope you find fortune on your Path, and if I can ever repay this favor, I will do so."

It was a bit melancholic hearing her make promises of the future when the five of them knew such promises could never be fulfilled. Making her leave the dungeon with them also wasn't an option. Chances are that even if the Dark Witch had ever been a true person, she was long dead in the real world, and if she still lived, it was because she had reached godhood... in which case this dungeon image also wouldn't be able to leave. Not that any of that even mattered either, as Nevermore didn't allow the attendees to bring anyone from the dungeon out of it.

"Take care of yourself," Jake had just said. "And keep fighting the good fight. The Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic had some documents related to creating a way to teleport off the planet that may be able to help you leave if that is what you want. There is a lab hidden beneath where the now-destroyed capital is."

She nodded with gratitude as Jake and company walked through the gateway. It was odd how the Dark Witch seemed to know what the gateway was. But not truly. She knew it could take them off the floor – or planet - but not where it led or why she couldn't enter it herself. Just that she couldn't.

Appearing in the in-between room, Jake sighed loudly. Not because of the pretty damn boring room they appeared in that really paled in comparison to the cozy lounges Minaga's Labyrinth had, but because of the floor they had just done.

"Disconnecting these dungeon layers and the real world is difficult when the people become too real," the Sword Saint muttered. "I will not lie; I find the floors where they seem more like pre-programmed characters preferable to this. Makes it all more straightforward."

"Yeah," Jake nodded.

"Having some experience with her fate myself, being a boss in a Tutorial, I believe I have some unique insights. Even if the dungeon we experience is something we know isn't truly real, to the individuals living there, it is their only reality. To the Dark Witch, she was just a member of some organization who had arrived to help cure it of the plague. From her perspective, she was truly saved. Ultimately, even saving a "true" being in the multiverse is a mostly useless task as they are but one soul in an infinite sea of lives, living in an endless timespan where their paltry mortal existences matter not. So act according to what you judge best, be it in a dungeon or in the true world. In the grand scheme, neither truly matters, and consciously writing off beings as unreal is

an easy path to apathy. It is a path all gods eventually find themselves walking down... for is the life of a mortal which will end in the blink of an eye truly more real than the life of a being in a dungeon that only exists when you are in there? Both are but momentary blips on the tapestry of the infinity that is their lives," the Fallen King said, getting oddly philosophical. Definitely seemed like he had some unresolved thoughts from being in a system event... but he did also have some good points.

"I think what we did was good," Dina said with a smile. "And being true to ourselves even in a situation where the stakes are low is only proof of being a strong character."

"Ree," Sylphie added wisely.

Jake just nodded, and before anyone else could say anything, they were hit with some long-awaited system messages.

Forty-first floor completed. 4100 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Destroy the Karmic Plague from Tri-World entirely using the ritual in partnership with the Dark Witch, curing the planet while still giving it a path to recovery. 2000 Nevermore Points earned.

Reading over the floor completion and achievement, Jake nodded. The 4100 were expected with the rule change of every floor giving more base points, but the achievement felt a little low, only giving 2000 extra for choosing what was effectively the hardest way of completing the floor. Then again, they did complete a bunch of bonus objectives doing it this way, more than if they had chosen an easy path, so it probably was worth it.

The fact there wasn't any reward for saving the Dark Witch also didn't really surprise him. It wasn't part of their goals at all, after all, but just something Jake had done out of an odd sense of vanity. No... he had done it because it just felt wrong to let someone sacrifice themselves for his gain, so he had done all he could to stop that from happening. Even if it had wasted time and led to him damaging his Soulspace, he didn't regret it a single bit and would gladly do it aga-

Extraordinary Message: Additional achievement(s) based on unpredicted performance on the previous floor are being processed. Reward(s) pending; please wait.

Not that Jake was going to say no if the Wyrmgod and the system decided that an extra reward was in order.

"I did fear for a moment that Nevermore would not recognize what you did," the Sword Saint said, smiling at Jake. "I am pleasantly surprised it does."

"Yeah," Dina nodded. "It isn't surprising that there is no set achievement for it... I don't think anyone else in C-grade could have cured her unless they had a Transcendent skill or a Bloodline allowing them to uniquely cure plagues."

"Eh, I am sure someone else could find a way," Jake smiled, waving it off. Underestimating what others were capable of was never a good idea, and just looking at his four party members, Jake knew there were some real monsters out there.

"No, I don't think they could," Dina shook her head. "It took a unique combination of skills and abilities. Moreover, you had to handle the backlash of an angry Karmic Plague created by an early S-grade. The sheer level of pressure on your soul should have been suffocating... though I guess you never do tend to feel that kind of pressure."

Jake was about to protest when he stopped himself. Well, okay, he had to admit, he wasn't even aware there was meant to be some weird pressure from the Karmic Plague... or wait, was that what the drop of blood from Villy had promptly squashed the second he ate it? It was possible... either way, Dina probably did have a point. Even if someone else could replicate what he had done, chances are no one had done it yet in this incarnation of Nevermore.

"Let us just hope that the reward matches the uniqueness of the feat," the Fallen King said. "I shall meditate till the reward is done calculating. I would presume it is ill-advised to leave here before that is done."

"I concur and shall meditate for a while too. Even if using a Glimpse does not take much out of me, it isn't as simple as simply consuming a few resources," the old man said as he found a nice spot to sit down.

Dina did the same, with Sylphie deciding to take a nap on Jake's lap as he decided to go through some stuff of his own.

While it could be argued that saving the Dark Witch was just a moment of selfish vanity for Jake that didn't actually do much, the process by which it had happened certainly benefitted him. Two skills had been upgraded even if their rarity remained unchanged, and this downtime was the perfect opportunity to go through them.

First up was Touch of the Malefic Viper, which had gotten an even longer description than the last time he checked.

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper seizes control of the world. Attempt to inject toxic energy into a being through contact. The nature of the toxic energy is determined by the user. The Alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior or to further empower an existing toxic effect within a chosen target. Allows the Alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used to cultivate toxins of various forms. Can be used

with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 9 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

Reading through it, it was mostly the same outside of the upgrade from 3 stats a level to 9 and the added clarification that he only got 9 stats for every level in the C-grade variant of the profession. Besides that, there was only one place with any changes as far as he could see.

“Allows the Alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used to cultivate toxins of various forms.”

This part was still there before, but It had changed to be a lot more general, and when focusing on the skill, Jake felt unsure if he had even lost any of the effects of Cultivate Toxin. Upon further inspection, he did find one downside to the merge.

Before, he could just use it on any toxin, and it would be cultivated. Now it only worked on toxins that he already had some level of familiarity with, or in other words, types of toxins he had eaten before. This did seem like a big downside considering he wouldn't be able to cultivate powerful and unique natural treasures using Cultivate Toxin, but on second thought, why wouldn't he just use Palate and eat those with the special internal stomach, in which case, he would learn from the item through that?

Yeah, didn't seem like a big downside. Jake could also still use it to cultivate plants and such. In fact, this part was strictly better as far as Jake could see, considering he would now cultivate using a skill related to the Malefic Viper, and there had to be some Record-related benefits to that.

Moving on to the second upgraded skill, Jake saw a few more changes with this one.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins and treasures found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn the properties of herbs while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Natural treasures can be swallowed and refined at an accelerated pace using your current level of Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary). If the item is not a toxin, the item will still be refined but at a slower pace. Allows you to learn the properties of any treasure in your stomach as you slowly refine it. Allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the

process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash, and the internal space will be damaged. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 9 Endurance per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). Through endless consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand as you devour the world.

Ignoring the equally ridiculous length of the description, the same thing with more stats and clarification that it was only for the C-grade variant of his profession was present in this one. Besides that, there were two changes. One was the addition of Touch of the Malefic Viper now being used, and the changed wording around that addition. The second one was the ability to fully consume an item, something Jake had not directly aimed at doing but had ended up unlocking pretty accidentally during his recklessness.

“Allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash, and the internal space will be damaged.”

This sentence pretty much summed up what Jake had ended up doing with that World Core, including the part where the internal space got damaged. Seeing it described as part of the skill was honestly a big relief to Jake, as it made it clear this was “intended” damage, giving him hope it would heal naturally with time. He would still need to have Eternal Hunger get done eating all the remnant energy before the repair could begin, but hopefully, he wouldn’t stumble upon an awesome treasure he wanted to eat before Palate was ready again.

Satisfied with seeing the two skills improve, he also noted these two upgrades provided an immediate boost of 180 Intelligence and 180 Endurance before all bonuses. What’s more, he would get even more stats with every level-up... no matter how Jake looked at it, these Malefic Viper skills were truly overpowered, and he was all for it.

The upgrades, along with the entire curing process, had naturally also rewarded levels. Two of them, in fact.

*****DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 228 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

*****DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 229 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

*****DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 228 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Jake noted he was just one level away from getting his very first skill selection of C-grade, and while it was tempting to just grind out that level immediately, he couldn't just make his party wait.

Seeing as the processing of whatever bonus achievement they would get wasn't done yet, Jake also entered meditation while pulling out his Soulflame Cradle, as he had mentally shortened the name to, and infused some more arcane energy while he checked on the situation within it. Nothing much had really happened on that front as he was still waiting for his arcane affinity to get a proper foothold in the Cradle's world.

A few minutes later, Jake and everyone else exited meditation simultaneously as they all finally got the notification.

Calculations of extraordinary achievement completed. Special Grand Achievement earned based on actions performed with majority contribution from Nevermore participant Jake Thayne.

Special Grand Achievement earned: Allow the Dark Witch to survive while successfully curing her of the Karmic Plague. 500 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 5% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

Jake stared at it for a while. 500 points wasn't much... but 5% extra points were.

"Is this really... okay?" Jake questioned out loud. The implication that this kind of Special Grand Achievement could even be earned honestly scared him a bit. What had other people gotten that he wasn't aware of? Was that why they had been behind on points at times on previous floors?

"Jake," the Sword Saint said. "When you get a good thing, you just smile and nod."

"But--"

"Smile and nod."

Jake and company appeared on the next floor not much after, having all recovered. This time, they found themselves standing on a cliffside overlooking a city below with a large compound right in the middle. Within that compound was a training ground directly in their line of sight, and Jake's attention was instantly drawn there even before the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the forty-second floor of Nevermore: The Aloft Empire

You have arrived on a large planet ruled by the Aloft Empire, a faction ruled by a powerful A-grade emperor. More specifically, you find yourself within the land

controlled by the Luneville family, a small noble faction with an early C-grade leader at its helm.

Soon, the Luneville family will attract some attention from forces they cannot handle. Uncover the nature of why the Luneville family has become so conspicuous and ultimately decide their fate.

Note: Attracting the ire of the Aloft Royal Family will result in automatic elimination from the forty-second floor and require the party to start over.

Main objective: Decide the fate of the Luneville family without drawing the ire of the Aloft Royal Family.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: Fate Determined (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 68373

Jake read the entire thing over as he already had a guess of what this floor would be about. Especially coupled with what he saw down in the courtyard.

“This is an even more tricky one... if the emperor is A-grade, simply fighting our way through is out of the question... scratch that, just making the royal family angry will result in an automatic loss...” the Sword Saint muttered.

“This floor is another attempt to teach us the rules of the multiverse,” Jake shook his head.

“What makes you think that?” Dina asked.

“That guy,” Jake pointed to a kid down in the courtyard swinging a sword. He looked no more than nine or ten years old and was only E-grade, but Jake’s attention had instantly been drawn to them the second they entered.

“His form is simple but shows some promise, but I cannot see what else is special about him?” the Sword Saint questioned.

“Dina?” Jake asked.

“I can’t see anything either... wait... I think...” Dina said as she trailed off before her eyes opened in realization.

“Yep,” Jake smiled. “Kid’s got a Bloodline.” The rightful source is *novel✂fire✂net*

While many would argue two didn’t make a pattern... well, Jake was pretty sure he knew what to expect of this floor and several of the floors to come as he felt like they had just been thrown into a forced education plan on multiversal laws and etiquette.

Something the coming years would only further confirm.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 726: Nevermore: Floor Forty-Two

Floors forty-one to forty-five were a bit special in that they never truly changed between the eras. Every single iteration of Nevermore had these floors, and while they did vary, all had the same intent behind them:

Inform the denizens of the multiverse about some of the multiversally agreed-upon rules and best practices.

The choice of placing it so “late” into the dungeon wasn’t a coincidence either, neither was it accidental it had been placed on the C-grade floors. C-grade was when one usually began to explore beyond one’s own planets and began to interact with other factions and cultures.

Cultures which often had very different ways of handling things. Some had very well-defined castes and societal structures that effectively made certain people be born into slavery and others into opulence, while most simply segregated populations based on power, where all those weaker were heavily controlled by the powerful.

No one truly cared about forces that were too weak to interact with the rest of the multiverse, but those that did would be expected to follow certain codes of conduct. Nevermore was effectively a way to avoid factions coming up with the excuse that they didn’t know about certain rules – made it so that a B-grade could not forcefully have a Bloodline Patriarch join his faction and then claim ignorance. This had led to it truly becoming common knowledge, enough so that few even dared to try and circumvent them.

Even the Holy Church had heavily adapted how they approached individuals with Bloodlines. In the first few eras, it was normal for the Holy Church to effectively arrange marriages between those with Bloodlines with the expectations of them having a lot of children and hopefully even a variant Bloodline or two in there. Even if they didn’t have

anyone else with a Bloodline to pair someone with, they would instead just throw them at a powerful person to instead lean on their Records.

Now, whenever a member with a Bloodline was born or joined, their level of control over said individual would be heavily limited, and they would be treated as unique entities with different stations than regular members. This was even true for those with useless Bloodlines. The fact that those with Bloodlines couldn't enter the Holyland was also a major factor in this different level of treatment, but not the biggest one, as just the insinuation that the Holy Church forcefully coupled those with Bloodlines would lead to severe consequences, even for a faction often referred to as the most powerful in the multiverse.

Mind you, this didn't mean far more subtle means weren't still being deployed. The way the Emberflight tried to entice Jake into joining them was considered an acceptable method of trying to recruit someone with a Bloodline, and so was trying to pair them up with someone in the hope that something would come from that. The problem only arose when force was applied. This even applied to societal force, which was why the Holy Church was so careful in how it approached things.

The laws about Bloodlines had taken a lot longer to get accepted than those related to plagues but were now far more well-known. Some factions did still use plagues, but it was in heavily controlled settings and with lots of oversight, with some forms of plagues – such as Karmic Plagues – entirely banned. Plagues could also only be created by a set number of powerful factions, with only a few forces walking Paths that facilitated the creation of plagues. However, Bloodlines could be found everywhere. That is to say, limiting the use of plagues only negatively impacted a few factions for the betterment of the multiverse, while the rules around Bloodlines impacted everyone – or had the possibility to impact everyone.

This did mean some factions or people within factions didn't quite agree with the rules related to Bloodlines... and floor forty-two had been an example of one such faction.

In retrospect, the story of floor forty-two was kind of cliché. At least, Jake thought so.

A kid had been born into a lower-level noble family, with seemingly nothing special about him. Yet his body housed a grand secret, a hidden power: he had a Bloodline. He was a special boy who was bound for greatness, even if no one knew it yet.

Until the fire pirates attacked.

The day after Jake and company arrived on the floor, a giant spaceship broke through the clouds as a sea of fire descended upon the city. This fire somehow didn't damage anyone but swept them up and forcefully brought them into the spaceship of the pirates, everything happening in mere seconds.

Jake and the others managed to avoid the flames but were unable to really do anything. It took a total of ten seconds from the ship appearing to it taking off again. It was a fast operation... but not fast enough. A beam of light shot out from somewhere so far away even Jake couldn't see it, as an object slammed into the side of the spaceship.

The pirates didn't stand a chance as this object turned out to be an A-grade human who, with a single strike, tore the entire spaceship in two and saved the people who had just been kidnapped. Everything had gone so damn fast, and within an hour, everyone was back in the city, safe and sound.

All of this just seemed like one big showpiece, and Jake was unsure what exactly the purpose of everything was... until the very end of this scenario. The A-grade was a human wearing golden metal armor, and right before he took off, his eyes lingered on the boy with the Bloodline.

Three days later, a C-grade "inspector" from the Empire came. She claimed to be a healer there to make sure there were no lingering issues after the kidnapping attempt and focused primarily on the children. The thing is, this was clearly one big ruse, as the woman had a Bloodline, and she was capable of identifying the kid had one too.

Funnily enough, despite Jake and the others having snuck into the city and gotten close to the Luneville family through some subtle social engineering from the Sword Saint, she didn't bat an eye toward Jake and Dina, as if their Bloodlines were entirely invisible. It was odd, but on second thought, the floor would probably be impossible if anyone with a Bloodline attracted the same level of attention as the natives.

Anyway... to make a long story short, the inspector turned out to be a higher-ranked noble from the Empire, and she wanted to adopt the kid with a Bloodline, but the Luneville noble family refused as he was their only child and the heir. The noblewoman didn't take this kindly, and shit went south quick when she decided to just kidnap the kid, something the C-grade patriarch of the Luneville family wasn't a fan of.

A small skirmish began, and the Luneville Patriarch ended up injuring the noblewoman before she fled. This put the Luneville family in a difficult situation as they found out during this skirmish that the kid had a Bloodline, but also that this noblewoman was the niece of the Grand Marshal of the Empire – the very same A-grade who had torn the pirate ship down.

One thing led to another, and Jake's party accepted escorting the kid to the capital of the Aloft Empire to seek help from the royal family. This seemed like a simple escort mission at first, but they soon realized there was one tiny little problem... the capital was on another planet with the only teleporter to get there controlled by the Grand Marshal's noble family.

However, there luckily was a powerful space mage who was an old friend of the Luneville family; he just happened to live on the other side of the planet. So, with that in mind, they set out.

Sixteen months and lots of twists and turns later, including having to do a damn fetch quest for the space mage, they arrived in the capital city of the Aloft Empire. From there, they had to jump through a lot of hoops to actually get an audience with the royal family while avoiding spies and agents coming after them. Their status could not be used on this floor at all, and same as everyone ignored the fact they had Bloodlines, so did their identities get ignored.

The entire floor was quite contrived, but the only people that the Grand Marshal's family had sent to search for the kid were in C-grade, most of them early and mid-tier C-grade. This was excused by everyone in B-grade and above being heavily kept track of by the royal family and military, but Jake honestly wrote it off as bad justification for why a random B-grade didn't just descend to smack their skulls in before kidnapping the kid.

Eventually, they did end up having a meeting with the royal family, where they revealed what the Grand Marshal had been doing. Only for it then to be revealed that the Grand Marshal had been planning a coup for a while and had one of the crown princes in cahoots with him. It was an entire thing that was honestly just background scenery to Jake and company having to flee through a hidden passage... but oh no, the very first noblewoman they had seen trying to kidnap the kid showed up with a party of powerful people all around level 280.

From there, a final battle ensued, ending up with their party naturally winning and getting out the other side of the hidden passage. All while defending a damn E-grade kid who they had to make sure didn't get squashed into paste by a C-grade or kidnapped. Again.

Yeah, they had one occurrence during the many months of travel where they split up, and someone managed to steal the kid right under the Fallen King's mask – something he had gotten plenty of shit for over the last year.

Anyway, the floor wasn't the most exciting, even if they did experience some novel things. It was heavily themed around stealth and social engineering, which made the entire thing not super interesting most of the time. Until the final battle, that is, where it was incredibly obvious the Wyrmgod really wanted to hammer home the rule that trying to kidnap a kid with a Bloodline wasn't gonna fly.

The scene happened to play out right as they came out of the hidden passage, something that was clearly no coincidence.

--

"The Dark Witch was more challenging," Jake commented as they approached the exit of the long secret passage.

"It was a slightly disappointing final battle, but I guess it is factored in that we need to protect the child," the Sword Saint agreed.

"Ree," Sylphie screeched, making Jake nod.

"Yep, Dina sure trivialized that."

Speaking of Dina. She was currently walking at the back of the group carrying the kid with a vine. Jake had knocked him out with a little bit of poison the moment any fighting started, with Dina then proceeding to protect the kid.

"He has a name, you know," Dina grumbled a bit.

"We know," the Sword Saint shook his head. "And I am glad that the floor is soon over and that I will not have to speak it again."

"Yeah..." Jake sighed.

"I thank the system that I cannot have children if that menace is any indication of what it is like," the Fallen King said in an even grumpier voice than Dina.

Oh yeah, because that was another added layer of difficulty... the kid was downright horrible. He got kidnapped because he ran off on his own, and he constantly made a ruckus whenever they were anywhere.

It wasn't that he had strong NPC energy. No, the exact opposite was the problem. He had way too strong main character energy, and in the first many months, he treated Jake and company like his personal servants until the Sword Saint managed to instill just a tiny bit of discipline in the little fuck.

Jake was ninety-nine percent certain that the kid being such a little asshole was a mental trial to see if the party would snap and just kill him. Something that was surely a viable way to pass the floor... alas, they had come this far.

Though he could admit that if they were forced to start over halfway through, it would be difficult to stop the Fallen King from snapping and killing the kid so they could move on faster.

Only Dina managed to handle the child somewhat okay. She had way more patience than anyone else in their group, that was for sure.

Anyway, back to just before they make it through the hidden passage, Jake raised a hand as he spotted the exit leading out into the large plains surrounding the capital.

Even if he saw nothing with Pulse, it was better to be safe than sorry. “Alright, just ahead, and we are out of here... be prepared for another damn plot twist or random ambush.”

With careful steps, they exited the escape tunnel, protective barriers at the ready. Far up in the sky, lights flashed, and the entire planet rumbled as two A-grades were fighting. They didn’t truly feel any of the fallout, as a large formation protected the planet, and the two fighting – the Emperor and Grand Marshal – didn’t want to destroy the capital, considering one ruled it and the other wanted to take it over.

Jake and company had barely managed to exit the secret tunnel and oriented themselves when suddenly everything seemed to stop. The deep rumbling ceased, the flashing stopped... and then the pressure came. Instantly, the barrier that covered the entire planet shattered like a broken mirror, and the aura of a being far above A-grade spread across the world.

A few birds fell from the sky, unable of handling the pressure, and even Dina, the Fallen King, and Sword Saint slightly buckled their knees. Jake instantly knew what they were dealing with.

Why the fuck is a god here!?

Jake didn’t even have time to process the thought before he felt a presence lock onto them, and three figures teleported in from out of nowhere. One was the Grand Marshal, the other the Emperor, and the final figure was a young man who looked barely twenty wearing what looked like jeans and a simple sweater. One could easily mistake him for some average guy if not for his clearly divine aura.

The Emperor and Grand Marshal were both standing like statues, entirely frozen and unable to move as the divine being looked over Jake and his party before his eyes finally landed on the unconscious kid.

“Is that the child?” the god asked, getting straight to the point as he looked at the Emperor, who promptly unfroze and fell to his knees.

“Yes, your excellency... I was informed he has a Bloodline and later confirmed it... however, when I sought to confront my brother about his actions, he-“ the Emperor began but was stopped as the god raised a hand.

He then turned his attention to the Grand Marshal, who was also unfrozen and fell to his knees as well.

“My lord... I... I thought... I was told the Pantheon didn’t care about who ruled the Aloft Empire... why...” the Grand Marshal said as he knelt deeply, utterly incapable of even looking up.

“We don’t,” the god said in an annoyed tone.

“Then wh-“

“That kid has a Bloodline, you know that, right?”

“I... I know, so I thought that-“ the Grand Marshal tried as he stopped mid-sentence, seemingly incapable of continuing.

“Well, you should’ve thought some more now, shouldn’t you?” the god sighed as he finally looked at Jake’s party. **“I take it you five are the ones who have been protecting the Bloodline Patriarch during all this time?”**

Jake would like to note that the god didn’t even comment on two of them being entirely immune to his presence and the three others barely buckling. This only played into his belief this was pretty much just a glorified cutscene. Hence he responded accordingly.

“Yes, we did all we could to protect him from any who wished to kidnap him.”

The god just sighed again as he looked at the Grand Marshal. **“Now, how come a bunch of C-grades know how to act, and you don’t? Don’t even answer that... I don’t care. What I do care about is the fact that the Aloft Empire belongs to me, and I am not about to see myself be held accountable for having the Bloodline Accords be broken under my watch.”**

The A-grade Grand Marshal seemed to struggle with giving an answer as the god shook his head and waved his hand, the entire body of the A-grade exploding into a bloody mist. The Emperor looked on with wide eyes as he didn’t dare try to lift his head, shaking slightly the moment the Grand Marshal, who was apparently his brother, died.

“I hope I don’t need to elaborate on how I expect things to go from here? Let the kid go back to his family, and if I see or hear of even a single attempt to coerce or force him into doing anything, that will be the final day of the Aloft Empire. Am I clear?”the god asked the kneeling Emperor.

“Y... yes, I-“ THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY *novel·fire·net*

“Great, we’re done here then. Take the kid with you while you’re at. Remember, I’ll be watching,” the god said as he once more waved his hand, and the Emperor, along with the sleeping child held by Dina, disappeared.

Jake and company stood there, watching all this unfold as silent spectators until the Emperor and child were both gone. When referring to the final part of the floor being interesting, it wasn’t just about what happened with the Grand Marshal and a god appearing... it was related to what happened next.

Without any aura of grandeur, the god turned toward them and had an incredibly confused look on his face.

“How the hell are you the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Isn’t he in seclusion or something? What the fuck has happened in the ninety-third era!”

“Wait, what?” Jake splurged out, confused, before quickly gathering himself. “Eh, the Malefic Viper is back... but...”

“Damn, really? Must have caused quite the uproar... and for him to even have a C-grade Chosen, that is very surprising,” the god slowly nodded as he turned to Dina. “Oh, and you are related to Nature’s Attendant, right?”

“Ye... yes,” Dina said nervously.

“Quite the impressive party... a Chosen, a Unique Lifeform... geez,” the god smiled, shaking his head casually.

“This may seem odd... but are you aware of where you are right now?” Jake questioned, unable to restrain his curiosity.

“In an image of the Aloft Empire, taken in the early parts of the ninety-second era. Or, if you are referring to where from a more meta-perspective, we are currently on floor forty-two of Nevermore,” the god answered casually. “And I am effectively here to teach you about how trying to force anyone with Bloodlines into reproducing or anything like that is very much against the rules... but I get the feeling you already know all this.”

“Huh,” Jake muttered. “I thought people in dungeons weren’t really aware they were in dungeons...”

“It works a bit differently for gods, especially a god who is contracted and paid to be here,” the guy waved it off. “Anyway, while I would love to stay here and chat, it is a waste of time for both of us. My true self won’t be aware of anything this image ever sees or learns, and you five look like the types to aim for high scores on the Leaderboards, so I won’t delay you anymore.”

“If I ma-“ the Sword Saint began as the god just disappeared, leaving a teleportation gate in his place.

“I think that’s a no,” Jake smirked as they turned their attention to the gateway leading to the next floor.

Taking their cue to proceed, they did just that.

In conclusion, floor forty-two was very much a mixed bag.

Oh, and not just one - but two - more interesting did happen during the floor... Jake reached level 230 during the floor, his class leveling up after the fight in the secret passage.

And with that, he had gained not just one but two skill selections.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 727: Nevermore: Level 230 Profession Skill Selection

So... skill selections. It had been a good while since Jake had one last, and he would be lying to himself if he claimed he hadn't been at least a little bit excited. Especially when it was his very first one in C-grade. The fact that he had gotten it while just sitting around waiting on a flying ship had definitely increased his enjoyment too.

He hadn't rushed it, though. Usually, Jake wanted to jump right into them, but there was honestly no need to, especially not now that he had reached C-grade. While it was true that there could be some negative consequences to delaying picking a skill – primarily that you would end up getting worse options – the opposite was also true. For some factions, it was even pretty normal to delay skill selections until you had practiced a certain technique or magic with the hope of getting a skill.

This was also why there wasn't even a warning about negative consequences for waiting with the skill selection prompt, contrary to evolutions. He also wouldn't have to delay that long. Leveling-wise, floor forty-two had honestly been shit as they spent most of their time running and hiding, and with Jake having to constantly be on watch, he barely found any time to do alchemy. That is why he had only ended up getting his profession level while waiting in the capital of the Aloft Empire to meet the Emperor, at which point waiting just a few weeks more for the in-between room wasn't out of the question.

So that is what he did. But Jake was still Jake, and his patience did have limits, especially when he didn't just have a profession to choose skills but a class to pick for too.

After entering the boring in-between room, Jake excused himself from the party as the other four went to meditate a bit by themselves to fully recover their resources. He found a nice corner to sit in and, with high expectations and anticipation, began.

Considering his profession had reached 230 first, it was only right to start with that. The source of this content is novel•

****Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available****

Accepting the prompt, Jake saw five options appear, making him smile. His smile did fade a bit when he saw the total list had shrunk quite a lot, as many of the skills he had been offered in prior skill selections were now gone.

Though, on second thought, it probably didn't actually matter that much, did it? He rarely went back and picked skills he had been offered prior anyway.

Shaking his head, Jake's smile returned as he turned his attention to the skills on display. *Man, I have missed this.*

He was going to take his time going over every single skill on offer, that was for sure. Starting with quite an interesting one.

[Conjure Virtual Mind (Epic)] – What is better than one mind? Two. Create a simulation of your mind that can think autonomously and develop ideas. This will be a clone of your mind and thus still be limited by your current Records. Can only exist within your Soulspace and cannot directly influence anything around it or manipulate any energy. All information between you and your virtual mind must be relayed orally or telepathically. The duration of the virtual mind and its level of sophistication are determined by Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence.

The first skill and the system started out by offering an epic rarity one. This was the C-grade version of epic rarity, too, making it even better. The same as if the very first skill offered in D-grade had been ancient rarity... or maybe not. Either way, the first skill offered was sure something.

This seemed like the first step in creating an avatar, and he had quite a lot of ideas as to why he was offered the skill. The first was naturally Sim-Jake, who had effectively been not just a simulated mind, but an entirely separate version of himself. The second source of inspiration was maybe Minaga and his cloning ability... but that one was a bit of a stretch. Of course, it was also entirely possible this was just a basic skill most people got offered around this point in their Path, as cloning or at least avatar creation did seem like a pretty basic technique for most of those considered truly powerful.

Needless to say, this skill would be far from an actual avatar as the Virtual Mind was rife with limitations. Enough limitations for him to write it off pretty quickly, and not just for the "low" rarity. The real problem with it was... the Virtual Mind was made for thinking and not doing... and Jake recognized he wasn't the best thinker. He was the type to do stuff until something worked. Or, in fancier words, he preferred doing practical empirical experiments to find solutions rather than relying on studying and theory.

In less simple terms, he wasn't the smartest cookie in the drawer, and having another mind to think up dumb ideas wasn't going to help him with anything.

Hence, he moved on to the next one... which he felt like he had seen before.

[Arcane Alchemist's Grand Purification (Epic)] – Embrace your arcane affinity as you stabilize what properties you desire and destroy the unwanted. Attempt to purify any alchemical ingredient, reducing it to its most basic state while ensuring its stability. Arcane purification can help destroy unwanted properties from an ingredient, making it purer. Must have suitable ingredients. Purification does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified with the use of certain catalysts. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness and chance of success of attempted purifications based on Wisdom and Intelligence.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your Alchemist's Purification.

Yep, he had definitely seen this one before. Thinking back, hadn't that also been during his first skill selection in D-grade? Yeah, he was pretty sure it was. The only difference was that it had now added Grand to the skill name, which had seemingly allowed it to even retain its epic rarity tag. There was probably some more stuff in the updated description too, but Jake wasn't overly interested.

Jake had skipped it in D-grade because the skill seemed like something he could easily do himself... which was still the case. So, why hadn't he? Well, the thing is, purification was usually used to bring an ingredient to a desired state or to "fix" ingredients with problems. The first of these reasons required the person to have a pre-known theoretical reason for wanting to purify an ingredient and remove properties – without just doing it during the crafting process. The second reason one would purify an ingredient and "fix" it was only necessary for subpar ingredients, and... well...

The thing is, Jake was a rich asshole Chosen who only got the best of the best, and even when he didn't, his entire Path of alchemy was just to make stuff work by throwing it together. He had very basic plans and outlines of what he wanted to do, but he didn't draw up entire tomes of research before crafting every poison. Jake remembered seeing some of the notebooks Reika had made, and it was intense...

Anyway, the mere fact Jake hadn't upgraded the skill on his own already was proof enough that he didn't need this. Jake couldn't recall a single time using the skill outside of purifying water a few times since he reached D-grade. Usually, if he wanted something gone, he would only figure that out during the crafting process, at which point he could easily remove it with a bit of destructive arcane energy.

Sure, it did suck to look at the Inferior rarity skill, but at this point, Jake was just waiting to find a use for it or to merge it with one of his other skills. Probably one of his Legacy

skills... and if he wanted to do that, then picking an upgrade to it like this would only make that fusion process more difficult.

To summarise, Jake didn't need it, and picking it could even turn out to be detrimental down the line. So... next skill. And this one moved him up to ancient rarity.

[Arcane Curse Manifestation (Ancient)] – Allows the Alchemist to condense pure curse energy into objects known as Curse Fragments by stabilizing the volatile curse energy using your arcane affinity and encasing it in stable arcane mana. These Curse Fragments can be used in rituals, as alchemical ingredients, and as catalysts in crafting and transmutation. Curse Fragments cannot be effectively used directly as weapons. Be warned that wielding the power of curses can lead to unexpected results and requires a high level of control. Curse Fragments left unattended may begin to influence the world around them. The quality and amount of curse energy that can be put into Curse Fragments depends on Wisdom and Willpower.

This wasn't Jake's first time getting offered a curse-related skill for his profession, and it certainly wasn't going to be the last. The last time had been right after he had created Eternal Hunger, and truth be told, the entire concept of curses still very much spooked him back then. Especially considering he had just managed to fight off the influence of Eternal Hunger, so when he was offered Condense Curse Marble, skipping it was a no-brainer as his use of a Sin weapon was just temporary. It wasn't part of who he was.

Now, things weren't quite that simple.

Whether he liked it or not, curse energy was now a big part of his Path. Eternal Hunger wasn't going anywhere but would stick with him until the day he died or managed to figure out a way to separate it from himself... if that was even something he wanted.

Jake had to admit that he wasn't entirely averse to his increased reliance on curse energy. He hadn't even hesitated to use it when he absorbed the World Core, as he knew it was a wellspring of energy that was still only growing by the day. A source of energy that Jake was uniquely qualified to control. While his affinity for dark mana was great, his ability to tame and control curse energy was far superior, and coupled with his Bloodline, he could probably have become a damn good curse mage or something if that is what he wanted.

There was also the fact that Sim-Jake had effectively usurped whatever instinctual presence Eternal Hunger had when it relied on its chimera form. Eternal Shadow, his only mythical skill, was also tied up in the use of curse energy.

All of this is to say Jake had come to accept that curses were now part of him. That being the case, Jake also had to face the reality that he didn't use curse energy nearly as much as he could or should but only relied on it for special circumstances or with a

limited number of skills. Which, in retrospect, was honestly silly when he had one place where he could apply curse energy with great effectiveness: his poisons.

And Arcane Curse Manifestation was a way to do just that. It was a way to begin integrating curses into his alchemy and create interesting and potentially more powerful poisons. He could even use these Curse Fragments for rituals if he wanted...

Yeah, this one was definitely a contender. Of course, all depended on the last two skills. The first of which was... something.

[Malefic Plague Theory (Legendary)] – To kill an enemy, you use poison; to destroy a world, you deploy a plague. Allows the Alchemist to research and potentially create plagues of various natures. Plagues are incredibly complex self-replicating toxins that can spread independently of the creator by taking root in each infected target and using them as carriers. Do be warned that plagues can mutate and are incredibly difficult to control; thus, incredible caution and patience is advised when working on them. Malefic properties linger in all plagues you create, making them more potent and allowing them to spread faster. Stat bonuses are dependent on the nature of the plague.

See, Jake would be lying if he hadn't kind of seen this one coming, though he hadn't expected the first-ever plague-related skill he was offered to be legendary. He wasn't even entirely sure if the skill even deserved that rarity... until he read the second-to-last sentence. Malefic properties.

Anything with malefic properties had to be powerful, right? Jake assumed it meant the skill borrowed from the malefic affinity, something he was pretty sure only his Legacy skills did under normal circumstances. It made the rather normal-looking skill that was filled with warnings look quite a bit more impressive, that was for sure.

The reason he had been so certain he would be offered something like this was due to just how much knowledge he had gotten jammed into his head related to plagues. From both Palate and Sagacity, mind you, as the two of them had tag-teamed him in unlocking a flood of knowledge from the drop of blood when he healed the Dark Witch.

This knowledge did also make Jake aware of just how little he wanted the skill. And it wasn't just because of the multiverse generally not being a fan of plagues, as Jake was pretty damn sure he could get away with researching and even making plagues with his identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but because he knew just how useless they would be for his Path.

Plagues, from a combat perspective, sucked ass. They were only good for killing people far weaker than the creator and wiping out entire civilizations. Why in the hell would Jake want to spend a shitload of time cooking up a plague only for it to work on people way weaker than himself? That would just be a waste of time, which was why he had no

interest in the skill. Oh yeah, there were moral reasons for skipping it. Can't forget those.

Moving on to the final offering, one thing instantly caught his attention.

The rarity.

He could barely believe his eyes as he saw it. The very first Mythical skill he had ever been offered in a skill selection.

[Hallowed Shroud of the Heretic-Chosen (Mythical)] – To follow the Path of one who is blessed, yet a heretic, is an audacious and auspicious one, but there is safety to be found for those who follow the Heretic-Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Your very presence as a Heretic-Chosen helps protect those around you who follow a similar Path, hiding their identities as heretics by masking them as blessed instead. All those hidden under your shroud also experience a growth in Records gained related to the Path of the Heretic-Blessed. This skill partly borrows Records from your Shroud of the Primordial skill, making it work even against beings of divine nature. The shroud has no effective range but covers everyone who follows you regardless of where they are. Walk with confidence and spread your Path as all those who follow in your footsteps are protected by your Hallowed Shroud. The effectiveness of Hallowed Shroud of the Heretic-Chosen is improved by Wisdom and Willpower.

"Why is it shit?" Jake muttered to himself while sitting in the corner of the in-between room.

"You got offered a bad skill?" the Sword Saint questioned, having heard Jake complain and aware he was doing a skill selection. Jake hadn't exactly been subtle about his impatience to finish the floor and have a proper calm period to do it.

"Well, it's mythical."

"Oh? That sounds incred-"

"And it sucks ass," Jake interrupted him with a sigh.

"If I may, could I ask why you judge it so?" the old man asked.

"It is strong for what it does, sure, but it isn't really something I want. All it does is help hide people and increase their Record growth, but only in relation to the specific Path that I don't even think anyone else is following..." Jake muttered.

"You are referring to that entire Path of having both a Blessing, yet also considered a heretic?" the Sword Saint questioned.

Jake was about to confirm when he stopped himself. He... he was pretty sure he never openly talked about his identity as a Heretic-Chosen, so how-

"I can confess I, too, was offered skills related to such a Path, and I put two and two together and realized it originated from you," the old man shook his head. "From what I have gathered, it comes from the innate resistance to gods you carry and allow others to also experience. It makes you innately able to question things and stand in defiance of the gods – which treating them merely as equals apparently counts as. Aware of it or not, I believe you passively convert anyone you interact with a lot into a bit of heretic whether any of you intend for that to be the case."

"I see," Jake nodded. Yeah, it probably made sense they were offered skills like that with Jake's passive influence, right? Which begged the question... "Did you pick any of those skills?"

"No," the Sword Saint chuckled. "I have no need to, and they don't fit my Path. Plus, they all seem to revolve around you, and while I have nothing against you, Jake, I am not going to tie my Path to you."

Jake listened and slowly nodded... realizing the old man had just hit the nail on the head as to why he was so damn reluctant to pick up skills like this mythical rarity shroud. He didn't like the thought of people following him. He didn't like to imagine a horde of people looking up to him and relying on him, giving up being their own persons to follow some Path they believed Jake would want them to follow.

He wasn't trying to start some huge movement of Heretic-Blessed, as the system called it in the skill. If people wanted to take inspiration from him and go that route? Sure, go ahead, but he wasn't going to actively pursue the Path of being some prophet himself or encourage others to do so. It would be their choices, and any skill that encouraged others to follow the Path was a skill he didn't want. He preferred for the people around him to be equals and friends, not subordinates.

"Thanks," Jake muttered.

The old man just nodded and smiled, having seemingly read his thoughts. "Becoming a symbol or someone others look up to isn't something one can control but will happen naturally the further one climbs toward the peak of power. People will always stare toward the sky in awe, and if they see you among the clouds, so will they be in awe of you."

"Yeah," Jake sighed.

"You can accept but not embrace it. In the end, you cannot control what others do, but you can control how you react to their actions. You are not responsible for others unless you want to be. It is not their right to put that pressure on you, so just choose what you believe you can live with and be true to yourself, even if that disregards the feelings of

others,” the Sword Saint said encouragingly. “Or, I guess what I am saying is... go with your gut. That seems to have worked out well for you thus far.”

Jake nodded and smiled. The old man was right. He would just do what felt right to him.

That is why he happily picked Malefic Plague Theory to end all of existence and spread death and destruction to the entire multiverse!

All jokes aside, there really was only one skill that truly appealed to him out of these five.

So, pretty happy with his choice, and after only a little more deliberation while checking over prior skill offerings, he picked Arcane Curse Manifestation.

It was time to finally make some truly cursed poisons.

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Chapter 728: Nevermore (Not Really): Meetings... So Many Meetings

That day, the Chosen Ceremony Support Group (CCSG) once more had their bi-weekly meeting as six women met at Jake’s residence, as that was one of the only places they could be sure no one would interrupt or interfere. All of them were united in only one thing:

They each had a personal relationship with Jake and had all been severely impacted by his identity as a Chosen. No, they were repeatedly still impacted by his status.

This group consisted of Reika, Meira, Scarlett, Irin, Bastilla, and Izil, though they sometimes also had others join who also suffered from their association with Jake being revealed. These meetings didn’t have any strict purpose... well, they had initially been a way to organize and get their stories straight with what information they could and couldn’t share about Jake, but after only three meetings, the group had turned into what was essentially just a support group for venting.

“My family has constantly been sending people asking me if I could get a meeting with the Chosen, and when I say he is in Nevermore, they began to question if I know which floor he was at, and one of my aunts even asked why I didn’t join the party,” Bastilla –

the beastfolk roommate of Reika – complained. “I barely even know him... we did one dungeon together! Why the hell would he bring me, of all people?”

“Have you tried misdirecting them?” Izil, the elf from the Altmar Empire, offered advice. “I keep telling them that I switched strategies from directly trying to make a close connection with the Chosen to instead focus on the people around him who do have a close connection... which means they are actively supporting me going to these meetings now as they think I am networking. Which I guess I kind of am. But it also makes them back off, at least for a time.”

“That’s a good strategy,” Reika nodded. “I am lucky that I have no pressure from family anymore. Then again, that is mainly because the Patriarch is already close to Jake. Ah, by the way, as an update, the other alchemists from the clan have also backed off trying to get closer to Jake through me, and I warned them that trying to take advantage of the fact he brought them here may end badly. No, what I have had trouble with recently was this instructor who had a lesson I really wanted to take about ice-affinity flask brewing. The man is a total creeper who immediately refunded any Academy Credits I had spent on the lesson and then proceeded to offer private lessons. I thought he wanted... you know, but no, he just wanted intel on Jake.”

“Wait... isn’t that the same guy who taught cold-poison absorption and refinement?” Scarlett said in realization. “Big blue scalekin. Has a weird scale pattern on his chest that looks a bit like a cupcake?”

“That’s the one!” Reika confirmed. “Geez, he tried it with you too?”

“Yeah, he definitely isn’t subtle. I think he is from one of the Dragonflights or something, though I didn’t actually talk to him; I just took the refund and informed him I was forbidden from speaking about the Chosen. He still sent me a natural treasure even after I told him to screw off, so I just ate it and moved on,” Scarlett shrugged.

“Definitely nothing wrong with taking advantage of people like that; just be careful not to sow any debts,” Reika nodded with a smile. She then turned to look at Meira, who was sitting quietly as usual. “Anything new happened for you over the last two weeks? Still the same problem?”

“Yeah...” Meira said meekly. “I don’t even try to take normal lessons anymore, only if it is really necessary. I just work with Teacher.”

Meira had the problem that she wasn’t just the former slave and close associate of the Chosen. She was now also the first person that Duskleaf, the Grand Elder of the Order, had blessed in no one knew how long, making her a figure many were interested in. Coupled with her demeanor and general personality, that was not a good mix, as she was far from used to the pressure.

Scarlett did have a bit of the same problem, being blessed by the Malefic Viper herself, but it was far, far from as severe as it was for Meira. The six of them had all questioned

why Jake was so insistent on staying anonymous, but now, after having experienced just the impact of his status second-hand, they got it. While there were many advantages, the sheer mental drain was exhausting.

You had to consider if every single person talking to you had some ulterior motive and didn't actually want to talk with you as a person but were just using you to get to someone else. This was one of the reasons why these meetings kept happening: it was nice to talk to a group of people who didn't only suffer from the same issue but also people you were relatively sure weren't just there to try and get closer to Jake.

"Any positive stories?" Reika asked, trying to focus on the good stuff.

"I got one! My former supervisor, who just came back from an assignment a week ago, keeps inviting me out for drinks and asking to chat. This was the same girl who just a decade ago made fun of me for not landing any big fish in the net," Irin said, shaking her head as she displayed a proud smile. "I still remember when she spent three full hours bragging about getting with this young scion from some big Beastfolk tribe while throwing in jabs asking me who I managed to snatch up recently. Not a single comment from her for the last week, and I even purposefully keep bumping into her."

"Devilish," Izil chuckled. "Speaking of devilish... you said you had a skill selection coming up. Did you... you know?"

"Get an option related to Jake? No," Irin waved her off, smiling. "I got three total. Two for my race and one for my profession."

"And?" Reika questioned.

"Only picked one of them."

"Really?" Reika said with a deapan face.

"Best option by far, don't blame me. It isn't like I am the only one," Irin said shamelessly.

"Still," Reika sighed.

"Alright, change of subject. You know what I am gonna ask, right? What's the tally for the last two weeks? I am at thirteen," Irin said. "Down from last week. I think people are beginning to get the message."

"Only forty-three," Reika said with a smile. "All of them in-person too, with half during a single lesson."

"A hundred and two," Bastilla sighed. "Most from back home... I don't think they get that I don't actually know the Chosen, like, at all."

“Just eight; I think the fact I have a fiancée back home got around,” Izil smiled. “I don’t have one, but it worked.”

“A hundred and seventy-nine,” Scarlett said quite proudly. “I rejected all of them... especially this super weird one.” Read full story at novel•

All eyes turned to the final girl in the room as she looked embarrassed.

“Meira?”

“I don’t...”

“Come on,” Izil said. “It can’t be that many, right?”

“... nine-hundred and five...”

The others stared at her for a moment before Irin began giggling to herself.

“That’s on me,” Izil raised her hands in defeat. “I accidentally let a bit too much slip to the Empire... so...”

“It’s okay,” Meira smiled. “I just ignore them...”

As for what they were counting?

Unprompted invitations. Invitations varied, with most of them proposals or people asking them out, along with factions that wanted meetings to establish a connection, naturally with the goal of recruiting them. Oh, and the odd ones, like this weird guy who just wanted Scarlett to bite him.

Life as a survivor of knowing Jake was truly challenging.

In a meeting room back on Earth, other associates of Jake were also working hard at dealing with everything Jake’s identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had brought with it.

“Any problems on your end, Arthur?” Miranda asked the man sitting across the large table. “I heard a demonstration recently got a bit out of control in... what was it called again?”

“Seawind Village, though we should probably update the name to Seawind City with its expansion over the last year. There was a recent influx of immigrant beastfolk who preferred to live closer to the ocean, and the locals didn’t exactly take to this kindly. Especially not when the housing prices rose exponentially for all residences that were seaside, pricing out anyone who wasn’t at least solidly in D-grade,” Arthur explained, shaking his head. “While we managed to quell some of the anger by assuring that those

who already owned housing there would be grandfathered into the new real-estate law without having to pay increased taxes for at least the next five years, many who wanted to move there in the future are still far from happy, and as you say, there was one protest recently that got out of hand. A few injured, but no deaths.”

“I take it you have the situation handled, or do you need more assistance?” Miranda questioned.

“No, I believe that after an adaption period, things will calm down. We are also working on some high-rise construction that will provide more affordable accommodations that will still offer a view of the sea, even if they are not close to it. Many of the Beastkin want quick access to the sea itself due to their variant races, while the humans only really care about the view.”

Miranda nodded, happy that things seemed to be working out but more than a little tired of dealing with issues like this all the time. Even before the mass influx of slaves appeared – an influx that was still ongoing, mind you - they had been working on reforming many of the laws and institutions present on Earth to make what would effectively be a proper government.

Ever since the integration, it had become the norm for every City Lord to effectively be the local warlord who made their own rules and laws. While the United City Alliance and other factions did integrate many cities, they didn’t include even close to every single city. Especially not the rural ones.

Since the establishment of the council, they had actively made an effort to unite the planet. With the influx of slaves, this only became even more of a priority to make sure fringe factions that opposed this immigration wouldn’t appear without their knowledge. Recently, arrivals from the United Tribes to help assist Miranda had also begun coming, and while they were a great help in expanding the influence of the council, they were also ultimately newcomers, which many native earthlings weren’t big fans of. Lots of xenophobia all around, that was for sure.

“Speaking of beastkin and beast, did you look into the appearance of the C-grade beast?” Miranda asked another guy in the room. It was the former leader of the fort, now, after the Myriad Paths event, a reformed fist-fighting magic brawler, Phillip.

Phillip had given up entirely on being a leader of any kind, even after his second wind from having to deal with Haven during the entire Ell’Hakan debacle. He was now thoroughly retired... if by retired one meant having taken up the job of working for the government as an investigator of sorts. Ah, but he was not a leader with any employee responsibility. That was his big requirement for taking the job.

He had recently gone to investigate what was suspected to be the first appearance of a C-grade beast within human territory since Sylphie. C-grades were still pretty rare on Earth, so this had caused some ruckus, especially as the beast had appeared in a rural

village with no other C-grades anywhere nearby. All other C-grades Jake – or now Miranda, having been given the authority – had to approve to enter protected human lands. The one exception was those who had grown up within these lands and evolved there, like Sylphie. And now this beast.

“Yes, I looked into it, and I don’t think there will be any problems even if we leave him alone,” Phillip shook his head and smiled. “In fact, this beast has apparently been protecting the locals in the area for quite a while and is a bit of a local hero. Plus, he was really nice... though he did seem to have the same thing as Sylphie where he refuses to properly communicate, even if by all accounts he should be able to.”

“Alright, good to know. Keep an eye out still; better safe than sorry,” Miranda nodded as they prepared to move on. In all honesty, she wasn’t that surprised. From the reports, the beast was friendly and had been living with humans ever since they returned from the Tutorial, all without any incidents of note.

It did make sense. Golden retrievers tended to be good boys and girls, so it would have been very surprising if it had turned into a bad dog.

Miranda smiled a bit at the thought as she turned to one of the estate developers who had been allowed to attend the meeting. “Moving on. Could you give me an update on clearing the buffer zone around Haven? Did you relocate all the illegal settlements as planned?”

Quite a while ago, it had been decided that a buffer zone of around ten kilometers would be made around the entrance to the forest Haven was placed in. This was to continue respecting Jake’s wish of having Haven be a quiet little forest town, with the hope he would actually bother still visiting there from time to time.

Without this buffer zone, Haven would rapidly turn into a metropolis as every new arrival wanted to be as close to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as possible. Why wouldn’t they? Their primary reason for coming had been to form a better relationship with the Order of the Malefic Viper, after all.

Despite having set up the buffer zone, some people still chose to settle there. It was a constant struggle having to clear them out, and Miranda was honestly considering just placing a hex on the entire zone to give anyone who spent too long there horrible waking nightmares. Maybe diarrhea too.

“Yes, Mistress, they have all been moved to the primary city, and better signage has been posted to clarify settling within the buffer zone is not allowed,” the female developer explained. “However, Mistress, if I may, we are beginning to run out of raw materials... the supply simply cannot meet the demand. We are especially in need of metals for reinforcing the structures.”

“Hm, try to talk with the merchant alliance about obtaining more,” Miranda said after thinking for a bit. “Lillian can update your budget, but I will need an itemized report of what you spend these funds on. We don’t want a repeat of Ricardo, do we?”

“No... no, of course not. I will make sure not a single Credit is out of place,” the woman nodded nervously.

Yeah, Ricardo had been... well, foolhardy was perhaps the right word? Actually, stupidly greedy was probably more accurate. He had thought he could skim off the top without anyone noticing just because the budding government was still young and disorganized. Little did the guy know that the leader of the merchant alliance on Earth was Sultan, and when Lillian noticed discrepancies, the guy was fucked. Sultan was shrewd, but he at least knew how to take advantage of Miranda and Jake in a way that wouldn’t annoy them too much.

This did introduce another issue: what to do with criminals? Luckily, the people from the United Tribes had some solutions there. While capital punishment was considered normal in the multiverse, it did feel like a bit much to execute anyone who committed any crimes, no matter how small. Others also had this issue, including the United Tribes, who also used this solution to keep certain beasts with low intelligence penned.

That’s right, Earth had constructed its first proper jail. It couldn’t hold C-grades or too powerful D-grades, but that luckily hadn’t been necessary yet, either. They had achieved this by having high-level crafters make cells that were too durable for even the average high-level D-grade to leave a dent and further improved the place with a formation that weakened and drained resources from all those within. Finally, every single prisoner was magically marked to make them easier to track. With that, even if someone should escape, a C-grade guard would quite easily be able to hunt them down.

Miranda was about to move on when Lillian tapped her on the shoulder and sent a telepathic message. *“I was just informed that a warrior found an interesting item after slaying a quite powerful C-grade.”*

Having a good idea of what she was talking about, Miranda asked to have the hunter come.

A few minutes later, a familiar figure entered the room. A lot of slaves had come to Earth, with few standing out. This man was among the outstanding individuals who, after getting freed, had willingly taken up a leadership position and become a great support for the council.

“Holstred, I hear you have been hunting?” Miranda said as she smiled at the former Knight Commander-turned-slave-turned-freed.

“Yes, Mistress,” he bowed, overly polite as ever. “I believe it would be of interest to the council to be aware that items such as these seem to have begun appearing across the planet.”

Holstred held up a black token depicting a large black pit with a dragon within. Miranda did indeed already know what it was as she Identified it.

[Greater Nevermore Admittance Token (Unique)] – a special token that allows the user to teleport themselves and up to 99 others with them directly to Nevermore City to enter the World Wonder known as Nevermore. Nevermore consists of a number of sequential dungeons with increasing difficulty. Time is warped within Nevermore, making time pass slower outside than inside. One can only spend a total of 50 years within Nevermore. This token can be reused to return the same number of people back to where they originally teleported from.

Requirements: C-grade

Miranda looked at the item and smiled slightly. If those tokens had begun to drop... it appeared another influx of newcomers to Nevermore was inbound.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 729: Nevermore: Level 230 Class Skill Selection

One skill selection was great.

Two skill selections? Now that was just awesome. And today was truly an awesome day.

Jake was already pretty happy with his new profession skill, even if he didn't have the chance to start experimenting with it right then and there. Sure, he would like to sit down for a few weeks and just make Curse Fragments and see if he could find anything to use them for immediately, but that didn't mean he was any less excited to get another class skill or maybe even upgrade one of his existing ones.

In fact... having both skill selections at once like this was double-awesome because it meant that it didn't matter if the next floor had a lot of downtime for crafting or was filled with combat; Jake would have something new and shiny to play with.

So, feeling in a good mood, Jake began the skill selection.

****Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge class skills available****

And was instantly disappointed because, as was almost becoming customary by now, there, of course, had to be one shitty magic skill on offer.

[Devastating Arcane Orb (Rare)] – Harness your destructive arcane mana to bring devastation upon the world. Allows the Hunter to summon an explosive orb of arcane mana at a target location within your range of perception. The arcane orb will be highly destructive and especially effective against environmental mana, with energies tailored to wide-scale destruction over focused damage, allowing each Devastating Arcane Orb to destroy large areas. Multiple orbs can be conjured at once for optimal devastation. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Devastating Arcane Orb.

Man, Jake was definitely feeling regret now. He should totally have picked Malefic Plague Theory as his profession skill, as he now realized he had missed out on a huge opportunity. Imagine the synergy. With a plague, he would wipe out a civilization of E-grades, and then he could blow up their cities with Devastating Arcane Orbs once everyone was dead! One for killing, one for destroying, the perfect combo to wipe out people too weak to fight back.

Alas, Jake had failed to predict he would be offered such a perfect skill in his class skill selection.

All kidding aside, why the hell would Jake want a rare skill that was tailor-made to blow up stuff? Not even enemies, just... stuff. Also, the reasoning behind him getting offered the skill felt pretty damn thin. Did it really all come from Jake blowing up some cities during floor forty-one? Sure, he did sometimes use highly destructive arcane magic to blow up large areas or as distractions, but enough for one of his five skill offerings to be taken up like this?

Yeah, it felt like it was a bullshit skill just there to fill the list. Something the next one on offer also kind of was, though at least there was some solid reasoning behind that one.

[Superior Arcane Armaments (Epic)] – Be it a weapon or armor, through your arcane mana, you shall never be found wanting. Allows the Hunter to in-depth design and summon armaments of arcane mana. Armaments can be given to others. Weapons created will deal a small amount of bonus destructive arcane damage, while armor will be strengthened by the concept of stability. The duration and durability of all items summoned are based on the mana expended and the nature of the armament's design. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom when using Superior Arcane Armaments. Additional bonuses may apply dependent on the nature of the conjured item.

Jake still remembered getting offered the skill Arcane Armaments and thinking it was pretty cool back several skill selections ago. He also remembered that skill had been an upgrade to one called Summon Spectral Armaments or something like that.

Now, he did have to question... why was the system so damn insistent on Jake learning how to summon armor and weapons? Three times getting offered effectively the same skill definitely felt like overkill. Additionally, why would he even need it in the first place? A summoned katar would definitely be worse than both Blackpoint Blade and definitely way worse than Eternal Hunger. Could he maybe make some armor out of it? Nah, that also seemed bad, as Jake was fully dedicated to dodging stuff and trying to gear himself out in arcane armor just seemed like it would weigh him down. The two only real use cases Jake could see were to make things for his allies, as he assumed even monsters could use summoned items like this. The other one was to summon arrows... in other words, something he didn't have just one, but two skills, already doing.

Speaking of summoning arrows, Jake did feel pretty damn certain this upgrade to Superior Arcane Armaments came at least partly from his creation of Protean Arrow. Both were about designing things using arcane mana, after all. Of course, that upgrade had partly been facilitated by the Puzzle Cube that he had been gifted...

On second thought, Jake didn't want to go down any train of thought that would make him have any negative emotions towards that wonderful little box of puzzling wonders. The skill offered sucked and wasn't something he needed, so he proceeded to the next one.

Looking at it, things were finally starting to get interesting.

[Arcane Arrow Rain of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)] – At your will, cover the horizon in a sea of arrows. Allows you to repeatedly clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties as one becomes hundreds. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be transformed into a devastating Arcane Arrow Rain, exploding as it releases a rainfall of arrows in a massive area. Cloning arcane arrows or creating Arcane Arrow Rains using arcane arrows has a far lower mana and stamina cost. On an internal cooldown, the Hunter can push himself beyond his usual abilities and create an arrow that, upon activation, will explode several times on a slight delay for multiple Arcane Arrow Rains. Doing this will temporarily make the skill unavailable. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Wisdom when using Arcane Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an Arcane Arrow Rain.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Splitting Arrow Rain, resulting in the loss of the skill

A direct upgrade to Splitting Arrow Rain, more or less. One that was linked to his class, too, making it even more interesting. Reading over the actual effects, Jake was both impressed and a little unsure about this one's upgrade path.

It was pretty clear the upgrade leaned heavily into just adding more arrows. Jake didn't doubt that the basic splitting function would be even better than before, with the entire Arrow Rain aspect becoming far better. Even the way the rain happened had improved, as rather than just mass-cloning the arrows, this skill would just make one big arrow that would then explode and create an Arrow Rain.

The integration of his arcane affinity into the skill also had the effect of making the cloning of all arcane arrows – which was all of them – more cost-effective. This was honestly a pretty damn obvious upgrade he should probably implement himself if he didn't take this skill. It seemed incredibly simple and was just something he had never considered prior. Adding his arcane affinity to the skill never seemed relevant, as he was just copying arcane arrows anyway, so what would double arcane do? Well, make things more efficient, apparently.

This was already a pretty good basic upgrade. More arrows, better cost-efficiency, and a more effective method of creating Arrow Rains. All of it was great.

However, the most exciting thing about the skill by far was the option to put the skill on a cooldown in order to “push himself beyond his usual abilities” and create a self-sustaining Arcane Arrow Rain. If Jake read it correctly, using this effect would allow him to create a massive Arrow Rain that lasted for a prolonged period of time without him even needing to do anything.

Jake had never run into any functionalities in skills like this one before, at least not like this. Sure, Wings did have a powerful effect it could trigger and then become unusable for a while, and Palate also kind of did with the current situation going on with it right now – because yes, on a side note, even one and a half year or so after having the World Core explode, his stomach still hadn't fully healed.

Anyway, back to the Arrow Rain upgrade, Jake was very curious about how this worked. Like, what was the concept between it? Usually, things that allowed you to break your own limits were classified as boosting skills, and even extremely powerful single-cast spells usually came with either a long cast time or some form of backlash or period of weakness after use. This skill didn't mention that Jake would experience any of this, only a cooldown. Just to find out exactly how that worked, Jake nearly wanted to select the skill, but he had to remain steadfast. There were two more options to go through, after all.

With the next one having a suspiciously similar line in the description.

[Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)] – No defenses shall stop your arrows as they pierce any foe that dares impede your Path toward the

horizon. Allows the Hunter to create a Penetrating Arcane Arrow that will pierce through nearly any natural barriers and have a far higher penetrative effect on any defenses manifested or possessed by the target. Will temporarily lower the defenses of the foe if they are struck successfully. These effects are more powerful the higher the enemy's defenses and the level disparity between you and your opponent. On an internal cooldown, the Hunter can push himself beyond his usual abilities and forcefully infuse the concepts of the Penetrating Arrow of Horizon's Edge into another self-created arcane arrow. Doing this will temporarily make the skill unavailable, with this period dependent on the power of the arrow you infused. Due to conceptual synergy, Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge receives significantly increased bonuses from Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility, Strength, Wisdom, Intelligence, and Perception when using Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge.

Again there was the ability to “supercharge” the skill and put it on cooldown. Was this maybe something inherent to the Hunter of Horizon's Edge class? Like how Avaricious was all about making his attacks more effective against higher-leveled foes, this concept allowed Jake to “supercharge” skills along with the usual bonuses? THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY ***novel~fire~net***

If that was the case... why? What made this ability inherent to his class? Perception scaling made sense thematically with the concept of chasing the horizon. The horizon was just a metaphor for something unattainable that was incredibly far away, with any progress made toward the horizon just moving it further away. Perception played into this, as the further one could see, the more ambitious the horizon he chased. The scaling based on levels also made some level of sense, as every enemy reflected what obstructed him on his Path toward Horizon's Edge, and every enemy was ahead of him on this endless journey.

The main theme of his class did seem to be going above and beyond, reaching for the impossible, so was this supercharging of skills maybe a representation of that? That he would reach beyond what he could reach beyond his own station and, at the cost of putting the skill on a cooldown, supercharge the skill for one final push?

He knew he wouldn't get an answer by just thinking about it, so he decided to evaluate the actual skill.

Penetrating Arrow seemed like a bunker-breaker of sorts. It was created to destroy defenses and would probably work very well as an opener of sorts when Protean Arrow wasn't an option. Or could he supercharge the skill and infuse the concept into the Protean Arrow? Yeah, that was definitely an option, too, if he went for the one-shot.

The increased synergy with Unblemished Arrows was also interesting, but honestly made sense considering the two skills were kind of similar. The skill was also ancient rarity, so it clearly dealt with high-level concepts... yeah, all in all, this skill would just be

a great tool to add to his skill set. Sure, he did have a few doubts, such as how long it would take to summon this Penetrating Arrow, but as it didn't mention how fast or slow it would be, he assumed it wouldn't be too bad or good.

In conclusion, this one was definitely a contender. But he had one more skill offered – this one legendary.

[Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)] – All other magic - all other energies – falter as you embrace the supremacy of your arcane affinity. Determined in your Path, you are ready to dedicate yourself to your arcane affinity once and for all. With conviction, reforge your body, making arcane energy more easily travel through your pathways while making you significantly more resilient to your own arcane energies. Passively increases the effectiveness and lowers the cost of all combat skills using arcane energy. As your bond with your arcane affinity deepens, so does your understanding of it, reducing the mana cost of all freeform manipulation using your arcane mana while increasing its power. As your arcane affinity strengthens, you surrender other forms of magic, significantly increasing the cost and lowering the effectiveness of all combat skills and freeform magic that does not utilize your arcane affinity.

When reading this skill, Jake instantly got reminded of Attunement skills. In prior skill selections, Jake had been offered both the Curse and Dark Attunement skills, which would have permanently transformed a portion of his energies into dark mana or curse energy, with the benefit of any magic using those energies improving, but at the cost of any other types of energy manipulation getting worse.

This one was incredibly similar to that, but it was no attunement skill. Attunement skills were permanent changes to your status menu, literally adding or changing it to have a new resource. Arcane Supremacy, being a passive skill, would likely also lead to some changes, but it was far from as severe as an Attunement skill.

The biggest difference was that this one only really affected combat skills and magic. Jake wondered for a moment as he checked his status menu just to confirm something. Yep, pretty much all his skills already integrated his arcane affinity in some way or another. The only ones he was a bit worried about were those like Steady Aim, Relentless Hunt, and especially Eternal Shadow... but he was unsure if those were even affected or if they maybe did somehow utilize his arcane affinity even if the descriptions didn't clarify it. One had to remember that his arcane affinity came at least partly from his Bloodline, so any skill related to that should also be affected positively, right? Or at least not negatively impacted.

Even something like curse energy Jake knew he could merge with his arcane affinity. In fact, it was better to merge it with his arcane affinity to stabilize it, something the Curse Fragments he had just learned to make were already doing. The Penetrating Stab also used his arcane affinity already.

One thing that also really interested him was how this one would work with Arcane Awakening. The part about making his body more resilient to his own arcane energies had to work great with his boosting skill, right? As it was his own affinity, Jake already had an insane innate resistance to arcane energy, but that didn't mean he would say no to having to be even better.

Oh yeah, and reading more closely, when it talked about freeform manipulation of arcane mana, it didn't actually say that part only worked in combat... so maybe he could even use that elsewhere? The possibilities.

All in all, Jake concluded that Arcane Supremacy was a skill that would effectively just buff nearly every aspect of combat, with minimum downsides, and those downsides he could quickly iron out. The only true negative was that this would be Jake fully dedicating himself to a Path. That he would, once and for all, go all-in with his arcane affinity over all other types of energy. Which, to be fair, he kind of already was.

It was a good skill, no two ways about it. Legendary too, plus it had a great name, in Jake's opinion. The thing is, there were a lot of good offers this time around.

Jake read over the skills one more time, and he kind of liked the three last ones offered. Arcane Arrow Rain of Horizon's Edge, Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge, and Arcane Supremacy all had different pros and cons, but all shared that they would be great additions. One would make him far better against massive foes and large-scale combat, as well as just give more overall damage to one of his core skills. Another would give him an arrow to break defenses and even empower his other already massively powerful attacks, such as his Protean Arrow, while the final one would just make nearly everything Jake did slightly stronger.

So... which one should he pick?

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Chapter 730: Nevermore: A Bit of Testing

Choosing skills when there were four shit options and only one skill he wanted was much easier than having multiple skills that appealed to him. If possible, he would have picked at least two of them, as he was honestly fine with missing out on either Penetrating Arcane Arrow or Arcane Arrow Rain, but he really wanted at least one of them.

That entire supercharging effect was just too damn interesting. What's more, if it truly was something inherent to Jake's class, would he maybe be able to upgrade other skills with the same effect? Would he become able to make an even better Protean Arrow that he could supercharge? Or, to be extreme... a supercharged Eternal Shadow.

Jake sucked at theoretical stuff, but as long as he felt how the supercharging effect worked just once, he would at least have an idea of how to apply it elsewhere.

But... if he wanted that, he would have to skip Arcane Supremacy. Just the name alone appealed to him as his arcane affinity was indeed the supreme form of magic, but there were cons to picking it. Plus, he had no idea how it would interact with his Malefic Viper Legacy skills or his ability to easily use curse magic. Touch should be fine as that one he had pretty good control over and could easily toss a bit of arcane affinity in there, but what about Scales? Wings? Fangs? Pride? All of them. Shit, just something like Malefic Viper's Poison that made all his poison better did not have anything to do with his arcane affinity. Would that somehow get negatively impacted, meaning all of his poisons would get worse?

Also, while Arcane Supremacy was cool, so was being able to supercharge skills.

Mentally he had already written off Arcane Arrow Rain while just thinking this over a bit more, and for two big reasons. One was that it just seemed the least interesting of the three, and two, because it was an upgrade to an existing skill. That meant he could upgrade the skill himself, even if he couldn't make it as good. Picking one of the other options would add a new skill, and Villy had repeatedly talked about how having more skills tended to be straight-up better.

Jake momentarily considered asking the Sword Saint or one of the others but decided against it. This was his skill selection and his Path. He had complained to the Sword Saint about the mythical Hallowed Shroud, but he hadn't actually asked for advice as he already knew such a skill didn't fit him. If he didn't know his own Path and knew what he wanted to do, how could he expect anyone else to?

Arcane Supremacy does seem best overall, right? he questioned. Yeah, it did. But picking it did mean fully committing to his arcane affinity, akin to picking an Attunement skill. He felt like there were many unknowns with doing that... and what if he discovered an affinity that he also wanted to use at some point? Curse energy wasn't something he had initially been interested in, but now it was a core part of his Path. What if that happened with some magic affinity he just hadn't encountered yet? What if there proved to be some fundamental problem with his arcane affinity? What if he faced an enemy who somehow resisted his arcane energy?

What if...

Fuck off, Jake... you gotta commit to things sometimes, he scolded himself as he got his shit together. Logically he knew Arcane Supremacy was the best. He would have to dedicate

himself at some time to an affinity, as not doing so was just leaving power on the table. His intuition was also telling him he bloody had to pick it, but he still felt damn insecure. He was bad at commitments and any skills that would “lock out” other options... but there were times one had to do that.

Jake’s arcane affinity was *his* affinity. There would never be any affinity that could suit him better, as this one was literally created by him and was tied to who he was. If there was any type of magic or affinity to ever commit to, it would be his own. Even if some of his skills didn’t benefit from the skill or were negatively impacted right now, he would fix it in the future.

All he could hope was that the next skill selection didn’t have any interesting options or at least had another skill with the supercharge option because, this time, it had to be Arcane Supremacy. With conviction, he selected the legendary skill.

****New skill gained*: [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)]***

He selected the skill and took a deep breath as he felt something was coming. Seconds passed before a shiver went through his arms as it slowly spread throughout the rest of his body. The shiver was slowly replaced by an odd warm sensation that was on the brink of feeling painful, and in his sphere, he saw a bit of skin slowly begin to flay.

Then, the system truly went into gear. A protective bubble formed around Jake’s entire body, obscuring his form from view from the others waiting in the in-between room as the reforging process began. His skin sped up with flying off as both his arms rapidly began dissolving as if destructive arcane energy had ravaged them, yet the very next second, what was destroyed got rebuilt.

This was not simply his physical body undergoing a metamorphosis, but his entire Soulshape was influenced. The countless pathways that transported innate energy – stamina – throughout his body expanded and seemed to slightly change as the veins responsible for health points – vital energy – underwent rebirth next.

Nearly no part of Jake was left untouched. The only things he saw the system didn’t influence were his eyes, as trying to reforge them was utterly unnecessary. However, he was surprised when he felt a faint spectral outline behind his back also get influenced until he realized it was his Wings of the Malefic Viper. Even if he didn’t have them summoned now, Arcane Supremacy still affected them.

Jake had wondered if maybe he could achieve something akin to what this skill did himself... but undergoing the reforging process, he became fully aware of how far he was from achieving something like that. The endless pathways making up the body were so numerous it didn’t make any sense, and each evolution only added more and changed those that were already there. To manually try to do something like this would be akin to changing a living being by going in and affecting every cell individually. Plus, one had to be able to do this change within a very short time span, or the body would be

in imbalance and try to “heal” any damage inflicted. Not to mention the fact one had to figure out a way to not just find and influence all of these pathways... one had to do it in a way that could directly change the Soulshape.

Soon enough, the reforging approached its end. Jake had almost expected his Bloodline to act up or do something during all this, but it was surprisingly silent. Content. It clearly approved of what was happening, and as Jake began to inspect some of the changes, he couldn't help but think:

This feels right... more right than it was before?

It was odd. The changed parts of Jake's body felt more... natural? At least more so than before being reforged. Like this was how they had always been supposed to look... no... maybe that it was at least closer to it than before? He couldn't quite put his finger on it, and before he could properly get an idea, his metamorphosis was fully complete.

The entire process only took around a minute before the protective shell that had formed around him slowly disappeared. Jake opened his eyes to see four individuals staring down at him, Dina with a worried look, the Fallen King and Sword Saint with pure interest, and Sylphie looking like she was annoyed at his commotion waking her up.

“So... you got an interesting skill, I take it?” the Sword Saint asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It reminded me a bit of when I underwent my full Nature Attunement... but not quite?” Dina said, slightly confused.

“First of all, yes, very interesting, and it is pretty close to an Attunement skill, Dina,” Jake answered the both of them as he slowly opened and closed his hand.

“*So you have chosen to specialize your magic?*” the Fallen King questioned.

“As I said, something like that,” Jake answered as he let a spark of arcane energy jump between his index and thumb. “I guess you can say I finally committed properly to my own arcane affinity, as odd as that sounds.”

“Will it affect your alchemy skills?” Dina asked with a bit of worry. “More often than not, that is one of the big hurdles for Attunement skills, as they can create difficulties for crafting. As far as I know, most alchemy is best with pure unattuned mana, so if you are attuned, it adds another layer of challenge and complexity.”

Jake felt for a bit as he transported pure mana through his body before shaking his head. “Nope, alchemy seems unaffected... in fact, it may be better than before. No problems moving pure mana around, at least.”

“Hm,” Dina said before smiling cheerfully. “Arcane affinities are odd, so I won’t ask anything. But it sounds like it was a good upgrade, so congratulations!”

“Thanks,” Jakes smiled back at her. “Now, can I get a bit of time to familiarize myself with things?”

“How long will you need, you think?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Not long, I reckon,” Jake answered. “But don’t worry. I have a strong feeling I would like to do some live testing pretty soon.”

“Very well. Notify us when you are ready,” the old man said as he went over to a corner and sat down to meditate. The others also went back to doing their own thing and left Jake to do some testing. As much testing as he could do in the relatively small in-between room, anyway.

Jake started by consciously moving some arcane energy around and found it moved far more smoothly than before. It was like his internal channels had slightly expanded and gotten lubricated, at least when it came to leading arcane energy through his body. He also quickly tried summoning a bit of magic, starting with a barrier of stable arcane mana to encase himself, serving both as an experiment and a way to not annoy the others too much.

With little effort, arcane mana manifested all around him, forming a stable barrier in a bubble all around him nearly instantly.

Faster than before, that’s for sure... by around twenty percent, maybe?

Next, he took out Eternal Hunger and did a pressure test. He rested the tip on the barrier and slowly applied pressure until the arcane barrier began to crack and break. He repeated this a few more times as he kept summoning barriers to break.

Durability is up too, and more than the summoning speed. Maybe thirty percent?

Jake did regret not doing all these tests before he picked the skill to have a better control group, but he luckily had a pretty good feeling of how strong his different skills and freeform magic were before he got Arcane Supremacy.

Anyway, after a few more tests with both stable and destructive arcane mana using freeform magic, he concluded that both had undergone significant improvements. Summoning speed had improved the least, as Jake was already pretty good at that before, but potency was where things had improved the most. For stable constructs, he had just gone over how much they improved, while for destructive energies, he summoned them about fifteen percent faster while the potency had gone up about twenty-five percent. So a bit less than the stable variant.

Due to Jake's high Perception, he had always been pretty fast at summoning magic, so he guessed the bonus to that and potency were actually pretty similar. He also had more practice with destructive arcane energies, so Jake guessed the "true" bonus to summoning and potency – not factoring in Jake's skill - was somewhere around twenty percent for both. In other words, this bonus made his arcane freeform magic twenty percent better under ideal circumstances while probably adding more under non-ideal circumstances.

Next up was the improvement seen with skills. That one proved to be a bit more tricky to determine. Skills already included system assistance when activating them, and while you could practice and get better, it wasn't as much as one could with freeform magic. This didn't mean that skills didn't benefit, though. Through a quick test, he noticed the charging speed of Arcane Powershot had gotten faster, and his ability to construct a Protean Arrow had definitely sped up.

Power-wise, he estimated the boost was a bit lower across the board and varied quite a bit based on the skill. Something like his Avaricious Arcane Arrows – the arrows he normally shot – were surprisingly enough nearly twenty-five percent better than before, while the power of Arcane Powershot was only improved by about ten percent. Well, okay, that wasn't entirely accurate, as his increased resistance also allowed him to now charge Arcane Powershot for longer and faster, resulting in that potentially being the skill that improved the most.

He also wanted to test Arcane Awakening but decided to wait with that, as he would rather see the effects in a real fight. Besides, he would probably piss off his party members if he decided to see how far he could push the skill while inside the in-between room, delaying their progress even more than necessary.

Finally, when it came to the increase in efficiency and reduced energy cost, Jake had to be honest and admit that part was by far the weakest aspect of the skill. It wasn't really that he spent less mana doing stuff. It was just that less was lost in transportation, meaning he would estimate a five to ten percent efficiency improvement at most across the board.

Now for the downsides of the upgrade.

Firstly, Jake tried to move some dark mana through his veins to form a bolt of dark mana... and it was like dragging sludge. The feeling of the pathways getting lubricated had turned from smoothing things out to now being a sticky substance that made everything harder.

Power, speed, and efficiency had all fallen even more than his arcane energy had improved. With a bit of worry, he tried to move curse energy next and found the same result. It was indeed a lot worse in every single way.

Trying again, Jake did the same test with dark mana, but this time sprinkled in a bit of stable arcane energy and found that the dark mana this time traveled through his body as if it was arcane energy. The bonus did seem slightly weaker, but it was there. Read complete version only at [novel-fire.net](#)

So merging other affinities or types of magic with arcane energy works. Great.

Having tested that, Jake finally decided to try a few Malefic Viper Legacy skills... something he had been dreading. He hoped they wouldn't have been impacted too badly and began by summoning Scales and Wings. Both appeared and...

Nothing.

It felt the exact same as before, with the cost and effectiveness both utterly unaffected. Confused as hell, he pulled out Eternal Hunger and infused it with venom from Fang... and once more, everything was the same. He kept trying, wondering what was going on, until a rush of realization hit him.

Villy you glorious bastard, Jake grinned widely.

Arcane Supremacy worked on combat skills and freeform magic.

All of the Legacy skills were technically not combat-related skills. Sure, they were used in combat, but they all had Origins in something alchemy-related, resulting in them not being considered combat skills by the system. Truly, Vily was truly a goddamn scammer.

Wait, does that mean...

Jake tried his new skill to summon Curse Fragments right then and there. He felt the curse energy move through his pathways, as he felt it was utterly unaffected. It was like the "lubricating" effect didn't impact it at all. It wasn't a combat skill, after all. This also meant that the arcane parts of the skill didn't receive any benefits from Arcane Supremacy.

Next, he took out his cauldron and tried to use brew potion real quick, once more seeing it was unaffected. So that was a relief.

He kept trying a few more minor things but quickly reached a bit of an impasse. Any further testing he wanted would take too long or require real combat. That, or for him to at least not be locked in a small room where he couldn't make big explosions or fully charge an Arcane Powershot without blowing up someone.

Standing up, Jake stretched. "Alright, gang, done testing and ready to go."

It was time to experiment and get some floors done. Oh, and probably have some more multiversal lessons imparted to them.

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Chapter 731: Nevermore: Two More Lessons Learned

Jake had a lot he wanted to test on the next floor, but sadly, he wasn't really able to. At least not right away.

The forty-third floor was indeed another "lesson" from the Wyrmgod, but this one wasn't as much about any hard rules as it was about a norm and something that was generally frowned upon. It was a message that if they decided to act in a way that many wouldn't find acceptable, they could put themselves in a bad situation and make enemies unintentionally.

When they appeared on floor forty-three, they were on board a spaceship traveling toward a large asteroid belt, where each asteroid may as well have been a small planet. The story was that they were mercenaries in a vessel stranded in space after a battle with space pirates – yes, there were pirates on this floor again – and during this fight, the ship had gotten damaged.

Their job was to scour this asteroid belt for natural treasures that could be used to repair the ship, but after they arrived, they discovered that dangerous wanted people were also hiding out on these asteroids among the natives.

To further complicate things, these planets were filled to the brim with people of all sorts of races. Tens, if not hundreds of Billions of humans, beastfolk, demons, monsters, elves, dwarves... all sorts of races lived on these asteroids. The most powerful of which was only in D-grade. Outside of the criminals, that is, all of whom were firmly in C-grade.

Calling them criminals was honestly a bit... wrong? They were people who had pissed off major factions in a myriad of ways, some of which Jake deemed legitimate, others he found bullshit. For example, one of the criminals had purposefully created cursed weapons and armor and spread them to unsuspecting people, driving them insane and wiping out a huge kingdom by proxy. That guy was clearly an asshole, and Jake was all fine with stomping him.

However, there were also cases where the big bad criminal had done some rather basic stuff, just to the wrong people. One of them had killed someone with a Divine Blessing

in self-defense and was now marked a heretic to be hunted down and killed on sight, and another had taken and consumed a natural treasure some kingdom totally had their eyes on first.

Now, this is where a bit of important context should be added... the spaceship wasn't really one made for C-grades. In fact, the one controlling it was a mid-tier B-grade automata that had merged itself with the ship and, despite being damaged, could still harness the full weapons system of the ship.

This is to say, it had the ability to blow up smaller planets, or at least these asteroids.

The B-grade automata captain decided instantly that they should also investigate and eliminate the criminals, along with retrieving the items needed to repair the ship. Luckily they didn't have to fully search the asteroids as the ship had a mobile scanner they could bring with them when going down on each asteroid.

So, to fully summarize, Jake and company had the job of investigating the asteroids for treasures to repair the ship using a scanner while at the same time identifying the C-grade criminals hidden there and eliminating them all. Locating these criminals was the hard part, and all they had to do to beat the floor was collect the treasures, and figuring out if a planet had any treasures wouldn't take more than a few days for each.

Once it was decided there were no treasures, they could then decide to go back to the ship... and, to "optimize" their points per day, do a little bit of lying by telling the automata that the asteroid was filled with really bad criminals and to blow it up. That way, they could kill all the criminals there without bothering to find each one individually, only at the sacrifice of a few billion F, E, and D-grades.

This was one part of the moral lesson. Because while it was made clear that this was an option, it was also made clear this could be frowned upon. Killing billions to just take out a handful of potential targets wasn't something any laws directly prohibited, but doing so wasn't exactly looked kindly on either.

Not to say that actually eliminating the criminals on the asteroids was simple if one wanted to avoid collateral damage, even after they had identified them. A genius-level C-grade and a mid-tier C-grade fighting could wreak a lot of damage, something Jake had been a witness to during his visions of the Malefic Viper, so deciding to kill them also had to be done with caution to avoid widespread destruction.

The reason why wholesale slaughter of the "weak" was so frowned upon wasn't entirely due to some altruistic intent from the multiverse's major factions. Sure, there probably was a bit of moral thinking in there somewhere, but one of the predominant reasons was the fear of setting a precedent.

If one faction decided to send a group of C-grades to destroy a few small planets belonging to a major faction, chances are the faction would retaliate in kind but with

more force to not appear weak. So they would send a few B-grades and blow up even more planets... only for the first faction to then send A-grades before finally a bunch of gods are going around wiping out all life in galaxies. This kind of “war” would have no end and only lead to the ruination of a faction’s future.

No, it was instead far more accepted to just send the first group of C-grades after another group of C-grades. Then they could fight, and the only “fair” retaliation would be something similar, making it far less of a slaughter and more like a competition. It also meant that the higher-ups wouldn’t move, as that would ultimately make them look like the true aggressors by escalating the conflict.

This was also viewed as safer. In Villy’s words, most gods or even just very high-grade people were fucking cowards. They didn’t dare to fight others around their own level of power but instead preferred to settle matters through proxies. Rather than two gods fighting, they would rather compete in some other fashion, like setting up a tournament with A-grades or a war with C-grades, all while setting rules to make it a “fair” fight. This did also have the benefit of assisting the people made to take part in these competitions, effectively cultivating the next generation.

Killing a random planet of D-grades could also have other unwanted implications. Karma was a powerful thing, and no one knew if some random A-grade had once been born there or maybe some god had recently just come by and liked the place a lot a few millennia earlier, and your decision to blow it up annoyed them.

The spaceship had records of some such incidents that they could freely listen to while traveling between asteroids. One of the examples that struck Jake was about a late-tier god who had arrived on a planet and really liked a certain lake. He had settled down there for a long time and meditated, finally breaking free from his worries which allowed him to pass the final step and become a Godking. Two thousand years later, two S-grades were fighting and ended up accidentally destroying the planet, resulting in the Godking descending in the middle of the fight to destroy both of them for their transgression. He had then proceeded to wipe out both factions the S-grades were leaders of for good measure to quell his anger.

All because they had ruined a nice lakeside view. This update is available on *novel•fire•net*

To summarize, killing innocent people shouldn’t be done haphazardly, or you could piss someone off unintentionally. That, and it was just a bad look.

Anyway, when doing the floor, they didn’t blow up any asteroids. No, they were more than overpowered enough by themselves to utterly cheese the floors. Jake had his wonderful Pulse of Perception and a powerful innate Bloodline-powered ability to sense auras, allowing him to know if an asteroid had any C-grades pretty damn quickly after stepping foot on one.

Not that he was the most overpowered of them. You see, planets filled with enlightened beings and beasts were naturally full of life. Life meant plants. Plants meant Dina could also ask a damn forest that had existed for tens of thousands of years about stuff, and it would know, while sometimes even asking its friends, resulting in their fastest asteroid clearing – including getting a natural treasure – being less than half an hour.

This all resulted in them going through nearly a hundred and fifty asteroids with life on within only seven months, with the majority of the time spent flying between each of them. Jake got some good alchemy during this time and was gleefully experimenting with Curse Fragments whenever they had downtime. Sadly, there wasn't a single time he had to go all-out during the entire floor, as the one time they did find a small asteroid just filled with criminals, Jake and Dina had already been sent off to two other asteroids nearby. The Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint had thus been the only ones to experience proper combat as they spent a week or so killing all the leaders of some criminal gang that had taken over the asteroid while also retrieving the final item they needed to repair the ship and move on to the next floor.

Thus they pretty easily did floor forty-three while learning the lesson that going full murderhobo on a bunch of E and D-grades wasn't cool.

Onto floor forty-four, Jake honestly hadn't known what to expect. What more rules and norms were there?

Well, floor forty-four ended up feeling kind of... personal for Jake. For many of them, actually.

Because while floor forty-three was about how valued large groups of weaker people were and how one should leave them alone as a general rule, floor forty-four was all about individual creatures one should leave the hell alone.

They had appeared on what looked like a massive disc floating through space, filled with large islands spread all throughout. Both below the water, on the water, and floating up in the sky. Each island had its own little ecosystem and was covered by some kind of barrier keeping all the creatures inside. New monster variants had begun appearing within these domes, with their job to pass on to the next floor being to find and identify at least two hundred and fifty variants worth noting.

Information was pretty scarce, but the one that tasked them with this quest was an old woman living in a hut who Identified as a level 250 Researcher but, based on Jake's senses, was actually far more powerful than that. Not quite a god, but definitely A-grade. None of the others could notice this, though Sylphie did talk about how the wind avoided her, which made her think something was wrong.

Anyway, they were to find these rare variants and then categorize where they were while not directly engaging them in combat. The lesson from the Researcher was that all variants were of value to the multiverse as they represented new and growing

Records. A single powerful variant appearing on a planet – or a dome, in this case – could uplift the entire ecosystem and lead to a cascade effect.

It was a bit like what happened with Earth, partly because of Jake. So many powerful people appearing there resulted in massive growth potential even for the average Earthling. People who could never reach C-grade before had not set foot in the grade, and then those who likely could have gotten there themselves now had far better evolutions and future prospects.

Variants appearing also mattered to many factions due to the potential of allying with them. Two beasts of a similar species but different variants having a child would lead to a merge of their Records, and sometimes a more powerful variant than both of them would emerge. Adding new variants thus mattered a lot to some factions, even to the gods. This was naturally something Jake was very well aware of, considering his status as a so-called “Harbinger of Primeval Origins.”

On that note, no, Jake didn’t even consider for a second trying to get extra points or achievements by making a variant on floor forty-four. The Primal Juice or whatever was far too valuable and not something to squirt out haphazardly.

Anyway, all of this is to say that a lot of factions would get royally pissed if someone went around killing weak variants for no reason. It was generally considered customary that if you, as a C-grade, saw a lower-grade variant running around, you would leave it alone. If you did want to get rid of it, one could always just send someone around their own level, at least allowing the person who kills it to get something out of the entire thing.

So, the entire floor was basically flying between massive domes all over ten thousand kilometers in diameter and categorizing variants and taking notes, with the Researcher then deciding if the observed beast or monster was considered rare enough to count.

Well, that, or just killing them outright, no matter their grade.

Because the lesson of this floor wasn’t just to respect variants and the Records they represented but to be aware that some creature variants were to be killed on sight. These types of creatures were often what was considered living calamities.

Curse Remnants.

Plague Spirits.

And, one Jake truly did agree with was a menace to the entire multiverse: Fungi.

Or, well, not necessarily just fungi or all kinds of fungi. In general, plant-based living creatures with Truesouls weren’t really that special. The tree Jake had met in the center of the forest close to Haven was a common example of a plant monster, and so was the

fungi Jake had seen below Haven. But one of them was viewed far less favorably than the others.

Fungi that could infect other plant life were often seen as a pest akin to an ectognamorph hive but were not really viewed as calamities. But some variants that didn't just absorb energy from and control plant life could appear. Some evolved to be able to control any form of life or just anything with a soul or energy. These fungi or plants could evolve to take over entire planets, creating massive bodies out of them. From there, they would then spread and try to consume other planets one after another until they were killed or died due to age.

These plant and fungi monsters weren't that much different in that fashion from the aforementioned ectognamorphs, but there was one big difference: sapience. A hive could be talked to. Negotiated with. They could join a faction. These plants nearly never had any true intelligence, not even when reaching S-grade. It was only if they somehow managed to become gods that they would truly awaken.

Plague Spirits and such were much the same in that they only had an instinct. Curse Remnants also only existed to do whatever the curse was about, which was rarely something pleasant.

The final kind of creature one was meant to at least consider killing on sight was one familiar to Jake. It was monsters that had lost themselves and had become living killing machines that destroyed anything they came across without a care in the world.

Prime example? C and especially B-grade Villy. He had been a bloody menace back then, wiping out all life on his own birth planet, and then proceeded to slaughter whatever else he came across. Based on what Jake had seen, this was only in late-tier C-grade for Villy, though. Jake was unsure what exactly happened between the Villy he saw being crafty with the First Sage and fooling human kingdoms, to the Villy that sat in wyvern form on top of a cliff, roaring toward the sky. B-grade Villy was bad all the way through; no two ways about it.

Naturally, no powerful A or S-grade had killed Villy during his rise to power, and Jake was thankful for that. As for now... no one would even talk negatively about this. This was a great example of why these weren't really hard rules. Though, to be fair, there weren't truly any hard rules in the multiverse.

Plagues were not looked nicely upon, and some types were viewed as outlawed, yet Jake knew the Order still worked on them. One was not meant to mess with random weak people, yet Eversmile still did experiments that doomed entire civilizations without a care in the world, while Stormild could casually consume an entire galaxy indiscriminately. Yet none looked at the Primordials and called them criminals. These were ultimately just outlines of what one could expect to piss off other factions by doing, but as long as you had the backing or the power, it didn't truly matter. Shit, based on

some of the things mentioned, Jake and Eternal Hunger broke quite a few norms and rules.

Back to floor forty-four, this one wasn't hard either but was all about exploration like the prior floor while having the Researcher tell them about how important rare variants were to the balance of the multiverse. This one was better, though, as there was a bit more combat, and they didn't have to rely on a spaceship to take them around, allowing them to beat the floor in "just" five months. Pretty good for these larger floors.

After reporting on variants one final time, the Researcher summoned a portal as "new assistants were arriving shortly to replace them" while thanking them for their contribution. Another floor down.

Floors forty-three and forty-four had both been pretty simple and not that difficult, with them even raking up plenty of bonus points by doing things fast and well. Things had been pretty straightforward, and they had done as expected of them with great results. However, the final one of these "laws and norms" floors, as Jake dubbed them, would prove to be a bit more... complicated. Because this one was all about a rule in the multiverse Jake was really, *really* bad at:

Respecting divine authority.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 732: Nevermore: To Respect Divine Authority

Another in-between room, another small break before it was on to floor forty-five.

Over a year had passed since Jake had gotten his Arcane Supremacy skill, and throughout this time, he had time to thoroughly familiarize himself with the skill. He had time to relearn some things about his own body and truly discover how massive the bonus from the skill had been, despite the less-than-optimal setup of the floors he had been through.

The two skills that benefitted the most turned out to be Arcane Awakening, which wasn't overly surprising, but he was a bit surprised at Arcane Powershot being the second skill that got the most out of the upgrade. Pure arcane magic benefitted the most, but something like Arcane Powershot dipped into several concepts along with the purely physical aspects.

Arcane Awakening, on the other hand, dipped into all of the benefits provided by Arcane Supremacy. The lowered cost naturally made the skill more efficient, and the increased potency materialized in Jake just having to move less energy through his body to achieve the same effect as before, thus also lessening the strain on his body and increasing the time he could keep the skill active.

Adding on his increased resistance to his own arcane energy, the benefit was massive. He could now keep the stable 30% boost active nearly indefinitely without suffering much strain on his body, while the offensive and defensive modes were also pretty easy to deal with. He wouldn't even suffer any period of weakness from just using these two anymore as long as he didn't use them for a prolonged period.

A full Arcane Awakening boosting all his stats by 60% still took a lot out of him, and getting around the period of weakness wasn't going to happen. It wasn't as bad as before, though, and he could keep the full boost active for longer, with especially the health drain reduced significantly. The passive shield and the extra arcane damage with every attack had naturally also both been improved.

Arcane Awakening still didn't allow him to boost above the percentages set by the skill without him deciding to purposefully push it higher, which was something he hadn't dared to do, lest he would blow himself up. Even if Arcane Supremacy had given him more control over his energies, he still doubted he would get out of doing that unscathed, assuming he survived it at all. But... the potential for doing so was definitely there. Circumstances would decide if he would ever do it.

The second skill that experienced massive benefits was, as mentioned, Arcane Powershot, and some of the benefits were for quite obvious reasons. He could charge it for longer due to his increased resistance, do it faster due to increased control, and release far more potent shots due to everything put together. As the skill wasn't only about arcane energy, it "only" got around thirty percent better in total... but adding thirty-percent extra power to his most reliable attack? Yeah, that was massive.

However... Jake did find one skill that got worse, and Jake had no idea how to fix it. One Step had been hit with the increased resource cost quite hard, which was a real bummer as he, quite frankly, had no bloody idea how to integrate his arcane energy into that skill. It was a well-defined Legacy skill, so even if he wanted an upgrade, it definitely wasn't going to be easy. Shit, if he broke the set upgrade path, it would only get harder to upgrade it in the future... so as things were now, this was just a loss he would have to live with. It wasn't all bad, though.

UPDATE FROM **novel•fire•net**

The one good thing was that the increased stamina cost was only a thing in combat. When Jake used it just as a skill to travel, the cost remained unaffected, which he assumed was due to the skill being originally invented as a traveling skill, not a combat skill. He was also very happy that the system distinguished when a skill was used in combat and not in combat wasn't being applied to the Malefic Viper Legacy skills.

Oh, and there had been one other skill that had been negatively affected... though that hadn't been for long. Jake was naturally talking about Splitting Arrow Rain, which he pretty damn quickly got upgraded with inspiration from his skill selection.

[Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be split to create a far more potent arrow rain. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Wisdom when using Splitting Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an arrow rain.

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[Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)] – A skill most often used by archers, now usurped and reformed by the Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge. Allows you to clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties. Each arrow has variable strength and can be further split into less potent versions. If the original arrow is shot upwards, you can explode hundreds of smaller arrows, creating an Arcane Arrow Rain. Cloning arcane arrows or creating Arcane Arrow Rains using arcane arrows has a far lower mana and stamina cost. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Wisdom when using Arcane Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an Arcane Arrow Rain.

The skill honestly just integrated what he could get from the better Arrow Rain in the skill selection. It now used arcane energy, allowing him to clone arrows cheaper while also adding on the part where he exploded an arrow to make it rain. That was definitely better than what he did before, where he just shot upward and waited for the arrow to begin falling downward on its own.

He also finally got working on some curse-based poison, but it proved a lot more difficult than he had thought it would, so progress was slow in that department. Overall, things felt pretty slow, considering that even after two more floors, Jake had barely gotten any levels.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 232]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 232]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 233]

2 class levels and 3 profession levels were all a bit over a year, and two floors amounted to. By now, Jake had to get used to slower levels unless he did something truly impressive. He kind of wished he could do a Minaga fight every floor, but alas, that wasn't how Nevermore worked. Or anything worked, really.

How it did work was by throwing them on another floor meant to teach them a lesson. And the old man already had a good guess of what the last "lesson" floor would be about before they entered it.

"It will be related to gods and religion in some way," the Sword Saint said with certainty as they were about to exit the in-between room.

"That... can either go very well or really badly," Jake muttered. "Assuming you are right, that is."

He was right.

Stepping through the gateway, they appeared standing in the middle of a town square in what seemed to be the middle of the night. The place was pretty damn deserted, with many old medieval-looking buildings surrounding them. The only place with bustling activity was a massive church at the end of the square, and through a quick Pulse, Jake saw the place was jam-packed. Tens of thousands were within, praying.

Fuck me, Jake cursed as the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the forty-fifth floor of Nevermore: Peerin Kingdom of the Starcross Pantheon

You have stepped onto a planet owned by the Peerin Kingdom of the Starcross Pantheon, a powerful Pantheon ruled by over a dozen gods. The kingdom you have appeared in has been derelict for a long time, with no hopeful prospects appearing for over a thousand years, making it fall out of favor with the Pantheon.

As newcomers, you are unknown entities to the planet and must establish yourselves. Gain favor and recognition to gain access to the features of the kingdom as you aim to leave the floor and proceed to the next. Luckily, you have a token that will allow you to teleport to the next floor. There is just one problem.

The entirety of Peerin Kingdom falls within the protective formation laid down by the Starcross Pantheon, blocking all kinds of teleportation that takes one outside of it. The only way off the floor is by leaving this formation first. You must navigate the kingdom and reach the waygate station at the edge of the kingdom, which will allow you to fully leave the Starcross Pantheon's territory and, thus, the floor through the use of the token.

However, these teleportation circles are not available to the public and require permission to use. With B and even A-grades present in the kingdom, trying to force your way through seems ill-advised.

No matter how you wish to approach this, getting the attention of the clergy will be vital to your mission, as they can either help or hinder you on your path. For they control the entire kingdom.

Main objective: Use the teleportation token to proceed to the next floor.

Bonus objectives: Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom (0/1)

Current progress: Token used (0/1), Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 102.073

Right as Jake scanned the message, an odd emblem teleported right between the five of them. It didn't take a genius to figure out this was the teleportation token, and Dina instantly grabbed it, being the designated "taker of mandatory items."

"So..." Jake muttered as he scratched the back of his head.

"Firstly, we need to ensure the little hunter doesn't instantly anger the clergy and get us all killed," the Fallen King said.

"Seems like a good start. Sylphie should also be careful," the Sword Saint smiled, getting an annoyed screech from the hawk. "Dina, would it be best if the two of us took the lead? I am sure you have plenty of experience with how one is supposed to act around religious figures, while I myself have had some unpleasant experiences with a certain god and am fully aware of how... demanding people of worship can be."

Dina thought for a second before speaking. "Do we care about the bonus objectives here much? Or would it not be better to move on as fast as possible?"

A total no-brainer.

"Swift progress is preferred."

"Ree."

"Better to finish it quickly," the old man said, unsure what she was getting at.

Jake was a bit slower at answering before he understood. "I take it you also wanna just move on quickly?"

"Yes," Dina said. "That should be more efficient."

It was a bit absurd, but these last four floors since the Minaga fight had nearly doubled their total points. Jake and company had known that points would increase as one got further in Nevermore, but they hadn't expected every single floor after floor forty to give over 10.000 Nevermore Points each. Especially not considering that they didn't even go insanely out of their way to do all the bonus objectives and achievements they could. But... just the huge floor clear bonus being more than four thousand for each floor meant the gains were massive.

So if they could pass the floor quickly and get 4500 Nevermore Points, that would likely give the best overall gain. Later floors just gave that many more points.

"I assume you have already felt it up ahead?" Dina continued. "There are many blessed inside... so I think it is worth a try."

The Fallen King and Sword Saint also seemed to realize what the two of them were getting at, and the old man chuckled. "Sure, give it a go... if the floor blocks others from feeling Blessings, we can just do it the usual way."

"And if they can feel Blessings?" Jake grinned.

"May the young master have whatever he pleases," the Sword Saint said cheekily.

"Roger that," Jake said as he stepped toward the church ahead with the others in tow. They had to walk up nearly fifty steps to reach the giant closed double door leading into the church proper, but about halfway up, Jake let it rip.

An aura blasted out of his body as Shroud of the Primordial entirely fell away, and he purposefully amplified his presence. It spread out of him... and less than a second later, the giant double doors slammed open, someone inside having felt Jake.

Felt his presence.

A priest flanked by two paladins appeared, standing at the top of the steps only a few seconds later, staring down at Jake and the three with him in confusion.

[Starcross Priest – lvl 280]

[Starcross Paladin – lvl 285]

[Starcross Paladin – lvl 282]

"I... who are yo-"

"Call your god down here," Jake interrupted the guy.

"What?" the priest said, looking confused before suddenly turning angry. "How dare yo-"

"I wasn't asking," Jake said as he flared his aura even more, mixing in Pride of the Malefic Viper to further amplify it.

"And unless you want to create trouble for the Starcross Pantheon by ignoring the Chosen of a Primordial, I would very much comply," the Sword Saint added in, also tossing in a bit of his own aura as someone with a Divine Blessing from another Primordial.

Dina and Sylphie also joined in as the priest stared, clearly unsure how to react. The two paladins moved forward in a defensive manner as Jake just sighed.

Very well... full Young Master mode engaged.

"I gave you a fucking order, so stop standing there like a moron and contact your god," Jake scoffed. "Or are you some damn heretic? Is that why this pathetic kingdom has fallen into shambles?"

Jake wasn't sure what more he could say as they discovered that the priest had indeed contacted someone. An aura appeared toward the back of the large church, and a second later, a figure teleported out to stand between Jake and the priest. Instantly Jake was aware... *A-grade.*

But, he was in young master mode.

"What is going on he-"

"Fucking finally," Jake sighed loudly. "Hey, you, are you as useless as this priest, or can you get your shit together and contact that Pantheon of yours already? I haven't got all day."

The A-grade looked at him and the four with him for a moment before suddenly falling to his knees. "I greet the Chosen."

Alright, seems like we are getting somewhere.

"Yeah, yeah, just contact the Pantheon. I would prefer to converse with someone possessing a worthy status."

“Naturally,” the A-grade said as he put his hands together. His body glowed with divine light for a moment before he stood, still keeping his back bowed. “They will arrive shortly. I apologize for the disrespect and will make sure to right any injustices.”

The priest and paladins looked pretty damn frightened by now, but before they could do anything, the A-grade pointed at them as a beam shot into them, making them freeze and fall to the ground. “I shall remove these heretics from your sight at once.”

Jake thought he was overdoing it a little... but he was in young master mode. Still, he felt bad if they got punished for something he did.

“You only got yourself to blame for not properly teaching your clergy about proper procedures if they should ever meet the Chosen of a Primordial,” Jake scoffed. “Now begone. You have done as I asked and you are no longer of any use or concern.”

The A-grade didn’t even speak but bowed deeply once more before teleported away with the priest and paladins.

“That went well?” the Sword Saint asked through the mark.

“I think so, let’s just ho-“

Before Jake could even answer, a presence washed over the entire town. It utterly suppressed anything, and Jake felt everything warp. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a flickering torch suddenly slow down its flickering as it stopped entirely. The feeling reminded him of the Tutorial when Eversmile stopped time... because that is exactly what had happened.

Two figures appeared in the air, floating above them. It was a man and a woman, both with blueish skin and eyes reminding Jake of a starlit sky. They looked nearly identical, except for the difference in gender, though both were rather androgynous.

“What era are we in?” the male god asked as his eyes landed on Jake. “The Chosen of the Malefic Viper... never did I think I would see the day a new one would appear.”

“Ninety-third era,” Jake answered. “Not long since the integration, considering I am a Progenitor along with being a Chosen.”

“Truly? How surprising, but not a thoroughly unpleasant piece of news,” the male god nodded.

“Quite the party, too,” the woman spoke. “A Unique Lifeform, a relative of the Nature’s Attendant, and two individuals carrying the Divine Blessings of Stormild and Aeon.”

“The one blessed by Aeon is also a Transcendent,” the male god smiled.

“Oh my,” the female god said in an impressed tone.

Both gods had floated down by now and landed in front of Jake and the others. Once more, the Sword Saint, Dina, and Fallen King felt the pressure, while Jake stood unaffected, Sylphie perched on his shoulder unbothered.

“Entirely immune to the auras of gods?” the male god said, looking even more at Jake. “I am curious, but asking wouldn’t do me any good.”

“Yeah, images in Nevermore and all that,” Jake nodded.

“Indeed it is so,” the god smiled. “I am glad to see that the Malefic One has returned to the multiverse, and you must give him our greetings once you are done in Nevermore. Just say the Starcrossed Twins send their regards.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Jake nodded. Yeah, not gonna lie; chances are he was going to forget that.

“Now, let’s get on with why we are here. This floor was made to teach the masses to respect divine authority, and... hm, there is no need to explain, now is there? As the Chosen, you are a living symbol of a Primordial's divine authority,” the female god began before giggling. “We shall not hold you more. Ah, but do take this.”

She tossed a small coin to Jake, which he instantly caught.

“If you ever feel like visiting the Starcross Pantheon’s territory in the true multiverse, you would be more than welcome, and that token should help you,” she said with a smile. “Now, let’s get this silly barrier down.”

She reached out and took the hand of the male god as both glowed with starlight for a second. She then let go and looked at Jake and the others. “We wish you godspeed on your continued descent of Nevermore.”

“Thanks. From all of us,” Jake smiled as he looked at Dina, who took out the teleportation token.

Floor forty-five?

Easiest floor of his life.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 733: Nevermore: Definitely Balanced

“Okay, not gonna lie, that was kind of hilarious,” Minaga chuckled after seeing Jake pass floor forty-five so easily. “Really just tossed his weight around and got all those poor suckers to get him out of there right away. They didn’t show it, but those Starcrossed Twins were pretty damn submissive compared to how they usually are.”

“I am surprised you got those two in here for such a floor,” Vilastromoz said with genuine confusion. “Any god would do, so why have two gods as old and powerful as them? That can’t have been easy.”

The Wyrmgod was silent as he just sighed. “I had my reasons.”

Minaga raised a hand. “I know the reasons.”

Vilastromoz smiled and looked at the Wyrmgod, who reluctantly explained. “The origin of the images of mortals don’t truly matter that much as before any of them are ever used, the mortal will more than likely already be dead. Things are different for gods. While nothing that happens to the image affects them, and they never become aware of any interactions these images had, there can still be consequences. For the gods, that is.”

The Viper suddenly understood as he nodded while the Wyrmgod kept explaining. A bit needlessly, but the old dragon did like to talk about his work when given the chance.

“There was an incidence a few eras ago where the image of a god thoroughly pissed off a Chosen belonging to the Altmar Empire, to the point of just airing out his grievances that had arisen due to prior conflicts that the Altmar Empire thought they were over. While the god wasn’t able to hinder the Nevermore participant – or even made any attempts to - the Chosen still left deeply offended, and it turned into quite a situation. This resulted in all the images of gods from the Nevermore of the next era being far too... meek. Any time a Chosen or even someone with a Divine Blessing from a powerful god appeared, they would capitulate and pop in to help them right away with the hope of forming a good relationship with the young influential C-grades and allowing them to effectively skip the floor. Needless to say, this went directly against the purpose of the floor.”

“So he thought up a great solution,” Minaga grinned.

“The thought process was to put gods here that wouldn’t feel the need to try to gain favor with even the Chosens of high-level gods but would treat them like any other regular Nevermore participant. The Starcrossed Twins are part of a powerful alliance already and are not people even pinnacle factions would create trouble with, meaning

they didn't have to act courteously and respect the status of any C-grades," the Wyrmgod said in a rather annoyed tone.

"Yeah, brilliant thinking, and it worked out perfectly," Minaga said, holding back a giggle. "Poor Jake had a horrible time in there."

"The reappearance of the Malefic Viper and the fact he chose to have a C-grade Chosen were unexpected factors, and I cannot blame them for making an exception. Also, it wasn't as if I viewed it as an impossible outcome, seeing as I had already created an achievement for the feat," the Wyrmgod finished, as he didn't seem interested in discussing the floor more.

"It's a shame, though. Pretty sure that of everyone doing Nevermore, Jake is the one who needs to learn how to respect divine authority the most," Minaga grumbled a bit, clearly not as happy with just dropping the topic as the Wyrmgod.

"Or, have you considered this: he is the only one showing the proper level of reverence towards other gods as my Chosen? My Chosen being all subservient in front of other gods would be a bad look, you know? I never really thought about it before, but having a Chosen that isn't naturally suppressed is quite nice," the Viper countered.

"You know, the way you phrased that makes it sound like he is subservient only to you as his Patron," Minaga said. "And I somehow have a hard time believing that."

"Oh, he is showing plenty of reverence. Jake is just the kind of guy that is all about action and not petty words or platitudes," Vilastromoz smiled. "I just view it as every level he gains and every feat he accomplishes it partly in my name."

"If that helps you meditate in peace," Minaga said skeptically.

"His relatively selfish actions make me question that claim... though I reckon that if he proceeds on his Path as things are now, he will be a good return on investment simply due to the Records he obtains," the Wyrmgod added. "Perhaps I should get a Chosen myself, though finding a good prospect is quite difficult."

Vilastromoz nodded but didn't elaborate. It was tempting to reveal that he had already gotten his return on investment simply through Jake's action of consciously creating the Vespernat Hive Queen. That feat had even led to a cascade effect of Records from all his prior creations.

"Finding a good Chosen can indeed be a struggle, but if I find someone worth referring to you, I will let you know," Vilastromoz said to his fellow Primordial. "If not, then at least someone to give a Divine Blessing."

"Perhaps," the Wyrmgod said with little commitment. "I wonder, will your Chosen be capable of influencing the birth of another creature like the Vespernat Hive Queen any

time soon? Assuming it is indeed a replicable act. That seems like a potential avenue to secure a good prospect.”

“I can’t answer that. You will have to ask Jake directly. I already told you and everyone else that the ability belongs to him and not me,” the Viper shook his head. “And I am a snake of my word.”

The Wyrmgod looked to be in for thought for a moment before simply nodding. “If that is how you wish to do things, fine. I am beginning to understand you have adopted an unconventional relationship with your Chosen and will not interfere in whatever you are planning.”

“Who says I am planning anything?” the Malefic Viper smiled.

Minaga and Wyrmgod just looked at him for a while before Minaga shrugged. “Yeah, true, you are the straightest of straightest shooters, never done anything shady or had any underhanded plots or plans. Anyway, I sure hope you make it out of your conflict with Yip of Yore because if you don’t have a plan, things are looking bleak.”

“Who knows?” Vilastromoz smiled without answering.

“You do, and I wanna know,” Minaga tried to insist.

“It is not odd to want things you cannot have. In fact, isn’t that what brought us all to godhood? Trying to obtain the impossible,” the Viper kept avoiding answering with an amused smile.

“Well, I am the curious sort, you know that. And I like to try and figure out things on my own when people aren’t telling me the whole truth,” Minaga smiled in response, making Vilastromoz have a bad premonition. “Which reminds me. That Vesperia lady is real nice, though I can’t quite see the resemblance between her and her dad... oh, sorry, I meant Sire.”

And this was why catching the curiosity of a god with a legion of clones, insatiable curiosity, and limitless time could be problematic.

Vesperia felt the strain on your soul as she knew she had reached her limit when it came to absorbing energy from the Hive Core. Absorbing the energies and Records of old was far from easy, and the strain on her was substantial. However, she had already exceeded all expectations and gotten further than any of her sisters had ever predicted she would. It had only taken her a few months, and yet she still wasn’t fully satiated.

Opening her eyes, the lights on the diadem on her head shone with golden lights as she had once more reached a new threshold. She felt the power rushing through her body, knowing she had finally stepped into mid-tier C-grade. Opening her status, she saw that was indeed the case.

Status

Name: Vesperia

Race: [Vespernat Hive Queen – lvl 252]

Health Points (HP): 409000/409000

Mana Points (MP): 59842/60850

Stamina: 95743/100600

Hive Energy: 24600/25200 The source of this content is [novel~fire~net](#)

Her health had grown more than before, naturally empowered by her racial skills. She knew that humans were simple and only got ten mana per Wisdom or ten health per Vitality, but monsters weren't like that. There were too many passives to easily compare, and her health pool which would be considered ludicrous by the standards of enlightened species was only regarded as high and not even top-tier amongst monsters.

When it came to Hive Energy, she had barely used any. It was not a resource one spent like normal and then replenished, but every point spent was a point lost unless the being you spent it on disappeared. Vesperia herself had only made some eggs so far while familiarizing herself with her innate power.

As she was sitting there getting her bearings fully, she got a notification informing her she had a visitor.

The chambers she had been given were on a planet only slightly smaller than the planet her Sire had been born on, and it was a nice place to do some experiments while still in C-grade. The entire place was also enforced with the protective formations of more than a dozen True Royals having ascended above the rank of Godqueen and was placed in the very heartlands of the Endless Empire.

This piece of information was important... because when she checked the projection of who had come to visit, she saw the Odonstrom Hive Queen together with an odd creature she didn't quite recognize. It looked humanoid but had four eyes and blue skin. Based on how they stood together, Vesperia assumed he was a god, and seeing no reason to reject them, she welcomed them inside. She also knew that any being that could walk into the heartlands of the Endless Empire like this was someone Vesperia had to vary of.

A second later, both figures teleported into the welcome hall that had already been set up a long time ago by the other Ectognamorphs that served her.

"I apologize for the sudden visit, sister," the Odonstrom True Royal smiled.

"Hey-o, I'm Minaga. Nice to meet you!" the blue four-eyed god smiled.

Vesperia was a bit taken aback by the god's greeting, especially considering her fellow True Royal didn't even react. Instead, she sent her a telepathic message.

"Sister, I must warn you. This Minaga is no simple figure but is a being known as the All-God Legion. He was originally a Unique Lifeform with the ability to perfectly clone himself, and he kept this ability even in godhood. Making him an enemy would be ill-advised and not just for you personally but the entire Endless Empire. Thread with caution and try to not anger him. He is known to be highly unpredictable, and he insisted on meeting you," Odonstrom warned Vesperia.

"I am not aware of this Minaga figure, but I shall heed your words. Any idea why he wanted to see me?" Vesperia answered telepathically.

"Likely related to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but he never answered directly," her fellow True Royal answered.

"Hey, while I know telepathy is pretty fast, it is still pretty obvious you two are talking secretly behind my back, which is honestly quite hurtful," the Unique Lifeform known as the All-God Legion complained.

"I apologize; I was merely not aware of your identity," Vesperia apologized with a bow. "I am Vesperia, also known as the sole True Royal of the Vespernat Lineage."

"Yep, I heard. Quite the happening to have a True Royal reappear like that," Minaga nodded as he studied her closely for a few seconds before scratching his cheek. "Hard to see the resemblance."

"Pardon?" Vesperia asked, confused.

"With Jake. Well, I guess you maybe have kind of the same eyes? No, not really... hm..." Minaga said, stretching his neck to look at her from other angles. "Ah, never mind... I found it."

The powerful aura of a god descended upon the hall. Vesperia frowned but remained standing like normal as Minaga grinned from ear to ear. "There we have it indeed."

"May I ask why you thought such tests were necessary? And how are you related to my Sire? As far as I am aware, he is at Nevermore," Vesperia said, very unsure of what this odd god wanted.

"Oh yeah, he is in there right now. Can't say more than that, as I am not allowed to give out information like that, and that old grouchy dragon would probably toss me out of his

dungeon if I broke that rule, so definitely not worth it. Ah, but I did talk to him quite a bit. Interesting chap, for sure,” Minaga nodded with a big grin.

“He is indeed a peculiar figure,” Vesperia nodded with a smile.

“Right?” Minaga said happily as he looked at the Odonstrom Hive Queen. “Would it be fine if I stick around in the area for a while? Just looking to make friends.”

“We would be happy to welcome you, Lord Minaga,” her fellow True Royal nodded, though Vesperia could see she wasn’t overly happy about it. Yet she also knew that should she say no, the god would likely just stay anyway.

“He does not strike me as that dangerous... just odd,” Vesperia sent to the Odonstrom True Royal.

“The All-God Legion has been evaluated to possess a threat level roughly equal to a Primordial. While each version of him may not reach the peaks of power, he is, as cliché as it sounds, legion. We are utterly incapable of ending him, and should he choose to make us an enemy, we would enter a war of attrition that would only end when he gets bored or we reach a truce... and he is known to be both petty and vindictive, making both of those unlikely.”

“And you guys were worried that floor was going to be a disaster,” Jake grinned as they wanted into the in-between room.

“Well, excuse me for not realizing you could just act like an entitled customer and get your way,” the Sword Saint said in jest.

“The most important thing is that it worked and was not even that high risk. If they couldn’t feel Blessings, we would just have done the floor normally,” Dina said. “And I think the loss of points on this floor is worth it to move on quickly as it seems to only be increasing.”

Jake was about to agree as they were flooded with notifications.

Bonus Objective Completed: Get the attention of the clergy of the Peerin Kingdom. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Forty-fifth floor completed. 4500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five by enlisting the help of the Starcrossed Twins to take down the grand barrier. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five within one week (7 days). 2500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five without killing a single member of the clergy. 1500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete floor forty-five without causing any damage to or breaking any divine laws of the Peerin Kingdom. 3000 Nevermore Points earned.

“You were saying?” Jake chuckled.

“That is...” the Sword Saint began.

“Ridiculously dumb.”

17000 Nevermore Points – the most of any floor thus far in Nevermore - from one floor that had taken them fifteen minutes to do.

Yeah, that was definitely balanced.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 734: Nevermore: "I Still Got It"

Nevermore was a place where the publicly available information was far from scarce, yet there were still some unknowns.

Nobody knew exactly how many floors there even were in the C-grade version – or those who did couldn't or wouldn't tell – meaning for most of the individuals fighting for spots on the Leaderboards, it was just assumed they would never hit a limit. At least not a limit of floors.

The only limit they would hit was the limit of their own abilities and the 50-year time limit. A time limit that many had tried to circumvent through the ages but was upheld by one simple design choice:

It just counted the age of your Truesoul using dungeon-fuckery.

This meant that should one enter Nevermore in C-grade, be in there for ten years, and then leave again, the time wouldn't stop ticking for the Leaderboard positions.

Now, this is where one truly had to separate the early C-grades that all entered below level 210 and aimed for positions on the Leaderboards and those who were simply in C-grade and did the mega-dungeon at whatever level or pace they so desired.

The people that aimed for the Leaderboards would do best if they spent all of their time within Nevermore, never leaving for fifty years. For the people that didn't care about the Leaderboards, they truly had no reason to stay the entire duration in one go.

It was also well-known that only the top few percent of the Leaderboards would get any rewards. This meant many gave up after realizing they were falling too far behind and just left Nevermore for a time to do something else.

The total time one could stay in Nevermore remained the same, but every second spent outside of the dungeon was a year wasted when it came to competing on the leaderboards. To those who didn't care, it didn't matter. They could be in Nevermore for ten years, leave for twenty, and then do the remaining forty years if they so desired.

If someone competing on the Leaderboards did that, they would do Nevermore for ten years, leave for twenty, and then once they came back, they would only have twenty more years to rack up Nevermore Points. After that, they would still have twenty more years to just do floors, gain levels, do Challenge Dungeons, and whatnot, but they would have already had their final Leaderboards evaluation.

One couldn't cheat with time dilation either, even if they wanted. You couldn't enter Nevermore, do ten years, and then leave for another ten years in Realtime, where you actually spent two-hundred years in a time chamber. The cut-off was based on your own personal time, not Realtime or Nevermore's time.

In many ways, the most important thing for those aiming for high spots on the Leaderboards was time. Optimizing time meant more floors could be done. Of course, in order to do more floors, one also needed the power to actually complete them, even as things would begin to get more dangerous. Naturally, the levels one gained doing the lower floors would also help one go further, meaning leveling speed was also considered semi-important.

However, one often-forgotten power on the scale of importance was the ability to cheese stuff. The ability to totally ruin how a floor was supposed to proceed to the advantage of the Nevermore attendees.

Jake's party was in a very unique situation, for they had everything. Especially the ability to cheese stuff, which they happily used whenever they could, and they were all eager to proceed after doing floor forty-five faster than any floor prior.

The city floor after floor forty-five was quite a bustling place, but Jake and company quickly moved through after checking the Leaderboards, where they saw they had once more lost the top spot but were only a few thousand points behind the point leader.

Proceeding to floor forty-six, they found themselves on yet another open-ended floor taking place on a large planet. However, this time there was no lesson to be found, and their job was as simple as could be: Slay the Four Beast Kings. Four powerful C-grade

beasts each ruled a part of the planet. To do this, they would choose to enlist the help of the large kingdom they initially spawned within, with a bonus objective given pushing them towards enlisting in the military and influencing them to mobilize and take down the Beast Kings.

This was the long solution.

Jake and company picked the fast one.

They split up into two groups, each headed toward a territory ruled by a Beast King. These territories were filled with countless beasts serving their king, and many powerful ones served as mini-bosses that aimed to impede them on their paths toward the lair of the Beast King. All four Beast Kings were apparently in the process of consuming powerful treasures that were the source of their powers and didn't wish to be disturbed.

They got disturbed.

Group one consisted of Dina, the Sword Saint, and Fallen King, while Sylphie and Jake acted as the second group. The power between the two groups turned out to be rather equal, and not just because of Jake, who was particularly well-suited against high-level beasts, but because of the little hawk with him. She was the highest-leveled one in their group, after all.

Besides, if Jake and Sylphie did end up needing help, Jake could always summon the Fallen King using his mask.

Ultimately, that didn't turn out to be necessary, at least not for the first Beast King.

After taking out a few annoying pests that tried to get in their way, they finally made it to the lair of the first Beast King on their list. Despite being the northern part of the planet, the place was a huge mud-filled swamp as far as the eye could see, and within a small crevice was what looked like a meteorite with a massive beast lying right next to it.

[Beast King of the North – lvl 290]

The Beast King looked a bit like a hippo but had six legs and parts of its body covered in scales. It was half-submerged in the swamp water, with only the back above the surface, forcing Jake to strain his eyes a bit to see its full form beneath the muddy water. It looked to be more than eight meters long and was bulky as hell.

It hadn't noticed them, and Sylphie seemed excited to attack when Jake stopped her.

"Sylphie... I have been waiting for a chance like this for over a year," he said in a serious tone. "Please... let me have this one."

The hawk looked at him for a moment before nodding solemnly, understanding his pain.

“Thank you,” Jake smiled.

He and Sylphie were floating far up in the air, and when Jake got permission, they flew even further up. They went above several layers of clouds before Jake stopped, feeling the mana in the air begin to act up as they were getting too close to what he assumed was the system version of the stratosphere.

A stable platform of arcane mana appeared below his feet as he held out his hand. A thin string of conceptual energy gathered, forming the faint outline of an arrow as a stable film of arcane energy surrounding it.

When everything was as it should, he hardened the stable energy further and picked his poison. Because Jake wasn't going to pour destructive arcane energy into the second layer of this Protean Arrow this time... he was going to pour in pure poison.

Considering the size of the beast, using the Sleeping Night wasn't a good idea, and he didn't wanna test any of his curse-aligned poisons, so he went with some good old Necrotic Poison. That seemed to always get the job done against flesh and blood lifeforms when all else failed.

After that, he carefully finished the arrow, even adding in a bit of his familiarity with this kind of beast. While it wasn't as good as if he actually studied the beast, some things were just general for all mammal-looking monsters.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked as she looked at the finished arrow.

“Yeah, it's a real beauty,” Jake smiled. It was more than a meter and a half long and looked like a mix of black and purple due to the sheer quantity of poison within it. Something Jake had learned quite a bit ago was that his blood did indeed count as a “form of energy” he could pour into the Protean Arrow, and he was getting close to becoming able to use crafted poison too.

Alas, for now, he would just have to give the final product a good coating. A coating of even more Necrotic Poison.

Jake stood there with the arrow floating in front of him as he carefully observed the Beast King. He felt the conceptual energy slowly build up as he found a weak spot without any scales on the back of the hippo monster he was going to aim for. As for what was building up? It was naturally his Hunting Momentum. Check latest chapters at [novel●fire●net](#)

It wasn't much, but it was honest work and definitely worth pouring in.

“Now let's see what this bad boy can do,” Jake smiled as he took the arrow. He had poured in more than ten percent of his mana and just over twenty percent of his total stamina into this one arrow. He had high expectations.

Nocking the arrow, he took a deep breath as he unleashed his energy.

Arcane Awakening jumped to 60% immediately, his perception of time slowed down as he pulled back the string, and his body exploded with power from a mix of Arcane Awakening and Arcane Powershot.

Sylphie made distance as the area of over a dozen meters around Jake took on a pink-purple hue as energy crackled in the air. Arcane Powershot charged slowly as the energy built up within both Jake and his bow. Soon, ten seconds passed as the crackling in his surroundings became stronger, space itself slightly starting to distort closest to him.

At fifteen seconds, he felt the energies begin to reach their zenith. He knew that soon his arm and shoulder would give out. It was time.

In a massive explosion of arcane energy, he loosed the arrow.

Jake faintly felt something in his arm snap the moment he released the arrow as it fell limply to his side, but he only gritted his teeth from the pain as he focused his attention solely on the descending arrow.

The air itself in the arrow's way was torn apart as a trail of pure destruction as a vacuum of energy was left in its wake as it flew with ever-increasing speed down towards the still-unsuspecting hippo below. It was an arrow that encapsulated everything he had.

Arcane Awakening.

Arcane Powershot.

Big Game Hunter.

Superior Stealth Attack.

Hunter's Mark.

Along with his passive Archery bonus, bonus from his bow, and of course, his newly obtained **Arcane Supremacy** just boosting everything even further. All poured into a single arrow:

Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons.

Soon, the arrow broke through the final cloud layer, scattering the entire cloud in the process. This finally made those on the ground aware of what was coming.

The Beast King reacted as its eyes opened wide... though Jake wasn't going to make it easy for it.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

It froze physically, but a torrent of muddy water still flew up to block the impending arrow. The Beast King barely had time to create a small barrier as the arrow pierced straight through, assisted by **Umblemished Arrows**.

The final defense of the Beast King was broken, and it only barely became able to move the second the arrow struck right between two large plates of scales. It pierced straight through the tough hide of the hippo-like beast as the entire swamp exploded, sending water splashing up several kilometers as a crater was formed from the impact.

From this far up, Jake couldn't hear the roar of pain, but he would imagine it... moreover, he felt the response from his Hunter's Mark.

Absolutely massive damage.

Yet the beast wasn't entirely dead.

Flinching from the pain, he forcefully moved his injured arm as he switched hands, holding the bow in the injured arm and drawing with the still good one. He shot down another arrow and only a hundred meters below him, it exploded, releasing a rain of hundreds of smaller arrows, as he deployed an Arcane Arrow Rain.

He repeated this a few more times as he let it rain.

However... before his Arcane Arrow Rain even reached the ground, he got a notification.

****You have slain [Beast King of the North – lvl 290] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

*****DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 233 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

*****DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 233 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Jake was about to loose another shot when he the notification informing him that the Beast King was dead, having succumbed to Necrotic Poison. He stopped mid-action as a wide grin formed on his lips.

I still got it.

It felt like it was so long ago doing something like this. Killing a boss-tier beast more than fifty levels above his own. And damn, did it feel good. He had to admit that he was

afraid that he wouldn't be able to pull something like this off again as he proceeded through the grades, but it was good to see it was still an option.

Also... he was pretty damn sure he was the only one in his party who could pull something like this off. Because the arrow he had just released was the strongest attack that any of them had performed in all of Nevermore so far, even surpassing a Glimpse of Spring from the Sword Saint by quite a margin.

Compounding passive skills was truly an overpowered approach.

Wanting to go down and check the result of his attack, he, with a mental command, quickly made all the arrows falling toward the ground explode, as there was no need to cause further destruction.

Flying down with Sylphie in tow, he quickly reached the ground and saw the fallout. The Beast King had a hole more than one and a half meters in diameter through its back, with a massive crater formed right beneath it. At least he estimated the hole to be about one and a half meters on impact... because, by now, it was far larger as the flesh had rotted around it.

The entire beast gave off a powerful energy of pure death from the sheer potency and dose of Necrotic Poison Jake had dosed it with. It was as dead as dead could be, with a look of indignation in its eyes as its kingly reign had been before it could even realize what had truly happened.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she looked at the corpse.

"Yeah, it was a good opponent for me," Jake smiled. Slow, unaware, relatively unprotected, weak to his poison, high level, so a lot of bonuses counted, and he even got a massive damage bonus due to the distance... yep, the circumstances had been borderline perfect.

"Ree."

"Only if the next Beast King survives my initial attack... if not, you can have fun with the other beasts in the territory."

"Ree..."

"I know they aren't as fun, but hey, you can always hope the next Beast King is a lot more durable or maybe able to dodge the arrow," Jake tried to comfort the sad bird. "Who knows? Maybe it will survive my attack and put up a good fight even while injured, in which case you can have it all by yourself."

Spoiler warning:

It didn't put up a good fight after the first shot.

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Chapter 735: Nevermore: Sacrifice & Dedication

Jake and Sylphie won the race to kill two Beast Kings before Dina, the Fallen King, and Sword Saint. Their victory wasn't by a little either but by more than two weeks, giving them plenty of time to mess around and catch up with the three others. The Unique Lifeform complained about them being faster at crossing large distances, something Jake just saw as a bad excuse.

After killing all four Beast Kings, they had expected the floor to be over, and if it wouldn't be, then for there to spawn some Beast Emperor or something for them to fight. None of that happened. Instead, the kingdom they could have potentially allied with teleported over an army with the aim of taking down their party with the reasoning that a group of five capable of killing all four Beast Kings was too dangerous for the kingdom's political stability.

In summary, the insecure king was afraid they would create trouble, and he hoped that after defeating the final Beast King, they would be hurt or tired. A silly hope indeed.

Jake was all ready for a fight, but the Sword Saint annoyingly so talked down the general of the kingdom and reached an agreement with the contingency that Jake and company would leave the planet while spinning a lie to the populace that they were actually hired by the kingdom to defeat the Beast Kings, giving all the credit for the feat to the kingdom and king.

It was all bullshit, and Jake would have preferred to just blast the bastards for trying to backstab them, but the old man wasn't a fan of that solution. He talked about how the stupidity of a leader should not lead to the death of the average soldier and that they would get nothing out of slaughtering an army of innocents just for a slight born out of insecurities and fear.

After they had negotiated with the kingdom, they got a group of space mages to help them teleport off the planet and thus floor by using one of the treasures hoarded by a Beast King. Once they arrived in the in-between room, Jake did voice his dissatisfaction, only to get a semi-scolding, semi-explanation from the Sword Saint.

"Think about it from their perspective. Five people of immense power arrive on their planet and instantly volunteer to take down the four Beast Kings that have caused

trouble for the kingdom for centuries. Within two months, they then proceed to kill every single Beast King within their lairs, all while refusing to engage or involve the kingdom in any way. We are complete unknowns in their eyes and could, in many ways, be worse than the Beast Kings. At least the Beast Kings stuck to their own territories while we have no such inclinations. What would happen if we decided we wanted to take control? What could they do against us? No, from their point of view, striking us while we were still weak from a fight with a Beast King would be their final hope at retaining their own autonomy from five overlords taking over the only world they have ever known.” This chapter is updated by **novel★fire★net**

Jake did have to admit that the old man made sense... he just didn't like backstabbing assholes, no matter how they wanted to justify it.

“Their assumptions were shit. We had done nothing to provoke them or even once mentioned we wanted to take over anything. In fact, I am pretty sure we said we were just going to kill the four Beast Kings and then move on. Can you argue they didn't trust us and reached their own dumb conclusions? Sure thing, but what am I gonna do with that? Rather than me asking them, they should ask us first to clarify what we actually wanted to do,” Jake shot back.

“When one party is in a higher position of power, it is difficult to approach them and ask their intent in such a straightforward manner,” the old man sighed. “We are in a unique position, not just as people on a floor in Nevermore, but in the multiverse as a whole.”

“So you think we should clarify with anyone who comes to kill us if they are at least doing it under the right pretenses before fighting back and potentially hurting them? Oh, geez, I guess I fucked up when I killed two of Ell'Hakan's goons when they first invaded Earth. Should have asked them if they were super sure they wanted to fight first, I guess.”

“Now you are just being hyperbolic. Each situation is unique and should be evaluated with such uniqueness in mind,” the Sword Saint said, shaking his head.

Jake was about to say more as the Fallen King cut in.

“I thought we were done with the floors about morals and norms?” the Fallen King questioned in a mocking tone. *“And as far as I am concerned, any aggressor is fair game. You may argue they have their reasons, but they also had a choice. While it is true the regular soldier had little choice, there is always some level of choice. If you claim they didn't truly have any choice, then what choice did these Beast Kings have? What choice did the beasts guarding their territories have? For you never argued the innocence of the beasts you slaughtered on your way to the Beast Kings nor tried to negotiate with them.”*

“I can admit that my view is flawed, and I inherently treat the enlightened races differently than beasts or monsters. You are right in pointing out the hypocrisy... but I

still think that should there be a chance to choose diplomacy over violence, it is worth the attempt,” the Sword Saint sighed. “Do you disagree with that assessment?”

“No, I am saying that it doesn’t matter either way to me. Spare, kill; I am only here for the Nevermore Points, nothing more, nothing less. So I will do whatever entails earning the most points,” the Unique Lifeform stated pretty plainly. *“Things are no different outside of here either. Whichever choice brings the most benefit with the least demerits is the one I will choose.”*

“But how will you determi-“ the Sword Saint began.

“Ree,” Sylphie interrupted him.

“I think it is-“

“Ree.”

“Bu-“

“Ree.”

The old man stood defeated before the small hawk that looked annoyed at him. Truly, Sylphie did have the best philosophy that one could never argue with. A creature of perfect diplomacy that would forever choose the best option in any situation through her ultimate sage advice:

“Just follow the wind. The wind never likes the baddies.”

Truly, words rivaling the wisdom of the First Sage himself.

“To change the topic... I do wonder where the loot went. After floor forty, it just disappeared without any prompt or warning,” the Fallen King voiced his thoughts on a completely different subject.

“I think you were meditating when we talked about it, but Dina had a theory,” Jake said, nodding to the dryad.

“Right,” Dina nodded, having stayed out of their discussion earlier. “There are certain laws of balances, and it is possible the system won’t give about any more loot after a certain point. It is also possible this was done to combat overflowing the market of C-grades with equipment. On many of the floors, you can still gather some raw materials if you want, and it wouldn’t strike me as odd if there were even characters on some of these floors capable of crafting things. Even if they can’t, there is no lack of crafters spread out across the city floors.”

"I see. That does logically make sense," the Unique Lifeform nodded. "Though I still believe rewards should be given for completing each floor. Outside of Nevermore Points, that is."

"I definitely agree with that," Jake grinned. More loot was always better, and not getting any sucked.

Alright, it wasn't entirely accurate to say they didn't get any loot. As Dina said, then there was stuff to obtain on the floors; it just didn't come in nice boxes. On floor forty-six, as an example, the Fallen King had taken one of the unique treasures, while Dina had taken another as she could use it. There wasn't just equipment or new weapons lying around, true, but there were raw materials and natural treasures here and there, though they were a lot scarcer than on a "real" planet.

"Too much of a good thing can ruin the market..." Dina pointed out.

"It's okay as long as I am the one with the most good things," Jake grinned to lighten the mood.

The old man just shook his head, and the Fallen King solemnly nodded, Sylphie even giving a screech in approval.

Anyway, they didn't actually know why they didn't get any loot, but there was probably a reason, right?

Not wasting any more time with philosophical debates or talks about how much loot they did or didn't deserve, they dove back into the dungeon. Even if they didn't agree on everything, they were still all professionals who could put aside personal feelings to achieve the best results.

There was still a long time to go and many dungeons floors before they hit the cap for how difficult floors they could do... and once they did hit this cap, it was time to do some Challenge Dungeons.

Carmen really wasn't a fan of these damn morality floors or whatever the fuck that big space lizard decided to call them. Floor forty-one had been a bloody nightmare, and not just because of how creepy the place had been, but because she was still more than a little salty after floor forty.

The Minaga fight was something she had been looking forward to... but that shit had turned out to be way more difficult than any one of them had expected. Ultimately, they had weak links in their group, and that had bitten them in the ass during the phase where they were all split up.

Warlord Davion and the druid in the party were both bloody excellent and had come out of their one-on-one fights way faster than she had. The problems were the seer and

shaman. The shaman had managed to hold on but was too injured to really be of much use for the final phase, and the seer had gotten her ass kicked out nearly instantly when she was alone. She had already been pretty fucking useless in Minaga's Labyrinth due to his interference with divination magic, but in the fight, she had just been deadweight. Worse than deadweight... she had actually hurt them by being in the party. Her magic didn't do shit to Minaga, as she mainly did mental magic and illusions, neither of which worked on the Unique Lifeform. So her only contribution to the fight was losing them points and forcing them to constantly protect her in the first phase.

It only helped slightly to learn that at least that guy Casper and the Risen had also failed to do the Minaga fight without losing someone. It had helped a bit more to learn that the Holy Church had lost three members, including that Bertram guy who ended up taking down the Minaga with some insane suicide attack that ended phase three just as it began. Ah, but it was a bit sad to hear that Caleb's group hadn't even been able to face Minaga properly but just had to find another damn Demon Lord with a clone of Minaga only there to occasionally fling in spells to make it harder. The same appeared to have happened to Maria and her party.

From what she had learned, the only parties that did the Minaga fight without any losses – of the people she knew or had heard of, that is – were the odd ones or the ones she had really expected to do it. One of them was naturally Jake and his ridiculous party, which was really expected, while another was that weird scientist guy named Arnold, who Gudrun had warned her about not making an enemy for some reason. Carmen wasn't sure why, as the guy didn't seem that dangerous on the surface, but then again, the quiet ones did tend to be the ones you didn't wanna fuck with.

Besides that, Eron had also succeeded with his group of monks. It did suck to hear that bastard Ell'Hakan who had attacked their planet also completed the fight flawlessly based on the intel one of Valhal's agents told them during a brief on the city floor. To see her party members celebrate him had been a bit hard to swallow, but she kept her mouth shut to not stir the pot and reveal anything she shouldn't.

It had been extra hard to keep things under wraps, as her party had gotten quite a bit more interested in her and her origins after the Minaga floor... mainly because of the ridiculous intel on her fellow Earthlings, which had led to quite a few questions and subtle probes.

"Your planet is odd," Davion had said to her in an attempt to break the ice on the subject while they were flying on the barge right after arriving on what they later discovered was a bloody plague-themed floor. This was his first time bringing up the subject directly, and Carmen got the vibes he wasn't going to hold back.

"Yep," she just agreed.

"The Unique Lifeform, I understand, is originally from a Tutorial, so that is explained... the Sylphian Hawk also seems related to the Malefic One's Chosen's special ability to

influence monster Origins. That Judge is also easily explained as he is the brother of the Malefic Viper's Chosen, so that could just be a case of nepotism. However, that does not explain all the other outliers. A transcendent swordsman, a Risen with enough talent to be recognized by the Blightfather, another individual with an odd Bloodline now part of the Dao Sect, an Augur of Hope. Then there is that enigmatic man who entered a pact with a Void God yet remains human. This isn't even mentioning you. It just all seems highly unlikely for so many talents to appear on the same planet at once," Davion voiced the thoughts of everyone in the group. Well, besides maybe the ranger that they had joined them after floor forty to replace that bloody useless seer. Carmen didn't really have time to talk to that gal much yet.

"I agree," Carmen just nodded.

"You don't question it?" Davion raised an eyebrow.

"Nope."

"Most would. Do you not see problems in the future when too many powerful forces gain an interest in your planet? A curiosity like that will attract attention whether you like it or not," he continued.

"Oh, sure, I see a bunch of problems for Earth. That doesn't mean they are my problems. Valhal is in a pretty bad position there already due to the planet pretty much belonging to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper now, and I guess they are just waiting to toss us out or something," Carmen said. She had to play a little into that lie where the Order and Valhal were actually in a conflict, right?

"That is true, I suppose. Though I thought you had a good personal relationship with the Chosen of the Malefic One already? Or at least some of his party members?"

"I guess I do," she shrugged. No use in keeping that a secret after their constant meetings back on that Minaga city floor. "I knew him before this entire conflict, after all, and we are definitely still friendly. Ah, but I do have the go-ahead from the higher-ups."

Yeah, Carmen was bad at this.

"I see," Davion nodded as he sighed. "A bit of a shame that even someone of your position will have to make such personal sacrifices, but I one must do what is expected. We are still C-grades and subject to the wills of the higher-ups if we wish to remain with Valhal. Alas, I am sure your dedication will be honored. The Chosen's unique ability is simply too invaluable to give up on, it seems."

"What are you talking about?" Carmen asked with genuine confusion.

“You have been tasked with trying to seduce and get close to the Chosen to bring him over to our side, right? That is why you kept meeting with him despite the conflict. That is what I have deduced, anyway,” Davion said without a hint of jest.

Wait, what the fuck?

Carmen was about to curse at him, as she stopped herself. *This could... work?*

“Yeah, you got me,” Carmen sighed in an exaggerated matter. “But keep it under wraps, okay? Now that you know, you must help me make sure no one else suspects I have a personal relationship with the Chosen before it is time to strike. This is a highly secret mission coming directly from Valdemar and Gudrun themselves.”

Davion’s eyes opened wide as he nodded seriously. “I shall do my utmost. I honor your sacrifice and dedication, Runemaiden.”

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 736: Not Nevermore: Dawnleaf

Meira had experienced a lot of surprising and frightening things throughout the last few years. From the fall of the Brimstone Hegemon and her becoming a slave to recently being freed and having Teacher privately teach her all the time.

Yet today was more frightening than any other. Because she was called for a private meeting by the Hall Master herself, but not with the S-grade. No, someone else had asked – or probably demanded – to meet her.

The Lord Protector. Boundless Hydra. One of the most fearsome beasts in the entire multiverse, second to only the Malefic Viper within the Order of the Malefic Viper, as far as she knew.

Every other time she had met frightening existences, like that one time her Teacher brought her to buy herbs from a dragon god; she was always with someone and never the person in focus. Always just a tag-along. But this time, there was no Lord Thayne, no Teacher... not even Izil. Just herself and a god who had lived for nearly the entire lifespan of the multiverse.

Viridia, the Hall Master, had teleported her part of the way there, but on the final stretch to the domain of the Lord Protector, they had to walk. As they walked, Meira felt incredibly nervous and built up courage as she asked the Hall Master.

“Uhm... Mistress, I-“

“Call me Viridia,” the Hall Master smiled. “You should get used to not being so... meek. That simply won’t do.”

“Oh... okay,” Meira nodded, getting a disapproving look from the Hall Master. Still, Meira felt too curious not to ask. “If I may... why does the Lord Protector want to speak to me?”

“I do not know for sure, but I have my suspicions,” Viridia answered. “And if I am correct, I believe it is high time you drop those social-conduct lessons you are currently doing and for us to set up some proper conduct classes.”

Meira froze when she heard the mention of conduct classes. A shiver ran down her spine as she tried to control herself, but images flashed in her head of the “classes” she had when she first arrived at the Order. Clenching her fists, she continued walking as the Hall Master noticed her actions.

“You have reached the cap of D-grade for your profession, with your class soon to follow, correct?” she asked.

Meira just nodded.

“And the Grand Elder has discussed his plans of properly Blessing you soon, right? It is already known that you are his disciple... but from what I was told by the Verdant Witches, he is considering making you his Chosen,” Viridia said.

“I... maybe...” Meira said. She had to be honest; she wasn’t exactly sure what it meant to become the Chosen of someone like Duskleaf. The thought just seemed so foreign to her. Even now, it felt incredibly odd that many approached her, not just because of the people she knew but because they assumed she herself was also worth their time.

“In either case, but especially if that is true, you will have to adapt your demeanor to the situation, not only for yourself but the Grand Elder. You will be his representative, and your words will hold authority, so to speak confidently and assuredly is a must,” the Hall Master continued.

Meira nodded once more. It made sense...

“If such is the case, I would gladly help you in this process,” Viridia smiled. “And do know that my first free lesson is that people will want to form a relationship with you primarily for selfish reasons. Which is exactly what I am trying to do by offering you these lessons.”

“Yeah,” Meira nodded. “I know.”

That didn't really surprise her. In her meetings with Izil and the others, that was an often-discussed topic, as they always had people approach them with ulterior motives.

The two of them kept walking for a good while, only exchanging a few words in a rather casual conversation. It was only when they reached the gateway leading into the domain of the Lord Protector that Viridia left, and Meira realized she had just casually been talking to the Hall Master of the Order of the Malefic Viper for nearly twenty minutes.

It felt odd.

But not as odd as what happened next.

One moment Meira was just standing in front of the gate, while in the very next, she found herself standing on a stone platform. Before she could even orient herself, a presence swept over her that made her want to kneel... but she resisted. As best as she could anyway. Her knees still felt a bit wobbly.

Luckily, the pressure decreased after a few seconds. Just as Meira was about to breathe out a sigh of relief, a massive form appeared, towering over her. She looked up with wide eyes as she saw what looked like the giant head of a snake staring down at her. Mixed with the danger and the black stone platform surrounded by nearly pure darkness as far as the eye could see...

Yes, this was definitely the most frightening thing she had ever experienced.

"Do you have any inklings why I asked to speak to you?" the giant Hydra asked Meira, the voice of the Lord Protector echoing through the entire world. "And why I wished to have this conversation within my divine realm?"

"I... I don't," Meira said, really unsure how she was supposed to act. Normally, one would kneel or something, but Teacher had told her that as his disciple, she shouldn't kneel to anyone that isn't the Malefic Viper, so...

"Then let me not delay needlessly. You are aware of secrets exclusive to the Malefic One and his Chosen, and I know Duskleaf has also shared much many would consider classified. While I am still uncertain if I agree with the actions of Master and Duskleaf when it comes to choosing Chosen like this, I am beginning to see the novelty. It is different than prior blessed I have had, in that there is less blind worship," the god explained. "The mere fact that even you, someone that was merely a former slave of Master's Chosen, don't crumble before me does make the entire situation, how to phrase it, tolerable."

"Are... am I here because of Teacher?" Meira asked. Did the Lord Protector have something against Teacher? Why would he need to speak to her like this?

“Yes. While this was not something I imagined doing, it’s better to just get it out of the way now to avoid annoyance in the future,” the Lord Protector’s voice echoed as a second head rose from the depths below.

“Duskleaf is the sole disciple of the Malefic One for a reason,” the second head said. “He was not the only disciple the Malefic One ever had, but the only one who remains. The only one Master allows to stay. Allows to assist him in his own personal projects.”

Meira nodded, listening to his words. She knew that Teacher was brilliant, and she understood the gravity of him helping the Malefic Viper. For someone to be of actual assistance in any kind of project, their skills had to at least somewhat match that of the one they assist, which meant that the Malefic One recognized Duskleaf as an equal peer, at least in some aspects of alchemy. She knew that Teacher didn’t really do toxins that much, but in so many other areas, he was nearly unparalleled.

“It seems you understand that somewhat, but do you truly know who Duskleaf is? What he is?”

“What about Teacher?” Meira asked, curious and confused, forgetting herself for a moment.

“His secrets are not mine to share, but consider this. While it is true most multiversal forces avoided the Order during the Malefic One’s absence due to my presence, I would not be enough to keep away some pinnacle factions. Sure, some still feared the Viper was around and would appear if the existence of the Order was threatened... but most of the older factions knew that the Order was never something Master cared overly much about,” the Lord Protector said. “Knew it was something he could always just rebuild if he truly wanted it back.”

Meira was deep in thought as she considered his words. But something didn’t fit. She was about to speak when a third Hydra head emerged on her left, making her jump a bit.

“Duskleaf is... weak,” the Lord Protector’s new head said, making Meira confused by the next words spoken by the central head. “And one of the most fearsome figures in the entire multiverse.”

The Lord Protector noticed her confused expression and briefly elaborated. “Gods are not simple, and Duskleaf much less so. You may believe him a pacifist alchemist... would you still wish to be his official disciple if that is but one part of him?”

“Yes,” Meira answered, not having to really think about it.

“Even if it means carrying with you burdens and secrets for the rest of your existence, even should you somehow attain immortality? Secrets you may never be able to

disclose to anyone, not even the Chosen of the Malefic One?" the Lord Protector asked in an intimidating voice.

"If that is what Teacher wants, yes," Meira nodded once more without hesitation.

"Very well," the Boundless Hydra said. "Then fully embrace your new role and Path. And know that should you stray or break the vow you made today, I shall carry out my duty as the Lord Protector and end your existence."

Meira shivered as she was teleported out of the realm and back to the long underground hallway outside.

Definitely frightening, Meira shuddered as she looked down the hallway, unsure where to even go...

"You're getting sentimental, little Snappy," the voice of the Malefic Viper echoed through the realm of the Boundless Hydra just as the elf girl disappeared. "Watching out for Duskleaf like that."

"Master!" the Lord Protector said happily. "Yes, perhaps I am getting a bit needlessly emotional, but this is the first time Duskleaf has taken on an official disciple, and I do not wish to see him negatively impacted."

"And that's all?" the Viper said, a bit amused.

"There have been many changes recently, and more are coming. Yip of Yore, your Chosen, and his ability to manipulate Origins, rumors of the Dao Sect recently making moves, several gods that haven't been active for a long time suddenly stirring to life once more... something is coming."

"Something is always coming," the Viper said in a cheerful tone. "But yes, more things do seem to be changing recently. Records are converging, and all the big players are aware. Let us look forward to it, eh?"

The Lord Protector nodded. Changes were neither good nor bad on a fundamental level. However, they did represent opportunity and risk, as well as the chance to get something new. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [movel♦fire♦net](#)

And to the Malefic Viper and his insatiable Path, new was nearly always good, as it was simply more to consume and integrate with his infinite Path.

--

Months passed after her frightening meeting with the Lord Protector as Meira toiled away, leveling her class through a variety of means. She would have never thought that something like a C-grade Perfect Evolution would ever be possible for her, but her

Teacher had made it clear that if she wanted to become his official disciple, she at least had to have a Perfect Evolution.

Leveling her class wasn't easy, and she did many things she had never tried before, including dungeons. As a healer, Meira had a pretty easy time finding a group, even without factoring in the fact she was a student of Duskleaf. Even if she admittedly sucked at fighting, she still managed to get through all the dungeons she did, partly because her party members were far stronger than she was.

However, most of her levels came not from healing people. No, it came from something else entirely. Healing was a school of magic that included many concepts and affinities. Light and life affinity were the two most famous ones for healing, but nature affinity was also a very popular one.

Teacher helped Meira toward healing another form of life than usual. Rather than mend wounds, she would instead focus on truly helping people heal themselves through an odd healing concept Meira had not really encountered before.

Rather than healing, it was more accurate to call it nurturing.

Meira's healing relied on the light affinity before she began changing her Path. Her aim slowly changed from simply healing other people to being able to mend and nurture other kinds of life, even those without a soul.

As her Teacher explained it, the system was rather rigid when it dictated classes were for combat and professions for non-combat, but there were ways to make both work together. The Legacy of the Malefic Viper and the entire Alchemist of the Malefic Viper Path was a testament to that. As Teacher's Master, it was natural that Duskleaf had taken inspiration and also come up with some ideas himself for how one could circumvent these restrictions, and the Path Meira was now walking was one of them.

Plants and all kinds of natural treasures were in a constant struggle for energy and survival. They were in an endless battle to ascend and become more powerful, walking their own Paths. True, this was not a fight against a monster but the world itself, but there was conceptual overlap, which had made Duskleaf believe there was an opening.

Healers could already level just by healing the injured, even when they did not get injured in combat. That was how Meira had initially leveled her class, after all. She had healed people who got hurt in the mines back with her clan and helped relieve those who suffered. That had earned her experience, so why couldn't she do something similar by helping plants?

The system was strict but also accommodating. Something like the Augur class was proof of this, and Meira hoped to do something similar. To have both, with a class that was not truly combat-reliant but one she could level without having to step into a battlefield. The skills would still work for combat, but it would not be their sole function.

Soon enough, Meira reached her level cap, and she stood before the first evolution in her life that she was truly looking forward to.

Right before her evolution, Duskleaf sat her down and had three things prepared. One of them was an odd bottle, another was a marble of some kind, while the third was something he could only give himself directly:

His True Blessing.

Sitting at the final moment, Meira did get nervous again, and she had to ask if Duskleaf was sure, but he waved her off.

“We already talked about this. Now let’s do the proper preparations,” Duskleaf said as he pointed out the items, starting with the bottle.

“Usually, you elves can only evolve to high elves if you attain a Perfect Evolution in both D and C-grade while fulfilling all Records requirements, but seeing as you didn’t have sufficient Records previously, I brewed this instead,” Duskleaf said in a casual tone.

Meira’s eyes opened wide as she saw the bottle. She tried to Identify it but failed entirely.

“Next up is this,” he said, holding up the marble. “It is the core of a rather special star that I collected a while back. I have partly sealed it to make it safe for your current level of power, and It should suit your Path nicely going forward. Integrating it into your Internal Garden right before evolution should do nicely.”

Meira once more nodded. Her Internal Garden was a Legacy skill of Duskleaf himself. It allowed one to have a greenhouse within their soul to store treasures and energy, and based on what he said, it was partly derived from Palate of the Malefic Viper, but rather than consuming, it was created for nurturing.

At the urging of Duskleaf, she integrated the core and, right before evolving, drank the contents of the bottle. In the very final moments, before she accepted the prompt, Duskleaf smiled and took her hand. She felt a warm rush go into her body, as she knew he had just gotten her True Blessing.

Entering the evolution itself, things went better than expected. At least, Meira thought it did. Many of her old skills had already changed over the last few years, away from their slave origin, but her class and profession remained the same. Both had made it clear that even if she had been freed, she had still been a slave. Now, the word was entirely shed from her status menu.

Status

Name: Meira Dawnleaf

Race: [High Elf (C) – 200]

Class: [Dawnstar Saintess – 200]

Profession: [Principal Disciple of Duskleaf – 200]

Reading her status, the very first thing she saw was naturally her name. Meira never had a last name. She had always just been known as Meira. This wasn't really due to her being a slave but due to her clan's old customs, where it was only when one became D-grade that they became worthy of using the clan name.

Duskleaf had insisted that she needed a last name as not having one would just complicate things, and since she didn't have one and had no interest in taking up her family's, he just made one up for her. One that fused her Path and the name of her teacher while also communicating this was a new beginning for her. A new dawn, so to speak.

Her class was one that combined her light affinity with the power of life, while her profession was self-explanatory. She had even managed to successfully become a High Elf, something she never thought possible.

However, the one thing that stuck out the most was another new addition to her status menu.

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Shattered Dusk Emperor (Blessing - True)]

“Uhm... Teacher, in the Blessing section, it says-“

“Ignore that,” Duskleaf waved her off in a stern voice. “I should have known it would go with that considering it is a True Blessing. No, scratch what I said, do more than ignore it. Consciously put it at the back of your mind, and don't even speak it out loud. You know there is power in words, and some things are best left unspoken.”

Meira looked at Teacher and his unusually strict demeanor before nodding. “Okay.”

His serious expression fell away as he smiled. “Now, let's go test your new skills. Have you ever made an artificial sun? Jake never got around to doing it, so you should at least beat him to it.”

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Chapter 737: Nevermore: Time Skip Status

On reflection, Jake's sense of time had truly gotten warped since after the system arrived.

He had spent decades training with Sim-Jake, and while that had indeed felt like it had taken a while, it didn't feel longer than a few weeks, tops. This was odd because the Tutorial was still clear in his mind, and if he was asked how long that had taken in comparison to that training session, he would have said the Tutorial was definitely longer.

The same was true for the Treasure Hunt, which had been even shorter than the Tutorial by quite a deal, yet still felt long... maybe because something was happening all the time. Nevermore was a bit similar to this, though it did also have a lot of nothing in there. Floor after floor proved challenging in different ways, and whatever downtime he did have could be filled with alchemy or experimenting. Even when that was not an option, and things began to drag on, he had pretty good company to talk to.

Jake was speaking of Sylphie, of course.

In conclusion, Nevermore was an odd mix of feeling extremely long and extremely short at the same time. Somewhere in between the Tutorial and Sim-Jake duel. Even if he logically knew it had taken a while, he was still kind of surprised when they left the in-between room and entered yet another city floor as the Sword Saint made a comment.

"Just a bit under three decades already, huh?" he muttered partly to himself. "Time certainly flies."

"Truly, it has already been thirty years? Hmm, I suppose the last few floors did take longer than expected," the Fallen King commented.

"Yeah," Dina nodded to both the comment about how long they had been inside Nevermore and how these last few floors had taken much longer than they had wanted them to. Floor seventy had ended up taking them nearly two full years due to how damn annoying it had been.

"Damn, you are right," Jake muttered. "Doesn't feel that long, huh?"

As they were talking, an expected notification popped up in front of them.

At least Jake had thought it would be the expected one...

Congratulations! You have arrived on the Fourteenth City Floor of Nevermore.

All violence outside of the arenas is strictly prohibited on all city floors. Challenge Dungeon(s) can be found in the central square. If Nevermore is left and reentered, you will automatically be taken to the latest city floor unlocked.

You have successfully completed the second portion of Nevermore and is now entering the latter floors of the C-grade section. From floor seventy-one onwards, all floors will be even larger in scope. All basic floor completion bonuses will be increased twofold to compensate for the increased floor sizes moving forward.

Challenge Dungeons' growth limit has been reached. All available Challenge Dungeons have been unlocked.

Jake stopped walking as he read the message. "Second portion completed? Damn, I was sure it would be after floor eighty."

"Not entirely unexpected," the Sword Saint commented. "This may indicate there are a hundred C-grade floors in total."

"Even if that is so, we have two decades left," the Fallen King added. "Clearing more floors will net more points, but we should reconsider if that is the best approach."

"Ree?"

"Yes, *exactly*," the Fallen King nodded.

Jake considered, and Sylphie was probably right. Alas, before they would have to make a decision, they wanted to go check out the Leaderboards.

No one came to meet them on this floor, which was also a bit surprising as, on most prior ones, someone from the Order had appeared. They even had someone from the Pantheon of Life pop up at one point to talk to Dina and give them some basic intel.

Moving toward the Leaderboards to check how they were faring, the Sword Saint made another comment.

"Just got a telepathic message with an update," he said, Jake frowning. He hadn't even noticed anyone out of the ordinary observing them.

"Who? And why just send it to you?" Jake questioned.

"Shyness perhaps? It is another follower of Aeon. Anyway, the latest scoop is that..."

He gave them a brief update on the latest happenings as they quickly reached the pretty empty city square and saw the big Leaderboard.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-70): 336,381

Yeah, none of them really had any comments on this. It was damn low; what else was there to say? Was the number kind of big? Sure, but one must remember that the basic floor completion bonuses had increased significantly. Just completing floors forty-one to seventy would net 166,500 Nevermore Points, so to only get around a hundred thousand and fifty thousand above that from the prior forty floors and all kinds of bonus objectives... yeah, it was pretty bad. Of course, one also had to factor in that any party that could even make it this far wouldn't be in any way ordinary.

As for the Current Points Record, well, it was actually only a bit more than double the average.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-70): 744,673

Jake and company had kept the top spot. After floor sixty-five, they also had it, and not losing it was great. Of course, not everything was great. The Sword Saint had gotten an annoying update on other people also doing Nevermore.

As far as they were aware, a bit over a dozen groups they knew of were ahead of them, most of which Jake had no idea who was, but apparently, that beast group that had overtaken them a few times was one of these groups. Another one of those ahead he, unfortunately, did know quite well was Ell'Hakan, who had managed to cheese far more of these floors than they had been able to. The fundamental problem was that most floors had people on them, and Ell'Hakan's Bloodline was simply too well-suited for those kinds of situations. In places where Jake and company had to act solo or purposefully avoid the attention of B-grades or others too powerful to handle, Ell'Hakan had been able to actively enlist them.

As for how they knew this, for sure? Well, through the guy bragging openly and spreading the news. He simply beat floors faster than them and was thus ahead.

The only good thing was that he appeared to get far fewer points. Likely because convincing B-grades to help you wasn't unheard of, even for a C-grade. Now, convincing a god, that was awesome. But Ell'Hakan hadn't bragged about getting those Starcross Twins on his side, so Jake assumed he had failed or possibly not even dared to try.

Besides that, they suspected Eron's group was also ahead of them. They knew pretty much every other group they knew was not, and many weren't really going for high spots on the Leaderboards anymore. Caleb and Maria had both communicated they were just trying to do as many floors as possible for levels, while Carmen and Jacob's group wanted to go for high-tier placements.

Jake had no bloody idea what Arnold was up to.

Overall, Jake would still expect pretty much all the groups he knew to make it to around floor seventy. He would rate floors forty to seventy rather disappointing in the challenge

aspect, and they had only gotten a single more Grand Achievements outside of the Dark Witch one. That one also “only” provided a 5% bonus at the final calculation, making the Minaga one still stand out. Then again, the Minaga fight was still the biggest challenge so far, even thirty floors later.

It had certainly gotten harder, with many foes above level 300 appearing, but fights worth comparing to Minaga were few and far between. The final boss on floor seventy had been stronger than Minaga, true, but the thing is, so had Jake and everyone else in his party.

It had been more than two decades since Jake battled Minaga. Two decades was not a long time to a C-grade, but it was a long time for Jake and his party members, especially considering they were actively progressing all throughout this time. As they were walking toward a small house to discuss future plans, Just to put things into perspective, he compared his current status to his status shortly before the Minaga fight.

And there had been quite the development.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – 222 --> 253]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge – 219 --> 256]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – 226 --> 251]

Health Points (HP): 139,110/139,110

Mana Points (MP): 298,921/298,921

Stamina: 149,651/149,770

Stats

Strength: 10922 --> 17707

Agility: 15391 --> 23894

Endurance: 10476 --> 14977

Vitality: 11053 --> 13911

Toughness: 8986 --> 11062

Wisdom: 14357 --> 19131

Intelligence: 11698 --> 16021

Perception: 30882 --> 40308

Willpower: 12336 --> 16664

Free points: 0

--

He had gotten a lot of levels and stats; no two ways about it. Jake also continued to lick his Perception marble throughout, which was part of the reason why he had gotten such a massive growth in Perception. His Strength and Agility had also both grown immensely, which was of great benefit in combat. This came very much due to his high level of investment of Free Points. Jake had only chosen to put Free Points into Strength, Agility, and a bit into Endurance during this time, as while Perception was indeed the stat, he didn't like the feeling of seeing the Sword Saint slowly begin to catch up to him in speed and power, so he had to invest some stat points to stay ahead.

However, even if he knew he had gotten a lot stronger and gained many levels, Jake still considered it pretty subpar at times. It felt slow, especially during the last few levels. After he reached level 250, it felt like leveling slowed down even more than before – which was really saying something, considering how it had already slowed to a crawl before he even reached that point.

One could well and truly say he was over his initial C-grade growth spurt. They all were, including even Sylphie. Sure, she had reached level 267, making her the highest-leveled one in the party by quite a bit, but that she wasn't higher was proof of how much slower levels became with time.

The Sword Saint and Fallen King were the ones who handled this slower leveling the best, with Sylphie and Jake both being pained the most. Dina was kind of neutral, having clearly expected it and not carrying any particular feelings on the matter. She expressed that it was normal for growth to slow down as life matured and that as long as one didn't begin to wither but kept growing, there were no causes for concern.

So, yeah, asking a damn tree lady about impatience in growth was a bad idea.

Overall, even if Jake complained, he had to admit he was a lot stronger now than when he fought Minaga. In fact, while Jake couldn't say it with certainty, he would estimate that should he face Minaga alone in his current form... he would have a legitimate shot at victory, and not only due to his stat growth. Because while numbers had certainly gone up, his skills hadn't been entirely stagnant, and he looked through his skills menu

while mentally highlighting those that had improved or been added since the fight with the Unique Lifeform.

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Class Skills: [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Bestial Hunter's Tracking (Epic)], [**Splitting Arcane Arrow Rain (Epic)**], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [**Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)**], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [**Arcane Powershot (Ancient)**], [**Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)**], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentness Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [**Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)**], [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [**Brew Potion (Uncommon)**], [**Craft Elixir (Rare)**], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [**Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)**], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)], [**Arcane Curse Manifestation (Ancient)**], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [**Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)**], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [**Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)**], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)], [Core Manipulation of (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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Five class skills and six profession skills had improved since that fight, though during the last twenty or so floors, only one class skill and three profession skills had seen any improvement. And the improvement on pretty much all of those was far from interesting.

Arcane Powershot had gotten upgraded as Jake pushed the skill further and further, partly due to Arcane Supremacy, and his understanding slowly deepened, allowing him to pour in more and more energy. He simply fired so many of them that the feeling of

the arcane energy moving through his body became so familiar, and as he actively sought to improve it through his ever-increasing understanding, the skill upgraded. Once more, there was no functional change. The skill was just better in its wonderful simplicity.

It was definitely still his favorite archery skill.

Brew Potion was far more boring than that. He hadn't even expected the upgrade; he just got it the moment he crafted a mana potion that restored more than 100,000 mana for the very first time. So that was kind of nice, and even if it was surprising, he really shouldn't have been. That upgrade was purely automatic, and out of every single skill Jake was aware of, it had by far the most well-defined upgrade path. Well, besides maybe Concoct Poison, but the two were super similar.

Craft Elixir was not as similar, and the upgrade came to be from Jake being his party's only damn source of elixirs. Could they buy it on a city floor? Sure, they totally could have, but the Fallen King and Sword Saint agreed that Jake could easily just make it for them, considering all the natural treasures he was hoarding. Jake had semi-reluctantly agreed, as getting in a bit of elixir practice once in a while was fine, and he kind of wanted a break from working with Curse Fragments at the time. Working with fragmented curse energy representing the concept of insatiable hunger could be mentally taxing, after all. Who knew?

No, the only exciting upgrade had been Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist. There were plenty of chances to interact with rituals throughout the years, and he had honestly been in for an upgrade for a while with both the Vesperia ritual and the Dark Witch one. Especially so as Jake dove further and further into the Curse Manifestation skill, and he began to see ways to utilize the fragments in rituals. After a while and a bit of testing, he upgraded the skill to work even better with curse energy, though he still felt like he had a ways to go, as he still wasn't able to do a big ritual with Eternal Hunger as the power source. This chapter is updated by *novel**fire**net*

As for why he wanted to do a massive curse ritual using Eternal Hunger? Well, to see if he could, obviously.

Having gone through all his skills, the only menu he hadn't bothered addressing mentally was his titles, as nothing had really changed there.

In conclusion, two decades spent in a mega-dungeon led to some solid-ass growth. However, Jake also knew that things would only get slower from here unless he could find some truly challenging fights. The kind that put his life in legitimate danger.

Perhaps floor seventy-one would have that as they could now enter the third portion. However, with twenty or so years left to go, perhaps it was high time to consider another aspect of Nevermore they had neglected so far.

Challenge Dungeons' growth limit has been reached. All available Challenge Dungeons have been unlocked.

Reaching a house, they could sit down for a discussion on if it was time to decide that perhaps if they couldn't find proper challenges on the regular floors, it was time to do some Challenge Dungeons. Challenge Dungeons had to have good challenges, right?

It was literally in their name.

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Chapter 738: Nevermore: Challenge Dungeons

It was inarguable that the main portion of Nevermore was the many floors that seemed to continue endlessly. One had to remember the primary function of the mega-dungeon was to be a great leveling spot, and the entire Leaderboards part was just a fun extra event for an extremely small portion of those who attempted the C-grade version of the World Wonder.

If Jake didn't care about the Leaderboards, he could have entered Nevermore alone and probably done quite a few floors in fifty years. Shit, due to how his Path worked, he would potentially even have gained more experience faster that way, though it would have meant missing out on any exclusive rewards from getting a good record on the Leaderboards.

Other versions than C-grade Nevermore – as a general rule - didn't even have any Leaderboards, but it was just a bunch of floors that people tried to either solo or do in parties. It was even considered pretty normal for people to do as many floors as they could solo before then joining up with others to progress further.

However, in the C-grade of Nevermore, they had one more essential thing than just city floors and regular floors.

They had Challenge Dungeons.

Apparently, one could also find Challenge Dungeons sometimes in later grades, but they naturally wouldn't be part of some Leaderboards evaluations. Instead, they just existed to test the people doing them. To challenge themselves and allow them to improve in some way.

Then there was one more type of Challenge Dungeons that the Wyrmgod had temporarily closed off access to due to the Leaderboards competition. Legacy Challenge Dungeons. Ones like the one Jake had entered to get his profession and put him on a collision course with the Malefic Viper.

Some gods would enter agreements with the Wyrmgod and be allowed to place a Legacy Challenge Dungeon on a city floor that people could attempt. The god could then use that as a recruitment tool or even as a way to find students worth personally tutoring.

Dina mentioned that a god had once even placed a Challenge Dungeon in the S-grade portion that was just a glorified dating show for her to find a partner. Apparently, the Wyrmgod got more involved in controlling what Challenge Dungeons would and would not get accepted after that.

Jake's money was on Minaga having been the one to approve the dating dungeon.

Anyway. Challenge Dungeons were considered the solo portion of Nevermore, as one could only do those alone. It was also an important aspect of raking up points, and it had long been said that the final positions on the Leaderboards would ultimately be decided by who did best in the Challenge Dungeons.

Right now, Jake and everyone in his party had the exact same number of Nevermore Points. After the Challenge Dungeons, that would naturally change, and they all knew that. Which, to the surprise of no one, only ignited their competitive spirits.

Sitting in the house, discussing their plans, it pretty fast became clear what they wanted to do.

"So we are all in agreement that we are tired of seeing each other's faces and need time apart?" the Sword Saint asked in a teasing voice.

"I wouldn't say that..." Dina muttered. "But... taking some time to focus on individual improvement will likely be a good idea."

"These Challenge Dungeons should add apt opportunities for self-improvement in a relatively safe environment," the Fallen King agreed.

Oh yeah, that was another important aspect of Challenge Dungeons. You couldn't die inside of them. If you died, you would just be reset to the last "checkpoint" and have one less life. Once you ran out of lives, you would be thrown out, and your Challenge Dungeon time was over.

This meant one could do far more risky things. For example, one thing Jake planned on doing was to be more reckless if he ever found himself facing an opponent too powerful

to beat and push Arcane Awakening further than before. Doing that anywhere outside of a Challenge Dungeon was just too damn risky.

Sure, you could make it safe by doing it under the protection of someone powerful enough to save you should you fuck up, or maybe even in some specially prepared formation, but none of those things could compare to a true life and death battle – even if death wouldn't be permanent.

"True, true. I do have a few things I wanna test," the Sword Saint smiled. "Sadly, I have been informed the system will not allow me to go all out as death will not reset the repercussions from a Transcendence. I guess that also counts as a warning to you."

He said the last part talking to the Fallen King, who nodded in acknowledgment. The unique special abilities of Unique Lifeforms were borderline considered Transcendent skills and would not be reset either. There was even a chance something like Jake's Eternal Shadow wouldn't be fully reset due to the mental drain. Alas, he would find out.

"Do you all know which Challenge Dungeons you will be going for first?" Dina questioned.

Jake looked at the painting from the Sword Saint that looked a lot like a whiteboard, as he considered. There were five Challenge Dungeons in total. Each of them had their own themes and, as far as he knew, an endless number of "levels" until you became unable to continue and gave up or lost all your lives. This endlessness only became a thing after they reached floor seventy, mind you, which made this a great time to do it.

"Ree," Sylphie answered as she also joined Jake in staring at the list.

Challenge Dungeon available:

1. Colosseum of Mortals
2. Neverending Journey.
3. Test of Character (Limited)
4. Endless Minaga Labyrinth
5. House of the Architect

All of them had names that didn't exactly spell out what they were about but did give some hints. The first was obviously some kind of arena; the Neverending Journey was probably a travel-based one or maybe even one filled with different quests or something. Test of Character was a weird one. The only thing they were all confident in was that it wasn't a social type. In fact, there were no profession-focused Challenge Dungeons. One had to remember these were not just for enlightened but beasts too, so

all were combat-related in some ways, or at least concerned skills not about crafting or professions. That would just be unfair, the same as it would be unfair if there was a Challenge Dungeon all about absorbing and finding natural treasures or something like that.

Endless Minaga Labyrinth was self-explanatory. Jake just wondered if Minaga himself would be the-

Ah, who was he kidding? Of course, he would be.

Finally, there was the House of the Architect which could be many things but probably was related to energy control or something like that. Honestly, who bloody knew?

Well, the ones who had done the Challenge Dungeons knew, but they couldn't tell due to Nevermore and its love of not allowing the sharing of information. Again, probably an aspect of Nevermore that assisted Jake, as others were way better at taking advantage of it, but Jake still liked to complain.

"I may just do them in order," Jake said after reading them. The source of this content is **novel•fire•net**

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"Hm, good point," Jake nodded.

"Indeed, the Colosseum of Mortals and the Endless Labyrinth do strike me as similar in nature. Considering it is a Challenge Dungeon, perhaps some special circumstances are applied in one of them?" the Fallen King theorized.

"You forgot to factor in the constant mental attacks from the live commentary during the Minaga Labyrinth, which is a difficulty modifier in its own right," Jake grinned.

"If that truly returns, then I shall concede trying to get the best performance there," the Fallen King said with a sigh.

"Yeah..." Dina nodded. "I just hope I do okay."

Dina was the one facing the toughest situation in the Challenge Dungeons. As a healer, she was naturally less powerful in single combat, but she at least did have some solid offensive options. She was also damn durable and probably had the largest survivability of them all. Outside of Jake fighting foes he could dodge, that is.

"I am sure you'll do fine," the Sword Saint smiled to comfort her. "But what timescale are we looking at?"

“Based on prior eras, it usually takes between seven and twelve years for an elite to run out of lives, with elites usually taking longer,” Dina shared. “Considering there are five Challenge Dungeons, I think dedicating two years per dungeon should be a safe bet.”

“Ree?” Sylphie questioned.

“If someone is doing better than expected and will need more time, they can naturally stay longer but hopefully still leave once they reach a checkpoint to at least inform us of what is happening,” the Sword Saint answered. “Not using all your lives in every Challenge Dungeon where death is a possibility would be a wasted opportunity.”

Jake nodded. Two years per dungeon seemed fine to him. Of course, they would have to figure out a way to properly organize their meeting time after as the Challenge Dungeons would split them up not just spatially but in time too.

Challenge Dungeons tended to have more time dilation than the regular floors. Jake didn't know exactly how much more, and he honestly hadn't bothered trying to find out either. All he knew was that, based on his estimates, they would probably not even spend three years in Nevermore from the outside world's perspective. Which was honestly a pretty good level of time dilation considering the lack of any downsides.

“So, ten years based on internal clocks, right?” Jake asked the group.

“Yes,” the Sword Saint nodded as he took out five small blank pictures and handed them one each. “When inside the dungeon, infuse mana into the picture. The paint used to paint it will fade in exactly ten years after being revealed, so that should function as a fine timer.”

“You came prepared, huh?” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Had to make myself useful while you were making my elixirs. Speaking of which...”

Jake sighed and tossed the old man a few Strength-increasing elixirs in case he would get some levels. He also gave the others whatever they wanted. Intelligence for Sylphie, Willpower-increasing for the Fallen King, and finally Vitality-increasing for Dina. This was not necessarily the stats they had the most of, but just what they wanted elixirs for these days.

One thing did bother Jake a bit, though, as he asked the old man. “Did you already know we would dedicate ten years to Challenge Dungeons?”

If he had already prepared the pictures, that had to mea-

“No, I just made a few dozen variations while practicing,” he answered casually.

“Oh, alright. Yeah, that makes sense...” Jake muttered.

“Should we get going already?” the Fallen King questioned. “If we dedicate ten years now, we will still have ample time afterward to try and get a few more floors down to get higher Leaderboards positions.”

“Yeah, we should really get moving,” Jake smiled as he stood up and stretched. “Or does anyone have anything to add?”

“Ree?” Sylphie said, a bit worried.

“Hm, good point,” Jake nodded seriously. She had a point. The Union Oath Jake and Sylphie had formed so long ago with the help of Stormild had slowly been weakening for a long time, and while it didn’t seem to go faster just because they were in Nevermore – likely because it was facilitated by Stormild and thus worked on Realtime – it was still reaching the end of its lifespan.

Sylphie was worried about what would happen. Especially if it dispersed while they were both in their own Challenge Dungeons. The bond had become second nature and was something they didn’t really think or talk about. It only really materialized by allowing them to sense each other’s locations, while the rest of its effect was behind-the-scenes Records stuff, as far as Jake knew.

“I don’t think it will hurt you or me, will it?” Jake asked.

“Ree.”

“Right, Stormild can’t exactly answer when we are inside Nevermore...” Jake muttered as he looked up. “Hey, Wyrmgod, can you or Minaga, who I am sure is also around somewhere, ask the Viper if he knows if anything bad will happen? This entire situation is partly his fault, after all.”

A few seconds passed as Dina looked at him.

“I don’t think that-“

Space itself cracked in front of them as an aura fell over the room as the voice of Villy echoed.

“It’ll be fine. You can always redo the oath at another time, though I would recommend that you wait until after Nevermore. In fact, if it expires while inside a Challenge Dungeon, you will barely feel it considering you are already separated. Also, I have seen what the Challenge Dungeons are about and... yeah, I know I can’t tell him, but... just a little... no, I told you already tha-“

The connection cut off as the hole in space disappeared. For a moment, their party of five just stared as it suddenly returned, this time in an odd warped state as it looked like the Viper had torn it open himself.

“Jake, Colosseum, own that place; I made a bet that you would at lea-“

With force, the space collapsed as the entire house shook.

Seconds passed as Jake turned to Sylphie. “Sounds like things will be fine. Should we all get going?”

Dina just stared as the Sword Saint questioned him. “Aren’t you going to address... you know?”

“Oh, right, yeah, I am doing the Colosseum first, I guess,” Jake shrugged. “Something I already planned on doing, for the record.”

“Ree?”

“We can talk about making a new oath after Nevermore for sure,” Jake smiled as Sylphie looked relieved. She jumped up as Jake caught her in his arms.

Despite being the age of a fully adult woman, Sylphie was still as much of a little hawk as she had been thirty years ago when they entered Nevermore. Sure, she had gotten smarter and wiser, but she was still – and perhaps always was going to be – a little goofy featherball.

Jake wouldn’t have it any other way as he rubbed her head, making her snuggle up to him. “You go create some carnage in those Challenge Dungeons, okay?”

“Ree!”

“Damn straight you will,” Jake grinned as Sylphie jumped out of his embrace and landed on his shoulder.

The old man and Dina smiled as they began to walk after Jake, who headed toward the entrance to the Challenge Dungeons. The Fallen King was the last to leave, as he muttered from behind.

“Are we truly going to ignore two Primordials having a scuffle over a bet?”

That is exactly what they were doing, as everyone ignored him while they walked to the Challenge Dungeons.

On the way, Jake did a final check-up of things as the others casually chatted.

Arcane affinity growing in influence within the Soulflame Cradle? Check.

Potions stocked? Check.

Poisons ready? Check

Void marble licked? Check.

Equipment not upgraded for thirty years but still good enough? Check.

Yep, everything seemed good to go. Jake's injured Palate stomach had even healed quite a while back, making him all ready to go.

Reaching the Challenge Dungeons area, they finally saw other people. A few hundred C-grades were gathered in the area, with a few booths even set up not far away selling different things. Jake and the others weren't interested as they looked at the five giant gates in front of them. Each had a motif on the gate. One was a grand Colosseum with what looked like two gladiators standing within.

Another was what looked like a road continuing infinitely. A third was a large square building of sorts, while a fourth was a single person sitting in meditation.

The final one was just a picture of Minaga's face.

Very professional.

Jake couldn't help to smile as he looked at it. Doing a bit of solo labyrinth fun was appealing, but alas, Villy apparently had a bet for him to win by doing... something.

"Where are you guys headed?" he asked the group.

"I think I will do the Labyrinth," Dina said, surprising Jake a bit, though he didn't really question it. He was sure she had her own plans.

"Ree," Sylphie shared, having decided on just doing the House of the Architect first. Definity struck him as random.

"I shall do the colosseum, too," the Sword Saint stated. That one made sense.

"*Test of Character*," the Fallen King said, not wanting to elaborate.

Jake nodded, and after a final snuggle with Sylphie, he walked toward the Challenge Dungeon gate. Putting his hand on it, he looked back at this party. "See you all in ten years!"

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Chapter 739: Nevermore: Colosseum of Mortals

The Sword Saint had joked about them not wanting to see each other's faces anymore, and while Jake wouldn't have phrased it like that... it wasn't that far off from how he actually felt.

Not to misunderstand. Jake liked his party. Sylphie was naturally always a joy, and Dina liked to stick by herself when possible, so she was also great. And, sure, the Fallen King could be a bit uptight, and the Sword Saint liked to take on the demeanor of an old lecturer, but things had been good overall if he said so himself.

However, he also had to recognize that some alone time was more than welcome. While he did get some time alone here and there while on the different floors, they were still always connected through their Golden Marks and had frequent check-ins.

Now, in the Challenge Dungeons, Jake was back to it being just him, and he was all for it. He did recognize that there would likely be other characters in there, but no people he had to actually interact with outside of the bare minimum unless he wanted to. He didn't have to consider social decorum much and could just go with the flow and focus on whatever challenges appeared before him.

After saying his temporary farewells to his party members, he entered his very first Challenge Dungeon.

Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!

Jake only managed to read this single part of the welcome message as he was assaulted by a wave of weakness. His legs lost strength, and he fell to his knees. He felt his knee hit the stone, and a tinge of pain hit him as the rough linen now covering his body didn't help much.

Wait, pain?

How could hitting his knee like that hurt him? What was going on...

As he was trying to figure things out, he luckily had a system message that explained everything.

You have entered the Colosseum of Mortals. A battleground for the weak where only the truly skilled will prevail.

As a new arrival, you are nothing but a New Blood that must prove himself in the arena. Fight, conquer, and advance through the ranks as you qualify for

promotion matches. Who knows, perhaps one day you may even become the Champion.

During this Challenge Dungeon, all base stats are normalized and set to 10. Base stats cannot be increased while in the Colosseum of Mortals. All current items and equipment have been confiscated and shall be returned upon exiting the Challenge Dungeon. All usage of items and equipment is heavily restricted. All skill use is heavily restricted. Further restrictions may apply.

Objective: Achieve victory in the Colosseum as many times as possible.

Current objective: Be promoted from New Blood to Initiate Fighter

Current rank: New Blood (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 0

Lives remaining: 10

Jake read through it all and had a pretty damn good idea what this was, and the name Colosseum of Mortals also made quite a bit more sense now.

This was the kind of Challenge Dungeon where one couldn't just take advantage of overpowering everything with pure stats, high rarity skills, or great equipment. It was one where everyone was equal, no matter their Path, and it was all about skill.

Well, kind of. Because upon looking at this updated Status, something didn't quite add up.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (G) – 0]

Class: N/A

Profession: N/A

Health Points (HP): 170/170

Mana Points (MP): 170/170

Stamina: 160/160

Stats

Strength: 16

Agility: 18

Endurance: 16

Vitality: 17

Toughness: 16

Wisdom: 17

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 20

Willpower: 16

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Wait, it said all my stats were set to 10? Jake questioned, confused. While he was not a math Wizz, he was pretty sure none of those numbers were the number 10. However, he soon realized what was going on. Base stats had been set to 10. Get full chapters from [novel~fire~net](#)

Looking at the rest of his status menu, he did indeed see that while all of his class and profession skills were gone, his titles were left untouched.

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer XV], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Marquess], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)]

At least they were untouched for the most part. All the flat stat bonuses obviously didn't count, but all percentage amplifiers did. This meant that Jake had far higher stats than normal base humans, putting him firmly at the level of a superhuman despite the effects of the floor. It wasn't that extreme, though, but a nice advantage.

Checking further, he also saw that at least his race skills were mostly the same.

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Meditation (Common)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Meditation and Identify had both been downgraded, but the rest were the same. Wisdom of the Hunter still gave him a percentage amplifier to some of his stats, and Shroud of the Primordial was completely unaffected. At least, he assumed it to be that because, with his current stats, he was pretty limited in his ability to check it out.

However, even with everything going on, one thing remained untouched. One thing that, even when Jake did Villy's Challenge Dungeon, wasn't affected in the slightest:

Bloodline: [Bloodline of (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

Deciding to scan his environment, Jake closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception. The entire space around him was laid bare before him as an area more than three-hundred kilometers in diameter was revealed to him. His mind was absolutely fine, too, as even if the system had nerfed him, it had left his Truesoul untouched.

It was more like it had put a barrier around it. A barrier that only let through whatever the system allowed – with the Bloodline having a nice little backdoor.

He did have the problem that properly memorizing the entire mental map was difficult, but at least he got an idea of where to go. Not that he needed it, as a young man approached him from behind, walking down the cobblestone road leading toward the Colosseum with what looked like a panther of some sort. Over his shoulder, he wore a travel bag and had quite a cheery look on his face as he also spotted Jake.

"Oh, hey there!" he greeted Jake with a light-hearted smile. "Are you here to join the Colosseum too?"

Jake had already stood back up and inspected himself briefly. His clothes were gone, and switched for a simple linen shirt and pants. Having the mask gone kind of sucked, but he would manage. Looking at the young man, he smiled in return. "Yeah, that was the plan. Though I will admit, I am pretty unfamiliar with how things work around here."

"No worries there," the young man said as he looked in his bag and took out a small pamphlet. Jake graciously accepted it as the young man asked: "Wanna go together and see the Battlemaster to sign as combatants?"

Seeing as that was his objective in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake naturally agreed with a smile as the cheery-looking man told him all he knew about the place as he showed Jake the way into the grand Colosseum.

As for how grand it was?

Well, grand enough for even a fully powered Pulse to be utterly incapable of seeing the entire structure and the seemingly thousands of arenas within.

“The Colosseum of Mortals. A testing ground where skill takes precedence over pure power. The individuals doing it shall be returned to their starting point, only empowered by rare stat percentage modifiers, and, through the directive of the system, face opponents,” the Wyrmgod said, partly explaining the place to the Viper.

“I reckon designing that yourself would have been borderline impossible,” Vilastromoz nodded. He was already aware of how these kinds of Challenge Dungeons worked himself, having tried to make quite a few in the past. He also knew the biggest challenge they faced.

“Impossible is an understatement,” Minaga scoffed. “People say I am impossible, but have you ever tried balancing a Challenge Dungeon like that? Actually impossible. Everyone has different starting points and grades in which they begin... on-the-fly adaptation and individualization is required, making no two Colosseum of Mortals alike.”

Vilastromoz nodded. This was indeed the major challenge when one “nerfed” the people doing a Challenge Dungeon like this, especially when in a competitive environment. Jake would do it as a G-grade, as that was his starting point. Meanwhile, someone like the Unique Lifeform in his party would start as a level 100, as he was born in D-grade, making that his starting grade. All the other restrictions would still apply, such as those on skills, but he would have normalized stats for the grade. The actual stats would be lower than pretty much any level 100 D-grade, balancing even different variants.

Well, not truly balancing. As a Unique Lifeform, he would still have his titles, including the special Unique Lifeform title. Even if the Wyrmgod wanted balance, absolute balance within the dungeon was never the goal, hence why they were allowed to keep such bonuses.

When it came to balancing creatures that were actually a higher grade, things got truly complicated. As an example, the Sylphian was born at level 0, yes, but that did not make her an F-grade at any point. No, she was truly a far higher grade. One she hadn’t even reached yet. Hence the system would simply make her level 200 – the “latest” starting point she had hit.

Was this the best solution? One that truly balanced the relative level of challenge and ensured the integrity of the Leaderboards, even if everyone ended up ultimately facing entirely different individualized versions of the same Challenge Dungeon?

Yes. Yes, it was. Because it was all handled by the omnipotent system.

“What weapon do you usually use, Jake?” Owen asked as they walked toward the Quartermaster. “My old man trained me to use a spear, but I am pretty good with a sword and buckler too.”

“Hm, I usually use bows and katars, but I have also used swords and knives for a bit. Oh, and a staff on rare occasions,” Jake answered the young man he had met outside of the Colosseum.

Despite being fully aware he was just a dungeon character, Jake still got talking with the guy, and he was far more animated and real than most other people. In fact, Jake couldn't place anything off about him at all, to the level of him needing to confirm he wasn't actually a real person by asking him about the Challenge Dungeon aspect of where they were. That confirmed he was indeed a character innate to the place, as he didn't respond or even seem to react to it.

After they had entered the Colosseum together, they had gone and registered with a very uninterested Battlemaster who told them that if they wanted to fight, they had to go talk to the Quartermaster about getting weapons and armor first.

“That's... a lot. Man, now I feel inadequate. Though I do also kind of know how to use a pitchfork well. I once fought off a big boar all on my own a few years back using one,” Owen tried to regain some clout.

“Hey, you said you know a few schools of magic,” Jake cheered him up. “I can only do one kind properly.”

“Right, right,” the young man nodded enthusiastically.

The panther he had arrived with had left them right after meeting with the Battlemaster, by the way. It turned out the beast Jake had expected to be related to Owen in some way was just another fighter who wanted to sign up for the Colosseum whom Owen had met on the way and was now off to talk to a monster-specialized Battlemaster.

Reaching the Quartermaster, Jake found that they could pretty much ask for any weapon or equipment they wanted and some-fucking-how, the guy would have it inside his store room. After a while of talking with the guy who looked like the stereotypical blacksmith out of any game – despite being a Quartermaster – Jake and Owen both left with a set of equipment each.

The first to get his weapon was Owen. He received his requested wooden spear with a metal tip that looked quite well-made, along with a set of armor. Looking at the spear, Jake was happy to see that his Identify skill at least worked.

[Flexible Spear (Common)] – A flexible spear made of wood and metal. Sharp and durable, with relatively weak mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

It truly was as simple as it came, but with their current stats, did one need better? When it came to his own weapons, Jake got it a bit later. He had requested just a bow, a quiver, and a knife. None of them was anything special either.

[Shortbow (Common)] – A shortbow suited for fast drawing and shooting of arrows. The body of made of wood and a string of tough sinew. The wood is relatively durable but is not made for taking direct impacts. Low mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

[Quiver (Common)] – A simple quiver capable of holding twenty-four arrows. The arrows are with simple fletching and metal tips, great for penetrating lighter defenses but weak against heavily armored foes.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

[Hunting Knife (Common)] – A hunting knife made of metal. Sharp and durable knife, but it has an edge that easily dulls if used repeatedly. Relatively low mana conductivity.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

Armor had come in light, medium, heavy, and very heavy variants. One could have just gone with robes or many other designs if they preferred that, but Jake had chosen to go with the light armor, while Owen got the medium one.

[Light Leather Armor (Common)] – A complete set of light leather armor, offering good protection against slashing attack, but is weak to stabbing and blunt damage.

Requirements: Any Humanoid Race. New Blood Colosseum Rank

The armor was pretty well made but also simple. It was functional over everything else too, and while not perfect, definitely better than nothing. Plus, it didn't affect Jake's movements at all after he made a few light modifications, where he made a few cuts around the joints and stuff. He wasn't planning on taking many hits with it either way.

As for why he hadn't opted for his katars or bigger melee weapons... well, weight was now suddenly a problem he had to consider. Plus, swapping weapons was harder now as he didn't have any spatial storage. Katars were great weapons when magic was involved, but they took some time to put on if he had to switch from his bow mid-fight. No, a sheathed knife was way faster there. Sure, maybe he could have tried to go with a hidden blade or something too, but a knife seemed like the simplest and easiest option. Plus, this would be for the first fights, which he predicted to be relatively easy.

Needless to say, Jake would have preferred to use his own stuff, but he would have to settle with whatever the dungeon would provide him. Again, he understood why it worked like this, but that didn't mean he couldn't complain about it internally.

Jake *had* tried to pull out his Eternal Hunger. The mythical item was in a weird position in that it was both merged with his soul, but also a piece of equipment, so he didn't know if that would be gone. His attempt had ended with him only pulling out a bit of curse energy while mentally draining himself significantly. He had wanted to continue practicing, but something told him that should he even manage to summon Eternal Hunger, his entire body would explode from its energy, wasting a life.

Having low stats seriously sucked for any and all kinds of experimenting and imposed several annoying limitations. What made it all worse was that Jake's mana and stamina pools were both so damn low now, and it wasn't like Jake had potions to quickly regenerate them, so he had to be a bit careful with wasting energy outside of fights.

Speaking of fights, he and Owen were both making their way back toward the Battlemaster to begin their first fights.

"We should go sign up to battle at the same time," Owen said with a smile.

"No, let me go first, and you can observe, okay?" Jake said.

Yeah, he was not falling into that trap. It would be very cliché and kind of fucked up if he would meet someone nice and friendly, spend time getting to know him, sign up to battle at the same time, only to face each other in a duel, forcing Jake to kill him.

No way he was going to do that shit.

"I guess we can do that, too," Owen nodded. "Oh, damn, if we had done that, couldn't we have risked meeting each other in the arena? Yeah, that would have been bad, wouldn't it? Yep, definitely awkward to kill a friend."

Jake stared at him a bit. "You are surprisingly calm, considering you might have just been killed if you decided to go up against me."

"I have confidence that I can win enough fights to at least become a Fighter," Owen smiled proudly. "Though I am not quite sure if I could beat you, true. How about you? What are you aiming for? You sound kind of skilled, so maybe you can even reach the Gladiator rank..."

Jake just grinned at him. "Champion or bust."

"I... I don't think that's very feasible," Owen said, scratching the back of his head. "Like, I commend the spirit, but..."

“You’re right,” Jake nodded. “There is definitely gonna be some hidden Grand Champion rank or something above Champion, right? That seems like a more realistic goal.”

As the saying goes: go big or die ten times in the attempt and be forced to go home.

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Chapter 740: Nevermore: Kicking Off The Colosseum Arc

“Welcome to the Colosseum! Today, we have two New Bloods, both here to prove their worth! As they set foot on the sand soiled with the blood of their predecessors, who will come out on top!? Who will have a chance to move forward!? Perhaps... no! Not perhaps! Surely, today is the first match of a coming champion!”

The voice of the announcer echoed loudly throughout the entire arena as Jake stood behind a fenced gate leading up to the arena itself. After talking to the Battlemaster, the guy had looked him over once before agreeing he was ready and sent him down one of the many hallways leading into an arena. These hallways were a mishmash of spatial distortion, taking you pretty much anywhere in the arena without you even noticing. No one around seemed to comment on it either, as everything was indeed very low-fantasy. There weren’t even teleportation gates anywhere, and regular gates had replaced magical barriers everywhere. He also had to admit that everything large-scale magical going on could only be detected by him due to his sphere.

“Combatants, enter the arena!”

Jake began walking forward, bow in hand and ready to go. He quickly made it up to a still-lowering second meshed gate, his opponent directly ahead of him.

“Go Jake!” he heard yelled from the stands as he saw Owen there.

The arena was entirely circular and pretty small, only about thirty meters across, the ground covered in sand. Jake knew that as one moved up the ranks, arenas got bigger and grander, but for a starter arena, this was honestly pretty good. The stands all around were just benches, but there were surprisingly many in the audience. Though, Jake quickly came to realize they weren’t humans. They were instead small green creatures.

Jake stared at his opponent at the other end of the arena as he cursed internally. *Really?*

[Goblin]

The goblin looked exactly as he would have expected. It was not even a meter tall and carried with it a wooden club that it held over its shoulder, trying to look intimidating. This was Jake's first time encountering a goblin that truly personified a starter mob, and he honestly had no idea what to expect from the fight.

He knew goblins came in many different forms. They were an enlightened race as they had professions and classes like humans and elves but rarely reached high levels. If a goblin reached D-grade, chances are it wouldn't be a goblin anymore but, at the very least, some kind of hobgoblin. Jake even heard that goblins sometimes evolved into orcs and ogres or other such races.

As for the audience? Yeah, it consisted of ninety-five percent goblins who were all cheering and hollering loudly at their fighter. The crowd definitely wasn't on Jake's side.

Right as the mesh was about to fully lowered, the announcer spoke one more time:

"Let the battle begin!"

Without hesitation, the goblin charged toward him, having no doubt realized he would have a better chance in a melee. Jake had a bow, and the faster the goblin got close, the fewer shots he could get off. Additionally, Jake only had a knife for melee combat, which would make it very difficult to block a club.

The goblin knew all this and quickly ran across the arena, closing in at an impressive speed. The sand barely seemed to slow him down as he sneered at Jake, soon getting within only a few meters with Jake yet to nock a single arrow. The goblin prepared to swing its club the moment he entered striking distance, with Jake still yet to respond.

"Oh no! The goblin is simply too fast for the human to respond in time and draw his bow! How will he-"

Jake kicked the goblin.

His small green opponent tumbled to the ground, losing grip of his club. The little guy tried to get back up and find the club but stumbled again. After a dozen seconds, Jake just sighed as the goblin had managed to stand back up, even if he looked wobbly on his feet, barely able to hold onto the club.

"If you try to hit me again, I will kick you harder than last time."

The goblin stared at him for a second.

"I give up!"

Silence persisted for a good three seconds as the announcer yelled loudly.

"A perfect victory for the archer... no, the martial artist! A glorious display of misdirection to bring a bow and confuse his foe! Truly brilliant!"

Jake tried to ignore the announcer guy as he walked back the way he came. He raised his hand and waved as the goblin bowed while Jake made his exit to the excited yells of Owen. Reaching the tunnel, he checked his menu and saw it had been updated.

Current rank: New Blood (1/5)

Colosseum Points: 2

Lives remaining: 10

Alright, one victory down... if you can even call that a victory.

Yeah, his first fight was a bit disappointing. Luckily, he hadn't had to actually kill his opponent to win. The rules of the Colosseum were rather simple in regard to obtaining victories. One could win in one of three ways: kill your opponent, knock them out, or have them surrender. Apparently, in higher ranks, the rules could change, forcing some matches to be death matches, with others even having referees.

Winning a match would give you one point toward promotion. Getting five points – at least for now – allowed you to do a promotion match and reach the next rank. If you lost a match and survived, you would lose a point, and if you went too much in the negative, you risked getting demoted to a lower rank. All in all, a simple system that made it quite easy to see that Jake just had to keep winning matches.

Anyway, getting out of the tunnel leading to the arena, Jake went straight to the Battlemaster, who congratulated him and told him to take a rest before coming back for another fight. Before Jake could protest, he heard running from behind as Owen arrived. The Battlemaster threw Jake a look, making him back off and sit on a bench not far away as Owen ran over.

"That was awesome!" the young man said excitedly and slightly out of breath as he stared at Jake with starry eyes. "I didn't know you were a martial artist! Those are super rare."

"I'm not," Jake shrugged. "I just didn't want to use a weapon... it felt like that would have been overkill."

"You don't need to be shy," Owen smiled. "That kick was clearly practiced. You hit him right on the chin, too, and the timing... definitely not something you just did on a whim."

But... it was, Jake said internally, knowing he wouldn't get anything out of saying it out loud.'

Owen talked for a bit more before Jake decided sitting there was too boring.

"Anyway, I think I am going for another match," Jake said as he stood up.

"Already? Well, I guess you don't really need any rest..."

"Nope," Jake said as he walked up to the Battlemaster. "Let me fight again."

The Battlemaster looked at Jake. "Hmph. Don't get overconfident just because you won one fight against a goblin, New Blood. Plus, I heard you revealed to everyone your special kicking technique, so expect your next opponent to know about it."

Jake really wanted to point out how he literally just kicked the goblin normally but nodded solemnly. "I will keep that in mind. So will you let me fight?"

"Alright, just don't embarrass me for giving you permission," the Battlemaster scoffed as he pointed at the tunnel for him to enter once the timer above it was done. Which would be about half an hour, it seemed. This time was given for a few things, including studying your opponent using stuff from some of the many information brokers around, but naturally, Jake didn't feel like he needed or wanted that. At least not yet.

How no one pointed out that there were hundreds of tunnels leading out of the training area was really fucking weird, but not anything worth commenting about. Also, who the hell was in charge of all those timers? How did they even know how long something would take? Of course, he knew it was all just system-fuckery, but he still kind of wanted to know if the system would at least try and offer up a feasible explanation.

After the timer was done, he began walking down the tunnel. He soon found himself in a nearly identical arena, ready for his next match. Everything proceeded as before, as it was even the same announcer who went wild and introduced them both as Jake reached the second meshed gate. At the other end, he saw his next opponent.

It was an elven woman wearing an overly elegant dress that Jake suspected was against regulation. She held a simple wand in her gloved hands, looking incredibly full of herself - something her words that sadly interrupted the announcer also made extra clear.

"You are but a brute whose only skill is thoughtless kicks! I have been training under my revered master for years, and your meager martial arts will prove no challenge!"

Not a martial artist.

The moment the mesh was down, the woman walked slightly forward as she held out her wand. "Behold! The power of true magic!"

Jake began walking into the arena at a casual pace as he saw mana slowly begin to gather, glad that even if he had been pushed to G-grade, he could still easily feel it. Then again, if he couldn't feel it, other G-grade humans also wouldn't be able to, which would make any and all casters utterly fucked in the Challenge Dungeon.

Anyway, Jake kept watching as a fireball about the size of a basketball condensed over the next dozen or so seconds, as the elven woman looked incredibly strained. She kept her eyes trained on Jake, who kept walking, and as he passed a bit over the halfway point, she yelled again.

"Try to dodge this!"

He did.

The fireball flew straight for him, and Jake pretty casually side-stepped it as she stared wide-eyed as the fireball hit the sand and left a nice black burn mark. It didn't even explode.

"Not yet!" she screamed with determination as more fire mana began to gather. Jake sighed a bit as he kept walking until he got within three meters of the elf, and she looked right at him again with a triumphant smile.

"Hah! At this distance, you cannot possibly dodge in time!"

He could.

This fireball flew straight by him as he dodged and kept flying before it, already half-fizzled out, hit the back wall of the arena behind Jake. Now, standing within a couple of meters of the elf, she looked at him with wide eyes.

"If... if you let me win, I am sure my master will-"

Jake walked one step closer, slightly raising his leg.

"Please don't kick me."

Jake looked at her and raised his eyebrow as she looked about to cry.

"I give up!" she yelled loudly as she stumbled back and fell down on the sand. Before Jake could even do or say anything, she began full-on ugly crying.

Jake stared for a moment before quickly scurrying out of the arena again, sighing mentally on the way.

Get me out of this...

He nearly felt bad about that last fight; the lady clearly had no damn fighting experience.

Making his way back to the Battlemaster, he was once more told not to get cocky. Alas, at least the guy wasn't a complete idiot as the middle-aged man allowed Jake to fight again immediately, and on the way back to the arena, he only said a quick hi to Owen, who had also decided to do some matches himself.

Entering the arena for the third time that day, he had another quick victory, all the build-up taking far longer than the fight itself.

As for how he won?

One kick.

The fourth and fifth fight was the same, both of them going down with single kicks. All three of his last fights had been humans, and all had gone down the same way. Honestly, it was amazing how good a quick kick was at convincing someone that continuing fighting was probably a bad idea. His fifth opponent did look like he wanted to quit before the fight even started but still allowed Jake to get in a good kick before he surrendered.

This finally allowed him to make actual progress. That's right, it was time for a promotion match.

Alas, this promotion match proved to be quite a lot more challenging than the fights prior. In fact, it took twice as much effort than any of those prior:

Two kicks.

When he got down from his grand promotion match, the Battlemaster had a smile on his lips and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Good job, New Blood... or should I call you, Initiate Fighter. Who knows, if you keep this up, we might one day make a proper combatant out of you!"

Owen, who somehow seemed to always be around, also quickly came over, looking a bit worse for wear. He had bandages wrapped around his right upper arm, and his forearms were also wrapped in some green half-seethrough gauze to treat what looked like burns.

"You managed to get promoted already!" Owen said with a smile. "I only won three matches myself, but I am getting the hang of it!"

Jake just smiled in return, not wanting to ask how the hell the guy managed to get himself injured against the kind of foes one could meet in these first five matches. They

were all either people too weak to put up fights or didn't have an iota of fighting experience. Even the guy Jake met for his promotion match barely knew how to raise his arm to block with a buckler. Which was how he managed to handle two kicks, by the way.

"You aren't even injured," Owen whistled. "Damn, you really are a pro martial artist."

"Not a martial artist," Jake corrected him.

Oh, right, sure," Owen grinned, giving a wink. "I understand perfectly."

"I don't think you do," Jake sighed as he looked toward the Battlemaster, who was talking to some other young chump. "Oh well, I guess I can go for one more match."

"What are you talking about?" Owen asked, confused. "The Colloseum is closing in half an hour. No way you got time for one more fight."

"Closing?" Jake questioned. It closed? Jake wasn't used to things closing anymore. Check latest chapters at [novel★fire★net](#)

"Yeah, it closes every night at ten and reopens the next morning at six, with matches starting at eight," Owen explained. "Getting here early means you can often get in a morning fight."

Jake slowly nodded. Damn, it sounded like the Colosseum did really close, and looking around the large training area filled with target dummies and different kinds of equipment, he did notice the place was emptying out.

Then what the hell am I supposed to do? Jake wondered.

"Do you already have a room booked, by the way? I heard that as an Initiate Fighter, you can get a small room to yourself," Owen asked after seeing Jake just standing there in thought.

"Hm?" Jake humphed. "No room booked, no. But I guess we can go check that out.

"Nice," Owen ever-cheerfully smiled as he showed Jake the way.

Jake shrugged and followed. While walking, he stretched his arms a bit as he yawned, stopping mid-yawn.

I'm tired?

Next, something else struck him as his stomach rumbled slightly. *And hungry...*

Plus, his mouth did feel a bit dry...

Jake had forgotten a lot of human things that had apparently returned, and suddenly the breaks made a lot more sense. He needed to eat, drink, and sleep. While he was still a superhuman by all reasonable standards, making such aspects of life less of a problem for him than many others, he was not immune to these woes.

Oh, and then there was one final big challenge to his continued desire to fight endlessly. Without potions and a shitty meditation skill, Jake found himself struggling in the resource department.

Health Points (HP): 169/170

Mana Points (MP): 162/170

Stamina: 32/160

--

He had not strained himself at any point throughout the day, yet his stamina was low. Simply living and walking around drained stamina, but usually, Jake could easily regenerate that by quickly meditating or consuming a potion. Even without these, he could easily go for months or years without running out of stamina from just existing.

When it came to sleep, as a C-grade, Jake never had to sleep. Sleep could still be done, mind you, as it was by far the best method to regenerate mental energy. So good that some beings who were born without having ever needed to sleep – and thus lacked the natural ability to – learned to sleep just for this regenerative ability.

To need sleep again was kind of a bummer, but it wasn't that bad. In fact, Jake was sure there could be a lot of benefits to reconnecting with how he was in his early days. He could work on the very basics without high stats or any skills...

Especially the not-having-skills-part was significant because it allowed Jake to develop and try some things he couldn't before. To potentially even understand some of the skills, he did have better than ever, as he could learn aspects of them without the influence exerted from possessing the skill and the accompanying system assistance.

Yeah... on second thought, maybe this downtime between fights did have some benefits. Jake definitely had things to do or look into when not in the arena. There were even a few plans popping up in his mind. But first thing's first:

It was sleepy time.

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Chapter 741: Nevermore: A Second Day At The Colosseum

The last time Jake slept, it was because he had utterly over-exhausted himself and was all out of mental energy. However, this time, it was a far more normal sleep. He even got in a good seven hours before he woke up – more than he had initially planned. Not having an alarm clock made it hard to plan out how much you wanted to sleep.

Oh yeah, that reminds me... the Sword Saint's timer.

To use a special painting infused with time magic was a nice idea, but who could have known that the very first dungeon Jake entered would take away all his items? But hey, at least the Sword Saint shouldn't yell at him if he was late, as the old man was also doing the Colosseum of Mortals along with Jake.

Wait, he probably has some overpowered internal clock skill... Jake realized. Sure, Jake also had an internal clock, but that honestly didn't work very well in circumstances like this. In combat, he could count time passing down to less than a millisecond, but when things were calm, his clock broke.

Getting out of bed, Jake stretched, feeling refreshed. He was in a small room with nothing but a pretty bad bed and a wooden table with a lantern that had what looked like red fireflies within. Jake didn't really need the lamp, but it was nice of the Colosseum to provide them for those with lesser Perception.

Jake opened the door to his room as dozens more doors stretched out to either side of him. He was in a large dormitory of sorts that seemed to operate more like an inn than an actual dormitory. The building itself was placed in a decently-sized city just down the road from the Colosseum.

He had seen it with his Pulse of Perception before but hadn't really paid it much mind. Now he realized he was probably going to spend quite some time there. Though, hopefully, with better accommodations in the future. The small room sucked, but at least it was better than where Owen was stuck.

The poor guy was sleeping in a large communal room with bunk beds. Three-layered bunk beds, even. When Jake came to get him, he didn't look like he had gotten nearly enough sleep, but he pepped up pretty quickly.

"Hey, Jake! Slept well?" he asked cheerfully.

"Could be better, but I'll manage," Jake said, wanting to at least sound a bit empathetic toward the poor guy. "You mentioned yesterday that you know about a great place to get breakfast?"

“Yeah! My old man kept talking about how great the food is,” Owen said enthusiastically. “Just follow me!” Follow current novels on [novelfire.net](#)

And follow him, he did. Owen led Jake to a dining hall elsewhere in the city, not far from the dorms. There, Jake had a meal he could only describe as scrumptious. Having to eat was an obvious downside to his reduced stats, but getting to eat was pretty damn sweet, and Jake had nearly begun to forget how good food was.

A diet of toxic ingredients was good for his Malefic Palate but not his regular palate.

After eating, the two of them naturally headed to the Colosseum again. It was about seven in the morning at this point, with the fights beginning an hour later. Could Jake be more efficient with his time, optimizing his time spent? Sure, but why would he do Challenge Dungeons at all if he didn't enjoy them? Plus, it wasn't like he would actually be delayed, as far as he could tell.

Walking to the Colosseum, he looked over his menu related to the floor.

Current objective: Be promoted from Initiate Fighter to Fledgling Fighter

Current rank: Initiate Fighter (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 20

Lives remaining: 10

Firstly, was a Fledgling Fighter considered better than an Initiate? Both sounded like new fighters who sucked, but alas, if that is what the Wyrmgod decided was a good rank-up name, so be it. It was dumb, but sure.

Looking at the points, Jake had gained 2 for every win and then 10 for the promotion match, virtue of clearing the quest. Exactly how the math worked with giving points, he naturally didn't know, but he was planning on gathering a bigger data set as fast as possible.

He just had to keep kicking.

And kicking, he would.

At higher ranks, getting a match could take time, but it was normal to do several a day in low ranks. After signing up for a match, Jake took a seat as he saw it would take forty minutes before it began, as he was still a bit early for the eight-o'clock opening time.

Owen had run off to the training area to discuss with some of the other fighters while gathering information on them. Something Jake didn't see a big need for. Apparently,

there were other training areas for higher-ranked combatants, and everyone in this training area was all below Fighter rank.

Sitting there on his lonesome, Jake tried to meditate a bit, but it proved short-lived as he saw someone approaching. Someone familiar.

Opening his eyes, he saw an elven woman who now wore a slightly less extravagant robe. She carried a fan that she used to cover half of her face as she walked over, her appearance making her look very out of place. Jake hoped for a moment she wasn't going toward him, but considering there wasn't anyone else on the bench he was sitting on, that didn't seem likely.

Preparing himself mentally, he looked her way. She hurried the last few steps and stopped right in front of him, the fan open and only revealing her eyes and the top of her head. To his eyes, anyway. Sphere still saw the nervous-as-hell face she tried to hide.

"Good morning, my fellow combatant. It is surely a fortunate happenstance that we would meet once more," she said in a weird-ass tone.

"I am sitting in a waiting area at the gates not far from the Battlemaster... it would be weird not to see me," Jake smirked. "But, sure, we can call it fortunate and random."

Hey, if he was going to have to wait for a match to start and she wanted to talk to him, she had to be ready for him to mess with her a bit, right?

"I... perhaps, I may have sought you out intentionally," she said, hiding more of her face with the fan. "I saw your other fights yesterday after you bested me. It was truly impressive, and your martial skills are outstanding."

"Thanks?" Jake said, not sure what she was getting at. "You are kind of getting me curious... why did you approach me?"

"Where are my manners. Before we get to that, introductions are in order. I am Pollaystrasirial Langtdumtnavn, a master sorcerer in the making," she said, doing an exaggerated bow like one of those nobles in old TV dramas. "I was hoping to perhaps build proper rapport and potentially foster a healthy long-term relationship with my fellow combatant. Your talents shown already make it clear you will go far, and I am certain I can prove myself most useful."

Jake thought for a second. "What are you peddling, eh Pollaystaia- you know what, I am just going to call you Polly."

"It is Pollaystra-"

"Polly."

Her eye twitched slightly. “Sir, I believe keeping proper conduct is-“

“Eh, it’ll be fine, Polly,” Jake waved her off. “Name’s Jake, by the way.”

“Sir Jake, I-“

“Just Jake. Jeez, are you even the same person I nearly kicked yesterday?” Jake questioned.

“My actions yesterday were thoroughly unbecoming, and I deeply apologize,” she said, really looking like she was trying to save the situation. A situation Jake had no idea why was even happening, as he had yet to figure out what the hell she wanted outside of just making friends.

“All is forgiven and forgotten. Now, Polly, what did you want?”

“Sir, please, it is not Polly. It is-“

“We are talking in circles now, Polly,” Jake cut her off, adding in a teasing tone. “Now talking in circles, that’s unbecoming.”

“You...” she sneered slightly, trying to gather herself fast. “Very well. I come offering information and partnership. I realize that I may need more studying to truly excel at magic before I rejoin the arena, but I have researched the Colosseum for a long time and believe I could be of use.”

Jake motioned for her to continue, still not sure if he needed someone to give him information. At least not the information he reckoned she could get or knew of.

“I...” she said, looking down at Jake sitting on the bench, as something finally seemed to snap. “I’ve had enough of you! Agh! Why are you like this? Have you never heard of proper etiquette? To remain sitting down when talking to a noblewoman? To make up a name – nay – daring to use her first name without proper respect! Let’s not mention how you just left me crying yesterday, not even offering a lady your hand! Moreover, you... you...”

Her words petered out as she looked horrified at what she had just done, but before she could say anything, Jake cut her off.

“See, I already like this version of you much better,” Jake smiled, partly to calm her down and partly because that was how he genuinely felt. Overly-uptight people sucked.

“I... really?” she asked in a far more normal tone.

“Yep,” Jake nodded. “Also, I am impressed you only talked about how you were a noblewoman and not about this glorious wizard teacher of yours like yesterday.”

“Hmph, he is more than just a simple wizard! I have been taught magic by a true expert wizard who once also competed in the arena and nearly managed to reach the rank of Champion!” she said proudly.

“Define nearly,” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Well... I can’t be sure how close he got, but definitely really close!” Polly insisted, looking a little flustered.

“Sure, sure,” Jake nodded with a smirk. “Now, you say you got good information? Let’s start with an easy one. What are the different combatant ranks, and how many are there?”

Jake wanted to know how many people he needed to kick before he would be the Champion.

She looked at him for a moment, clearly confused, as a look of realization flashed across her face. “Aha! A trick question! You won’t get me that easily. Everyone knows that only the information up to the Gladiator rank is publicly available until you reach the rank yourself.”

Jake nodded as if he totally knew that already, silently cursing at Owen for not sharing something that was obviously considered common knowledge. Why did he have to talk about herding cows for half an hour during breakfast instead of giving actually useful information?

“And what are the ranks between New Blood and Gladiator?”

Once more, she looked a bit confused until she smiled. “Surely, you jest? It is right in the pamphlet placed at every entrance.”

“I... of course, I was just pulling your leg,” Jake jokingly said as he waved her off. Hurridly, he took out the unread and crumbled-up pamphlet that had been in his pants since yesterday. Quickly uncrumbling it, he opened it and saw that on the first page, it showed the different combatant rankings from now till Gladiator.

New Blood

Initiate Fighter

Fledgling Fighter

Upcoming Fighter

Fighter

Experienced Fighter

Journeyman Fighter

Veteran Fighter

Expert Fighter

Gladiator

So, ten ranks from New Blood to Gladiator... wondering how many there are in total?

“Do you... do you have any real questions?” the elven noblewoman he had decided was now called Polly asked.

“No, not really,” Jake said honestly. “That was why I messed with you. I am good for now, but who is to say I won’t have any questions in the future? How about you go meet up with Owen? That will make things easier if I can contact you through him and vice-versa. Ah, Owen is-“

“I am aware who he is,” Polly nodded as she prepared to head off. “I won’t delay your preparations any longer. And... good luck with your matches.”

“Thanks,” Jake said with a wave as she left.

Doubt I’ll need it.

Spoiler warning: Jake didn’t need it.

In fact, he didn’t need any luck for the rest of the entire second day.

His first fight was against a guy with a longsword that he, quite frankly, wasn’t built to wield. The guy could do some nasty swings, but dodging them was way too easy. Jake could see how someone could get caught out, though, so the guy becoming Intiate Fighter made sense. Still lost after a good kick to the liver, making him surrender as he could no longer hold his sword.

The second match was versus a water mage. This guy came prepared and carried with him a large jug of water that he threw right at the beginning of the fight. He then began to manipulate the water to try and hit Jake, at which point Jake sprinted forward and kicked him in the jaw, finishing the fight before his clothes got wet.

Having wet clothes for the rest of the day would have sucked.

The third was a standard match versus a guy with a sword. Took two kicks, that one.

During the fourth match, Jake finally met someone decent. An archer. At least Jake thought he was decent, seeing as he had a quiver. But when Jake saw him properly, he spotted it. An utter abomination slung over his opponent's back, with arrows... no, not arrows, *bolts*, in his quiver.

That's right, the cretin had a crossbow. That deserved punishment.

Jake began the match by running forward, and to establish dominance, he didn't show any mercy. He kicked the fake archer three times for his transgressions toward the world of archery. Five kicks total if he counted the one where he "accidentally" stomped on the crossbow while exiting the fight and the first kick where he blocked the crossbow bolt mid-flight. That one was purely to show off and to rub it on how bad crossbows were. Because, guess what? The guy never even got a chance to reload his shitty weapon before Jake reached him and gave him some good kicks.

Anyway, the fifth match was also pretty normal and was against a woman using a pike and shield. She was the one who had done the most research on Jake, as far as he could tell. She made sure to get in a good defensive position, and her eyes were firmly focused on Jake's leg area. She also started the fight defensively, having seen that Jake primarily fought opponents by dodging a strike and then counter-kicking.

A good strategy that sadly proved ineffective. Jake had learned how to attack quite well through his practice with Sim-Jake, and through a clever feint, made the woman stab her pike into the ground, wherefrom Jake proceeded to stomp on the wooden shaft to break its head off, with a second kick to her stomach sending her tumbling back.

Before Jake could even follow up, she announced her surrender, and Jake was off to his second promotion match in two days.

These five fights had taken Jake the entire morning, and it was now around two in the afternoon. Going to the Battlemaster, Jake wanted to do the next fight right away but was told that they should schedule it for later that day as promotion matches "pulled bigger crowds."

Jake wanted to complain as the Battlemaster added something that made him realize it was moot.

"Why the rush, Initiate Fighter? Even if you become a Fledgling Fighter today, you won't have more matches before tomorrow. Those are the rules: you can't fight any fights after a promotion match on the same day," the Battlemaster explained.

So that was a bit of a bummer and ruined Jake's plan of getting up two ranks in one day. Being forced to wait, Jake did some actual training and stretches to fully get used to his body. It wasn't overly needed, but he had to pass his time somehow.

After quite a few hours, Jake did get his rank-up of the day in a promotion match against his first heavily-armored foe. He faced a large burly man wearing full plate armor, wielding a flail. The guy definitely looked menacing coming out the gate, spinning the spiked balls on the flail around.

He looked a lot less menacing on the ground after Jake kicked the back of his knee, making him fall over. With the heavy plate armor and a dislocated knee, he couldn't stand up again either, the match ending in a quick surrender with Jake walking out, successfully promoted after only one kick.

One day, one promotion... should be Gladiator in a bit over a week, then, right?

At least, that was the plan. However, there was one thing that was far more crucial to find out...

How high of a rank could he reach using only kicks?

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Chapter 742: Nevermore: To Inspire Fear

To kick or not to kick. That is the question.

Well, alright, it wasn't really a question but just Jake's default way of handling any opponent he met in the arena. He knew full well that the situation couldn't continue forever, but for now, his stats just outmatched everyone else by quite a margin.

It quickly became apparent that most of his opponents didn't even have 10 in all stats, much less 16 in even their lowest, like Jake. This meant Jake thoroughly beat any and all opponents he met just by easily overpowering them. He was – metaphorically speaking - an adult professional fighter beating up a bunch of kids to quickly advance in ranks. If simply skipping ranks was possible, he would have gone for that, and on the third day, Jake even tried to ask the Battlemaster if it was possible to meet some higher-ranked opponent for a promotion match. To which the middle-aged man answered in a totally not judgemental tone:

“Oh, I am sure you would want that. Hey, do you think anyone else here wants the same? You're confident, so surely that is enough, right? What complaints could your opponent possibly have for getting matched with some low-rank opponent who doesn't even pull in a good audience? Surely, the fight itself would also go without a hitch, and with a victory, there would be so much glory in beating someone several ranks below

yourself. And who would possibly feel humiliated if they lost to someone expected to be so much weaker than themselves? Yeah, definitely no one, so let me do you a favor here and now and change the centuries-old rules of the Colosseum just because you don't feel like advancing the usual way! Who needs proper rules and a ranking system anyway? So old-fashioned. Having everyone fight everyone would be so much more exciting."

Jake cut him off after that, having gotten the point. The Battlemaster was a bit short with him the rest of the day after that, but luckily he was back to normal the next morning. However, during his first match on the fourth day, he found himself in an odd situation.

Standing ready behind the lowering gate, Jake looked at his beastkin opponent. She was a woman who was nearly two meters tall and had metal claws strapped to her hands. She definitely looked menacing and ready to pounce.

"Combatants, enter the arena!"

The moment the gate lowered, he walked forward as his opponent charged, yelling loudly:

"Heard you're good at kicking! Let's see you kick my claws, you pathetic human!"

With an annoyed frown, Jake looked at her and decided to get the fight over with right away. He even felt a surge of killing intent due to her comment as he considered employing the secret technique known as the dropkick. His eyes met with hers... and then things got weird. Right as their eyes met, she came to an abrupt stop and jumped back with wide eyes, hair standing up on her back.

Jake stood confused as she stared at him for a moment. Her sneer was gone, and her form lowered as she slowly backed away, looking perplexed. Jake took a step forward, making her jump back as she yelled loudly.

"I surrender!"

Wait, what?

More confused than before, he wanted to ask the beastkin what the hell was going on... but before he even properly registered that the fight was over, she had run out of the arena faster than she had arrived. Jake had no idea what was going on initially... until he got an idea.

In the next fight, he tested his theory.

Jake considered something he hadn't really thought much of for a long time. Everyone had an instinct; he knew that. It was natural, and while the enlightened races tended to

have weaker ones than beasts, it was still there, with beastkin often having instincts often comparable to or even surpassing some beasts. Why did this matter?

Back during the Tutorial, Jake had far less of a handle on his Bloodline than now. One way that lack of control materialized was his presence always leaking slightly. He learned to hide it pretty quickly, though, as it was a dead giveaway that he had a Bloodline due to its peculiar effects. This leakage of presence back then didn't really have any major impact under normal circumstances, as it was pretty normal to leak a bit of aura in the lower grades, but for Jake, it had quite the implications outside of being a neon sign advertising his Bloodline.

He vividly remembered several beasts avoiding him during the Tutorial. Raptors began to steer clear of him when they felt his aura and ran on sight. Even after coming back from the Tutorial, when he claimed the Pylon of Civilization, it shrouded the entire area in part of his presence, marking Haven as his territory.

Zoning out presences was something one tended to naturally learn just by being in the, well, presence of other living beings. After reaching higher grades, Jake couldn't use his presence to directly pressure anyone around his own level of power without using Pride of the Malefic Viper, even if he had a powerful Bloodline. Not because it was less powerful than before but because people had learned to resist it. The only way he could have turned his Bloodline-empowered presence into an actual attack would have been to actively infuse it with energy and do something akin to Pride. The problem with that was how ineffective it was, and even if the quality was high due to his Bloodline, he wouldn't be able to do anything to people he wanted to fight.

Could he scare a bunch of E and even D-grades shitless with his presence? Sure, but that wouldn't be worth anything. No, the only normal application of unleashing your presence was to intimidate people and flex your power. Semi-uniquely for Jake, he could also use it to train others to resist presences faster, but he had found that just being around him seemed to do the job, though it was far slower than active resistance training. This was, as mentioned, only semi-unique to Jake, as others could also help you train to resist presences, but Jake was the only one who could give that really qualitative training.

However, even if his presence was useless as a C-grade, there were at least three key differences between the real world and the arena. Firstly, they were all level 0, as far as he could tell. They didn't have any exposure to powerful presences and thus had no resistance. Partly related to this was the second reason: everyone's souls were weak. The third difference was Jake himself, who had realized something.

While he could use Pride as a presence attack, there were other ways to use the uniquely powerful response others had to his Bloodline. The instinctual response it instilled in anyone who wanted to fight him. He still believed a powerful foe could zone it out... but these low-ranking opponents? No shot.

Continuing his little experiment, Jake made a human guy piss himself in his next match as he unleashed his full presence and murderous intent. He even infused mana into it right as the match began, scaring the poor guy shitless. The experiment was a big success, but he also knew it had only worked because the guy was so much weaker.

In the third fight of the day, Jake didn't go as hard but focused on only one aspect of his presence: Suppression. No, calling it suppressing was wrong. It wasn't quite the concept of suppression but something else. Something far more simple and primal...

Fear.

The fear of a predator. The fear any human would experience when confronted with a bear or a lion before the system. It was the kind of fear that solicited a response from his foe. One that triggered fight or flight instantly.

During this third match, he saw that happen. He faced an elven woman with a rapier. She began with refined footsteps, and when fear gripped her, she didn't retreat. No, she chose to fight. However, she was unable to keep calm and lost her cool as her instincts took over, making her decide to charge while yelling, earning her a kick to the temple, knocking her out in a single blow.

For the fourth fight, Jake once more tried to experiment as he wanted to work on something else. Because he did have one other skill that he felt was at least tangentially related to the concept that inspired this fear:

Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

The skill allowed him to use soul attacks by looking directly at his opponent's souls. More accurately, he directly attacked their Soulshapes through an ocular connection, which was also why he needed visual contact. How exactly this concept worked, he wasn't sure, especially not considering it completely ignored distance... but hey, something to look into.

One very interesting aspect of Gaze was also how it scaled. Its effects in E and C-grade were effectively identical, and in both grades, it barely took any energy. In fact, it took a proportionally minuscule level of energy no matter what grade he was in. Instead, the true cost of the skill was the mental drain from attacking another soul.

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Jake currently didn't really consciously infuse anything related to his Bloodline when using Gaze... but who is to say he couldn't? Based on the description, he should be able to.

“A hunter who has seen his gaze reflected in the eyes of the Apex Predator and now stares back with equal zeal.”

Gaze of the Apex Hunter had come from the fusion of Hunter's Sight and Gaze of the Apex Predator. Jake earlier considered how he infused instinctive fear into his opponents... much akin to an Apex Predator. Which was exactly how the skill worked before the upgrade:

“A single glance, a fallen prey. The Apex Predator has grown to where their foes cower in fear as it lays its eyes upon them.”

With all this in mind, why couldn't Jake do his own skill-less version of Gaze? One that was probably far weaker but had some of the same concepts, at least. This was also one of the purposes of the Challenge Dungeon based on Jake's estimations; to allow the ones doing it to truly reflect upon their paths and skills. Gaze was a prime candidate for some kind of improvements, too, especially when one considered how core it was to his Path by now.

So that is why he spent the next many matches experimenting with trying to incite instinctual fear in his opponents. Many fights still ended with him kicking his foe either because he failed or because the person resisted the fear effect. Sometimes it also just made them mad. Which did make it clear that even if he did succeed, it wouldn't be the kind of ability that would work on everyone. At least not fully.

The day passed as Jake continued his six matches a day – five regular fights and one promotion match.

Like this, a good week went by. Jake had reached Journeyman Fighter by now and had spent some time checking out other areas of the Colosseum with all the downtime he had. After becoming a Fighter, he had even gained access to a bigger training area, but he had no interest in that.

On this fateful day, he had already won five matches and was just waiting for his promotion match. Jake was beginning to feel the pressure by now. In the last two matches, he had to use dozens of kicks to achieve victory, and he even ended up getting his clothes scratched a few times as he cut things too close.

And... he had a feeling this promotion match would be the end of his kicking-only spree. At this point, he continued just out of pure vanity, with the only changes to his fighting style being his experiments with inciting instinctual fear in his opponents.

While waiting, he quickly checked his status.

Current objective: Be promoted from Journeyman Fighter to Veteran Fighter

Current rank: Journeyman Fighter (5/5)

Colosseum Points: 765

Lives remaining: 10

His points had grown quite a lot. As for why they were what they were...

Well, math time:

The way Colosseum Points were rewarded wasn't just doubling every time he got promoted, but the growth was quadratical. As a New Blood, he had gained 2 points for every victory and 10 for his promotion. That did double to 4 per victory as an Initiate, with the promotion offering 20, for a total of 40 – a doubling of points.

However, the theory of doubling died when he became a Fledgling Fighter, where every victory now gave 7 points, with the promotion match giving 35. Upcoming Fighter rank then rewarded 11 points per victory and 55 for the promotion match. With that data, Jake understood the formula.

Every time Jake ranked up, the points per victory would increase by 1 more than the prior increase. That was confirmed when he finally became a Fighter, and every victory gave 16 points – up 5 from before, with the prior increase going up by 4.

Promotion matches would always reward the same as all of the five victories combined, meaning they were clearly the most important to complete. Of course, the most important thing overall was still getting promoted fast for some of that quadratical growth to really kick in.

As an example, winning a single match as a Gladiator would give 56 points, and winning all matches and getting promoted would give 560. Of course, that was all with the assumption that his math continued to be accurate and that the rules of the Colosseum didn't change... something he could totally see happen. It was also entirely possible the number of matches you need to get promoted changed, at which point-

Jake was thrown out of his thought process as someone spoke to him.

"Hey, you're up now," Owen said, having just walked over after ditching Polly somewhere. The guy, despite seeming pretty damn weak, had managed to reach Upcoming Fighter himself and was honestly doing pretty well.

"Oh shoot, you're right," Jake said, standing up and stretching his legs a bit. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Good luck!" the guy smiled. "May your kicks be swift and strike true."

"Sure, sure," Jake shook his head as he walked toward the tunnel leading into the arena. Walking in, he was both looking forward to and dreading what was about to come... and not because of the upcoming fight. No, it was because of what would happen just before the fight...

Approaching the gate, he heard it. The dreadful voice that had recently begun to haunt his dreams.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and anything in between! Today, we have a truly exciting match on our hands! A battle between an old legend and a rising star. At one end of the arena, we have a true warrior of carnage – a veteran from the battlefield. A man with the power to cleave a bull in two! An arm so strong it takes three warriors to match him. Today, he is here to once more cleave his way to victory. That’s right, it’s the Cleaver!”

Jake heard the crowd go wild at the announcer introducing the fighters making him sigh. Things were a lot different now than when he started. Thousands lined the stands, all yelling in excitement as the same damn commentator from Jake’s first match spoke.

“On the other, someone trying to do the impossible. He has had a truly meteoric rise in the ranking, getting promoted every day since he registered! However, is today the end of his streak!? Is he a meteor that sours till it becomes a fallen star, or... will he ascend to the heavens!? Perhaps he’ll even be able to kick the existing stars out of the sky! Because if there is one thing this man can do, it is kick! You all know who I’m talking about... the man with a leg of steel and a kick spelling the doom of his foes. Welcome, the one, the only, Doomfoot!”

Jake fucking hated that name.

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Chapter 743: Nevermore: Windows To the Soul

To feel old again.

It was an odd sensation that the Sword Saint would frankly have preferred to do without. When the system came, he had been reinvigorated, and as time progressed, he only ever felt himself grow stronger. Outside of the backlash from his Transcendence, that is, but those circumstances were far different. Now, to regress like this... he did not like the feeling at all. It reminded him too much of before the system.

He remembered the very first time he had difficulty standing up from a chair by himself. When his grandson had to support him as he walked up some stairs. When he was convinced to finally use a cane. He remembered feeling tired more. Feeling weak. Becoming unable to lift or really do anything. Becoming unable to lift his practice sword...

To feel one's body deteriorate was truly a harrowing thing.

Now, he had flashbacks to those days. Fortunately, it was not as bad. The Sword Saint's old body did feel weaker after entering the Challenge Dungeon, but his stats were still far from ordinary. He was still healthy and still powerful, especially with the percentage increases. This had resulted in his old willow body possessing more power than even the big and brawny men in the training area.

It was also for this reason that the Sword Saint had asked for a wooden sword when he went to speak to the Quartermaster for the first time. A true blade would only serve to slay opponents too weak to truly put up a fight, while a wooden sword would allow him to quickly progress while still not killing his fellow combatants needlessly. Official source is [novel•fire•met](#)

As the Sword Saint had just returned from his promotion match to Veteran Fighter that day, he considered for a moment how Jake was handling these early fights. This only made him chuckle, earning a few glances from his fellow patrons in the restaurant. The thought of Jake doing these battles was simply too entertaining. If the Sword Saint had learned anything from spending several decades with Jake, it was that his solution was probably less than ideal and even a bit stupid by most people's standards. Who knows, maybe he had even decided to do something weird, like seeing how many fights he could win unarmed?

Or worse yet, impose some other silly rule on himself, like using a kitchen utensil or only allowing himself to use punches or kicks.

"Now, lower the gates! Combatants, enter the arena!"

Jake walked up and into the arena, as instructed, his foe at the other end of their would-be battlefield, also waiting behind the still-lowering second gate. He was a man who did live up to his reputation as the Cleaver, at least visually.

He stood around two meters tall, with large bulking muscles showing on his uncovering arms. The only defensive equipment he had was a breastplate, helmet, and gloves, so his most vital areas were at least covered. In his hands, he wielded the weapon that had given him his signature name: a large cleaver with a long wooden handle and an edge more than a meter long. It was more of a large machete rather than a cleaver, but Jake wasn't going to correct him.

Behind the visor of his helmet, Jake met his opponent's eyes right as the gates fully lowered. He tried to incite a bit of fear through their eye contact but found the other man able to resist as Jake instead felt a wave of bloodlust returned his way.

It appeared the story of him having originally achieved his strength on a battlefield wasn't all for show. The experience only made him smile and look forward to the fight more.

Jake considered his approach. In the many prior matches, he had put down his bow at the entrance area to not risk it breaking or getting in the way, and this time he decided to do that too. He wasn't sure if kicking would get the job done today, but he wanted to at least give it a shot.

Besides, he still had his knife if things went wrong.

Walking forward, his opponent also entered the arena with steady and careful steps. They slowly approached each other as Jake considered how he wanted to handle the big guy. The Cleaver, in turn, observed Jake closely, clearly not wanting to make the first move. He had likely seen what happened to everyone else who took the first swing and knew that Jake was quite good at counter-kicking.

Very well, Jake thought as he got within five or so meters. Lowering his stance, he pounced forward with impressive speed. He quickly feinted a kick toward the Cleaver's leg but didn't get the expected response as his opponent stepped backward, making some distance. The big cleaver was still held in both hands, ready to come down at any point, making it quite hard for Jake to fully commit.

Jake tried a few more times to find an opening, and he finally found one. The Cleaver had been surprised by a double-feint, allowing Jake to land a low kick, making the far larger man stumble slightly. Trying to follow up, Jake dodged a shoulder check as he tried to land another low kick, only for the Cleaver to spin and try to backhand Jake in the face.

Committing to his attack, Jake landed the kick right as a fist hit his blocking arm. A tinge of pain shot through his arm as the impact took Jake by surprise, pushing him back and leaving a trail in the sand.

Strength... above 10.

Yep, he was definitely above 10. Jake wasn't sure if his assessment was right, but he was pretty sure this was his first time facing another real superhuman. Well, outside of all the magic going around, that is.

However, even if the Cleaver was strong, Jake still estimated he outmatched him even in the pure Strength department. The big man already looked unstable on the leg Jake had kicked twice, and moving about would be quite difficult.

Jake used this opportunity to go on the offensive immediately. He stormed in and continued to try and land kicks, the big man finally unleashing his true weapon in response. With a fright, Jake leaped out of the way as the massive cleaver was swung, cutting through the air. The power was impressive, and Jake knew he would be fucked if that ever hit him... but it wasn't going to hit him. In fact, attacking had left the Cleaver even more open, making Jake land a solid kick to his opponent's side, making him stumble.

This happened a few more times as Jake slowly gained ground, landing over a dozen kicks, small and big. He himself managed to only get his shirt slightly ripped as the man tried to grab him with his metal-gloved fists. His opponent also knew he was getting pushed and that Jake had the advantage, so he tried to make a risky move and land a finishing blow.

It didn't pan out.

Twisting his body out of the way, Jake dodged the cleaver and jumped past the man. Upon landing on his hands, he used them for extra leverage on the sand as he kicked the handle of the cleaver with the heel of his foot, doing a frontal somersault kick. The Cleaver was taken by surprise and lost grip of his weapon as Jake pushed himself off the sand and landed upright, already ready to execute his follow-up.

The Cleaver nearly fell to the ground from the uppercut kick but quickly gathered himself as he went to retrieve his weapon that had fallen a good distance away. However, with his bad leg slowing him down, he wasn't going to get the opportunity to.

Jake ran toward the Cleaver as he prepared to unleash an attack only spoken of in legends. The man barely had time to turn toward Jake as it arrived.

Jumping, he kicked with both legs as he landed a perfectly executed dropkick on the Cleaver's chest. The power of the impact dented the metal as the far larger man was lifted off the ground and flew back several meters before he hit the arena floor hard and rolled a few times before hitting a wall, kicking up sand the entire way.

Jake himself landed on the soft sand as he watched the glorious outcome of deploying an otherwise forbidden technique. One too powerful for mortal men to endure.

The downed Cleaver tried to stand, but Jake could hear his labored breathing from below the helmet and saw blood dripping from the edges of his breastplate where some of the metal had penetrated into his chest. Jake began walking over as he shook his head.

"Good fight," Jake said, knowing it was over.

The man scoffed as he spat out blood before scoffing. "On the battlefield... there is only victory... or death. Give me a warrior's end."

"Lucky for you, we aren't on the battlefield," Jake said. He felt for the guy. It had to suck getting your ass kicked – quite literally - but he did feel like the guy was being a bit melodramatic. Jake had yet to kill anyone in the arena and didn't really see a reason to start now.

The man just stared defiantly up at him. "Kill me... or no one wins."

A slight change in his tone tipped Jake off... this guy was fucking gambling on Jake not wanting to kill him, and the timer instead running out, resulting in no winner. Every single match had a limited duration, and if no winner was decided during that time, it would be considered a draw. With no referee, Jake had to either knock the guy out, kill him, or make him surrender... and knocking someone out with decent Willpower wasn't easy.

Fucking asshole.

He had probably noticed how Jake hadn't killed anyone or even inflicted mortal injuries on any of his opponents, likely making the guy assume Jake wasn't interested in killing anyone. This was a mostly accurate assessment, as Jake didn't really see any need to slay weaklings, but perhaps today, he should make an exception.

Jake squatted down as he stared the man directly in the eyes. Their gazes met as Jake felt legitimately angry. "You're sure you really want me to kill you?"

His gaze lingered as he felt like he stared into the soul of his opponent, seeing himself reflected in the man's pupils. At that moment, Jake felt like he saw something... and he pounced on it. A form of connection was formed as Jake felt an utterly insignificant pressure fall on him as he himself also lashed out, the man having it far worse.

Instinctive fear gripped the Cleaver as he lunged back in fright, a shudder going through his body.

"You...m... monster..." the man said, with wide eyes as he shivered. Jake didn't look away for a single moment as his smile grew. Partly because he had just had a breakthrough and partly because of the odd sense of pure ecstasy he felt at that very moment from making the guy realize how much of an idiot he was.

"Exactly," Jake grinned as he leaned in. "And there is no shame in losing to a monster, now is there?"

The man tried to shove Jake away as he yelled loudly. "I give up! Surrender! Get him the hell away from me!"

Jake's smile faded slightly as he stood up. "Good choice."

Walking out of the arena, he heard the clamors of the commentator behind him, deciding not to block him out... for now.

"And we have a winner! The Doomfoot once more proved himself superior, with our dear Cleaver falling, fearful of his opponent's might! Today, a new Veteran Fighter has been born, and the same question lingers on everyone's lips... how far can the legs of Doomfeet carry him!?"

Jake hurried out of the arena and slipped by Owen and Polly with a quick explanation that he had something to work on as he made his way back to town. He wasn't lying, either. Jake finally felt like he had a breakthrough with his skill-less Gaze or potential presence attack, or whatever he wanted to call it.

Once back, Jake went into the apartment housing he had been provided after becoming a Fighter. He went straight for his bed as thoughts were still running through his mind... he wanted to test more, but it would have to wait. For now, he wanted to at least mentally address his epiphany, if that was the right thing to call it.

Jake finally felt like he was truly onto something. Not just with making a type of soul attack that could work for the current him, but something that would even prove useful once he was outside and back to C-grade.

It was a common saying even before the system that the eyes were the windows into the soul. Nobody back then was aware of exactly how true that was. The eyes were indeed an opening into the soul, and there were many theories as to why this was a thing. Maybe it was because the eyes were one of the primary senses of all who had them and that the senses were related to the first layer of the soul, so making eye contact was like connecting two souls... or maybe it was just how the system decided things worked. In either case, it was the truth that the eyes were windows into the soul.

That was also why many forms of soul magic required – or at least were heavily helped by – eye contact. Some species of vampires were infamous for their mental magic and hypnotic skills, with many of those skills requiring the vampire to look into the eyes of his or her target. While Jake didn't have any skills like this, Gaze came close, as it did rely on the fact that using soul attacks with your eyes tended to be far more effective.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter was a powerful but simplistic soul attack. Jake theorized it used the delivery method it did for pure efficiency and to properly package the attack. Regular presence attacks were simply too weak against equal opponents unless you were significantly stronger than your opponent. The difference between using Gaze and trying to deliver the same paralysis effect through his regular presence was the difference between trying to stop someone from moving by either crushing them with a huge metal block or pricking them with a small needle that paralyzed them – with Gaze naturally being the needle. Sure, the impact was far smaller than crushing someone with his presence as the “package” delivering through his Gaze could hold far less power, and the only reason Gaze even worked was due to the high quality of the skill. But... what if he found a way to not only increase the size of his package but increase its quality?

The system had rules about equivalent exchange. Or, at the very least, it had rules about how the cost was usually at least related to the impact of whatever one did. This cost usually came in the form of resources like mana or stamina, but there were other ways to pay for a skill. Curse energy and mental energy were two Jake often used, with many more forms out there. But there were also other things you could exchange to not

spend your own energy. Jake wasn't thinking about sacrifices, catalysts, or anything like that, but something he often used already to pay for more power:

Himself.

Or, more accurately, he increased power by suffering a backlash of some kind. His current way of doing it was very crude and mostly came to be from him having to endure too much energy, but when he looked into the eyes of the Cleaver, Jake got an idea.

When fighting, it was normal to exchange blows and sometimes even take a hit to land one yourself. Why couldn't he do this, but with a soul attack? To attack the soul of his enemy without any self-regard, willingly suffering the backlash from his opponent in return?

That's right, Jake's idea was to effectively force a confrontation of presences and souls. To, metaphorically speaking, gaze into his enemy's soul to paralyze them and welcome them to gaze back to retaliate as they would engage in a staring competition that Jake was more than confident in winning every time.

Would this work? Maybe. Maybe not. But Jake was sure as hell excited to find out, and he had a whole bunch of unwilling test subjects, also known as Veteran Fighters, to test it out the very next day. Who knows... if it worked, maybe he wouldn't have to stop kicking quite yet.

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Chapter 744: Nevermore: Fear Gaze

On the next day, Jake woke up a bit excited to get testing. It was still too early to head to the arena, though, so it was breakfast time first. After getting ready, he checked his menu quickly while getting out the door, seeing his objective for the day.

Current objective: Be promoted from Veteran Fighter to Expert Fighter

Current rank: Veteran Fighter (0/5)

Colosseum Points: 910

Lives remaining: 10

His Colosseum Points were slowly growing, and Jake had to admit he was curious about exactly what they were for. Well, it was obvious that they factored in when calculating how many Nevermore Points he would get from the Challenge Dungeon, but he also knew it wasn't that simple. Case-in-point? The points had other uses than simply being hoarded for some final reward.

Something he was confronted with that morning at breakfast with Owen and Polly. Yeah, Polly had decided to constantly stick around after their first encounter, and while she did offer help with a few different things, Jake had yet to take her up on the offer. That didn't stop her, though.

As for what else one could spend Colosseum Points?

"Jake... have you considered spending points and getting some boots or something? Maybe you can get some specially made. You should at least wear some leather greaves to avoid major injuries if your opponent manages to hit you... healing such a wound would take days, and no one wants that," Owen said with genuine worry.

That's right, you could buy things using Colosseum points. More accurately, you could buy armor and weapons. As for why one would need that when the Colosseum provided those for free? Well, because not all items were created equal, and the good stuff you had to cough up for.

Magic items.

That is what everyone called them. In reality, it was just items with mana infused into them. Proper, real items. While Jake had none of these, Owen bought one the moment he reached Fighter rank, spending 250 Colosseum Points. And what he got wasn't even that good.

[Spear of Swiftness (Uncommon)] – A spear with a flexible metal shaft and sharp tip enchanted with the power of swiftiness. This enchantment makes the spear far lighter than usual and allows the weapon to move faster without losing striking power.

Requirements: Soulbound. Fighter Colosseum Rank.

Sure, it was a lot better than the basic spear, but not by such a massive margin that Jake felt it justified costing nearly the entire combined winnings of both the Upcoming Fighter and Fighter rank. Then again, Jake was kind of special... and he could recognize that good equipment could be the difference-maker.

The weapon of the Cleaver had likely been at least rare rarity and was a big part of his claim to fame. The breastplate potentially also increased Strength. Jake didn't really have any ways to check, considering all the items were Soulbound upon purchase, meaning looting was not a thing. The only reason he even knew what Owen's weapon

did was that he so openly shared any and all details related to it without even getting prompted.

Speaking of Owen talking a lot unprompted, the question of getting some greaves was indeed one Jake had considered, however...

"Nah, I'm good for now," Jake smiled. "I will maybe get some equipment later, but no need quite yet."

"Are you sure? Things could get dicey if you keep fighting so risky. That is why a spear is great, you know? I win most of my fights without even taking any injuries, as I can keep a distance. I know that you only took that bow for show, but have you considered learning how to use it? You are already incredibly strong unarmed, so if you learned to use a weapon, you could go really damn far," Owen tried to convince him. This chapter is updated by [novel-fire-net](#)

"I will pick up arms when I deem the time is right," Jake said in a solemn tone. Owen did have a point that he should get better at archery, but he did think he was at least decent already. As for melee weapons... well, there wasn't a single fight so far he couldn't have ended within five seconds if he used his knife, though that did risk also killing his opponents.

"How about magic?" Polly asked. "I do sense some potential from you, and if you show promise, I could maybe even ask my teacher to come and show you some things. But you have to prove you can actually do magic first! Have you ever considered trying to explore the magical arts?"

"I will pick up magic when I deem the time is right," Jake repeated his answer, throwing a cheeky smile at the two of them. He had already done a bit of testing with his mana, and... well, he could have ended every fight within four seconds if he had used mana. While, again, probably killing every single opponent. Destructive arcane mana went hard.

"You know what? I am sure Jake got it handled," Owen said in a comforting tone. "If not, then I am sure he will at least stay alive and recover. There is always time to pick up and learn other ways to fight if he truly wants to. Jake is already strong, and clearly, he is experienced at fighting, so we should trust his judgment. I am sure he will only grow stronger as he progresses, no matter what he chooses to do."

The young man's assessment was pretty cool-headed. He had seen a lot of Jake's fights, too, so that had likely left an impression. Even then, Jake could not help but tease the guy.

"How about you, Owen? Have you considered trying to learn the magical arts?" Jake asked in a searching tone.

“No, I want to stick to the spear,” he said dismissively, Polly deflating a bit.

“Your choice, but it is a bit of a shame,” Jake said as he leaned in and continued in a whisper. “I get the feeling you would find magic... electrifying.”

Owen yanked away from Jake before staring at him for a few moments. “Do you... you know... know?”

“What can I say? I am quite perceptive,” Jake teased as he also leaned back. “But don’t worry, you keep doing you, and I keep doing me, alright? Who knows, maybe this is even something we have in common.”

Owen looked at him as he realized what Jake meant and smiled. “Maybe.”

“What are you two talking about?” Polly asked, confused. “Come on, fill me in.”

“Nope, classified information,” Jake shook his head.

“That’s unfair, you shou-“

“Oh, would you look at that? I am done with my food and the Colosseum beckons!”

Jake quickly stood up and, before she could say anything more, hurried out of the cantina as he made his way toward the Colosseum, leaving poor Owen to deal with an annoyed Polly.

As for what Jake and Owen were actually talking about... well, Owen was doing a bit of a Jake. While it was true he wasn’t an expert with a spear, he hadn’t quite shared anything related to his other talents. Talents that included quite the lightning affinity and what Jake estimated to be potent lightning magic.

For some reason, he kept it hidden and only used a spear to fight, but he couldn’t hide it from Jake. Jake had only gone to watch two of Owen’s matches as he had some downtime anyway, and during the first one, he felt it. A faint shiver in the air around his skin and an almost magnetic pull around him as he pushed himself. It was clear that the young guy was actively suppressing his own magic, and while Jake was curious, it would be a bit hypocritical for the Doomfoot – again, fuck that name - to call someone out for messing around in the lower ranks.

Anyway, after an excellent breakfast, Jake soon arrived at the arena and instantly went and signed up for another fight with the Battlemaster - a man who was a lot less of a dick than when Jake had just started entered the Colosseum.

“Already a Veteran Fighter, huh? If you keep this up, you may even join the upper echelons as a true Gladiator. But you still got a ways to go, so don’t slack off now,” he said encouragingly.

Alright, he wasn't exactly overly polite, but he at least treated Jake as someone worth talking to now.

Nearly an hour later, it was finally his time to fight, and with excitement, he walked through the tunnel leading into the actual arena. The crowd had grown once more, and the announcer was as annoying as always, but Jake wasn't there for either of those. He was there to instill primal fear in the poor guy standing at the other end of the arena.

Jake's first opponent as a Veteran Warrior was an elven warrior wielding two thin curved swords. He didn't wear any armor at all but only wore some light pants. Instead of armor, his upper body was entirely covered in what looked like tribal tattoos, and he did look quite fearsome, almost like he was some semi-feral forest elf.

The two of them stared at each other from across the battlefield... and as Jake prepared for battle, he felt it... no, he saw it. It was odd. When he looked at the elf with the intent to fight, it was like he could "see" weakness. He could see an opening of sorts. There wasn't actually anything visually, just an odd feeling like there was something he could focus on that wasn't necessarily there physically.

When the gates went down, both charged. Jake's opponent did not have the caution of the Cleaver but instead had full confidence in his speed and superior offensive power due to his two long blades. Something he had a good reason for, as Jake instantly felt himself on the back foot.

Two slicing blades blocked off every path of attack, making it hard to dive in and land a proper kick. Not that Jake was in any major danger himself, as while his opponent was fast, Jake was faster, just waiting for his time to arrive. After about thirty seconds of Jake enduring a flurry of slicing swords from his silent opponent – a big upgrade from some of the other combatants he faced – he found his opening.

Opening his eyes wide, Jake stared at the weakness and grasped it. For a fraction of a second, his eyes glowed subtly, none but Jake himself noticing this strange occurrence... but it was proof of his success.

Jake's gaze connected. He had initially thought eye contact was necessary to achieve a powerful effect, but the moment he unleashed the result of his epiphany, it became clear that it wasn't needed in the slightest. The only requirement was that he could see his target. As for them seeing him... well, the moment he unleashed the attack, he could forcefully make them aware of him and "look" back at him instinctively.

Right when Jake felt the attack connect, the elf standing right in front of Jake froze, having just finished a swing. Simultaneously, two presences had clashed as one, with one coming out far superior, freezing the lesser of two beings in fear. Unlike the usual Gaze, the elf could still move a tiny bit, at least enough for his eyes to open wide and his face to contort.

Another thing that was contrary to the true Gaze of the Apex Hunter was that this wouldn't truly "attack" his foe's soul and damage it. He only targeted their Perception and instincts, not any of the inner parts of their souls. Jake innately felt that even if he was C-grade and looked at a level 0, the effect would also only be them freezing them. He was only instilling fear, after all. Not to say dying of fright wasn't possible, but if it did happen, Jake would write off all responsibility.

Not to worry about Gaze getting weaker and becoming unable to kill weaker foes. Once outside of the Challenge Dungeon, Jake was sure things would work out just fine, and he was fully aware that fully copying and improving all aspects of a high-tier Legendary skill like Gaze wasn't something he could simply do.

Back in the fight, the result was already a foregone conclusion the moment his Gaze had worked. Jake took advantage of the opening fully as he twisted his body and performed a high kick straight to the chin of his opponent. Teeth and blood flew out as the elf was lifted nearly three meters off the ground before falling down like a rag doll, landing with a thud.

After five seconds passed, it was clear he wasn't getting back up.

"And we have a winner! The Elven Twinblade Dancer looked to have the advantage, but no! No, all along, his opponent was waiting, analyzing his foe for the perfect chance to strike back. Waiting till he found his opening, and then he struck... no, unleashed his Ascending Doomkick upon his foe, ending his dance in a single move!"

Wait, was the fucker making up technique names for Jake now? Seriously, was he trying to force Jake to use other means than kicking to make him shut up? Perhaps it was some ploy by the Wyrmgod to make people show off all they had... or maybe it was Minaga who had somehow managed to get some influence. The voice wasn't Minaga's, and Jake was certain the god wasn't actively involved, as Jake knew the guy would be utterly incapable of not giving it away. Minaga was many things, but subtle was not one of them.

Anyway, Jake quickly left the arena before he could hear any more drivel from that damn announcer. A few employees of the Colosseum came in to take the elf away as Jake walked down the tunnel to the training area, finally getting out of earshot from the still-talking announcer.

After getting to the training area and signing up for his next battle, Jake found a nice quiet spot to sit and ponder till it was kicking time again.

Jake was very happy with the test result, and he didn't even feel any mental strain from using Jake's new version of Gaze. Well, another version of Gaze. The two would fuse once outside the dungeon... so for now, the "new" Gaze would be called Fear Gaze.

Fear Gaze had proven incredibly effective and had a slightly different way of freezing the target than the usual Gaze of the Apex Hunter. One that seemed ever-so-slightly less effective but lasted longer. Or maybe it just lasted longer because of who he fought. No real way to find out yet at the current place and time.

He did also feel that using Fear Gaze would be less effective the more he used it in short succession, but so was Gaze, so that wasn't really a big deal. Probably just something innate to the concept. Jake definitely wanted to test some more stuff fast, and luckily, it was soon time.

Sadly, that did also mean he had to listen to the announcer again only a bit over an hour after his first match. Fortunately, that also meant he had another opponent to test his newfound Gaze upon. Unfortunately for his opponent, she too soon felt an incredible sense of innate fear as Jake kicked the poor beastkin mage in the back of the head, knocking her out cold.

Seeing as he had knocked out two opponents in a row – something that Owen pointed out rarely happened above Fighter rank – Jake also began to suspect that his Gaze helped with that. Which probably shouldn't be overly surprising. One had to rely on Willpower to not get knocked out even when the body took severe trauma, and if every shred of your Willpower was occupied with shivering in fear, there wasn't much to keep you conscious when someone kicked you in the head.

This seeming effect on Willpower mattered more than just knocking people out. A lot more. It was lucky that he had met a mage in his second testing match because that allowed him to learn something he hadn't even considered. When he had used Fear Gaze on the mage, the half-summoned stone bolt she was making crumbled and fell to the ground, as the fear did not only grip her body but even her soul.

One of the major weaknesses of Gaze of the Apex Hunter was that it only froze the body and didn't impede his opponent's abilities to react by controlling energy.

As for Fear Gaze?

With your Willpower suppressed... there was no controlling your magic.

It was truly a great discovery, and Jake could only look forward to continuing his kicking spree as he tried to find if there were more pleasant surprises from his Fear Gaze.

He was also confident now in achieving an utterly useless personal goal:

Completing the "Achieve Gladiator Rank Using Only Kicks" challenge.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

- Chapter 745: Nevermore: Gladiator

Chapter 745: Nevermore: Gladiator

Jake believed he had reached his limit for his kicking-only challenge when he hit Veteran Warrior, but his newfound Fear Gaze allowed him to keep the streak going for at least a little bit longer. He had still been unsure if he could really go all the way to Gladiator, and after reaching the rank of Expert Warrior, he did meet quite a problematic opponent in his third match.

His foe was a large orc wearing armor covering his entire body. The difference between this guy and the other armor-wearing opponents Jake met was that his armor was of a lighter variant while still offering plenty of defense against kicking opponents. Moreover, it had one very problematic design decision...

It was covered in spikes.

Not just a few spikes. Spikes freaking everywhere. Jake didn't see a single opening where he could kick without seriously hurting his foot, and the orc clearly knew this as he went on the offensive, swinging his hatchet wildly while making sure to always keep his buckler ready. A buckler that was naturally also covered in spikes.

Jake found himself being pressured quite intensely as he didn't ever get the chance to respond. Even with Fear Gaze, he doubted he could end the fight instantly. Did he see a way to win? Well, yeah, there were a few dozen openings present at all times that would allow Jake to end the fight in a single move.

The problem was that none of these moves were kicks or required him to use magic, so they were off-limits.

After fighting for several minutes, Jake finally found an opening that was kick-viable. His opponent had gotten slower and realized he had to pace himself or get exhausted before the timer ran out, which gave Jake more time to think and figure out a way to take the big orc down.

Because there were a few places where he didn't have spikes, namely around his joints, on the inside of his thighs, the front of his helmet, and his boots. Jake took advantage of this. Without even using Fear Gaze, Jake dodged under his opponent's hatchet with perfect timing and performed an equally perfectly executed leg sweep. He had aimed for the ankle of the orc and hit right where he wanted.

The large orc was swept off his feet and fell on his side, making many of the spikes penetrate into the sand. Before the orc could even try to get up, Jake finally used Fear Gaze right as he stood up and prepared to deliver the finishing blow.

With the big guy frozen in fear, he couldn't protect his face when Jake delivered a kick straight into it. Hitting the non-spiked parts of the helmet did hurt Jake's foot quite a lot, but the orc had it far worse as his head lunged back, and Jake faintly heard something snap. That is when Jake realized he may have made a mistake.

Due to the embedded spikes, the orc had been stuck. Usually, when you hit something, the impact would be partly lessened as that opponent would get moved backward... but with the spikes stuck in the ground, the only thing capable of moving was his neck.

A neck that was entirely incapable of handling Jake's kick.

Fuck, Jake cursed internally as the orc went limp. He wasn't dead, but Jake was unsure if he was dying or not. Reacting quickly, Jake tried to stabilize the guy's neck as he held it in place while employees of the Colosseum soon rushed in. He had entirely zoned out everything but zoned back in when one of the employees took out what Jake recognized as a health potion and made the orc drink it before dragging him out of the arena.

Nearly killed him on accident, Jake sighed as he exited the arena, ignoring the commentator. Sure, the ones he fought weren't "real people," but Jake still didn't want to kill someone like the orc when he had no reason to. None of his opponents ever seemed to strike with the sole intent to kill either, and only a few showed true killing intent or aimed solely to land lethal attacks. While it was true that Jake could still die even if his opponents didn't aim to kill him, he fully realized the other combatants had to risk killing him if they wanted a chance.

While waiting for his next match, he got confirmation that the orc had survived but would probably be out of commission for several days. Jake did know that potions were a thing even before this match, as while he couldn't really craft any himself due to the time constraint and his lack of ingredients, the Colosseum did sell them. They were not allowed to be used during matches but were only for faster recovery between fights, so he had no interest in getting any.

Feeling relieved, Jake did the rest of his matches of the day quite easily while maybe being a bit more cautious than normal that he didn't accidentally kill anyone.

The final promotion match before he became a fully-fledged Gladiator was versus a wind mage. This was his first time meeting an opponent that was truly faster than himself, and the slicing wind blades he sent out were more than a little problematic as they were fully capable of leaving nasty flesh wounds.

Ultimately, he still proved easier than the Spiked Orc, as Jake dubbed him. The wind mage simply didn't have a response to Fear Gaze, allowing Jake to catch up after dodging all of his attacks and land a good kick to his noggin.

This sent him tumbling, and Jake pounced on the opportunity and kicked the wind mage a dozen times before he finally surrendered. Overall, it was a good match and definitely more fast-paced than many of the others.

Jake's knockout rate was definitely far higher than the average due to Fear Gaze, but only the orc in Expert Fighter rank had been knocked out, the rest managing to hold on. None of them tried the same tactic of the Cleaver, though. Something he assumed was partly due to the nice side-effect of Fear Gaze.

Fear was not an emotion that would instantly pass, and everyone he fought kept showing apprehension toward him even after the effect wore off. They also clearly felt that he wasn't shy to kill his opponents if he deemed it necessary, making them not want to risk a stupid death by trying to test the apex predator that had just beaten their ass. The fact that he nearly killed that orc probably also played a part for the last few opponents.

After his victory, Jake once more returned back to the Battlemaster, as the middle-aged man, for the first time ever, greeted Jake with a wholly positive attitude.

"You bloody made it to the Gladiator rank, proving yourself a true warrior!" the Battlemaster said with a smile as Jake walked up to him. "Never once did I doubt you could do it, and I knew the very first time you walked in here that you were the real deal. Not only did you manage to become a Gladiator, but you did so without losing a single match and by fighting every single day. Take a well-earned rest, and come back tomorrow for your first real match. Your true debut. I am looking forward to seeing how far the Doomfoot can go, Gladiator."

The entire round of praise was a bit ruined by calling him fucking Doomfoot, but he had learned days ago that there was no use fighting it. No matter how much he tried to correct the Battlemaster, the guy simply hadn't cared and even commented on the name being pretty good.

Just as Jake began to wonder when his menu would update, registering his promotion, he got a message quite a bit longer than expected, as it became clear he had entered the second phase of the Challenge Dungeon.

Congratulations! You have reached the Gladiator rank, making you a true mainstay of the Colosseum of Mortals. However, this is only the beginning of your climb to the top. As a true Gladiator, you attract a crowd, and every single match is an event. Due to this, the Colosseum cannot have you fight in an official match every day.

You are limited to one fight a week against another Gladiator.

All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.

In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Gladiator opponents in Show Matches once a day. These Show Matches are against a variety of foes and have far looser rules and regulations than regular arena fights. The possible opponents one can face in Show Matches are decided daily. Winning Show Matches reward Colosseum Points based on the opponents fought. Show Matches and battles against other Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.

For reaching Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 500 Colosseum Points.

For reaching Gladiator rank in the lowest number of days possible, you are rewarded an extra 500 Colosseum Points.

Continue to fight, and claim your glory as you prove yourself the strongest mortal! Become the Champion!

There was quite a bit to unpack with this one. First of all, only one Gladiator match a week now? What? Jake already felt like only six in a day was insufficient. At least he could still do those bonus Show Matches, even if those were also only one a day... and with the rule of not having both a Gladiator and a Show Match on the same day, Jake would only ever be able to do one fight a day from now on.

At least those Show Matches were a bit interesting as those would not necessarily be against other fighters, which made Jake guess that he could also face non-humanoids or even groups. Getting to fight a bear or something would definitely be cool. Jake had always wanted to try and fight a non-magic bear.

The bonus Colosseum Points were also a surprise he had not expected. He was only a tiny little bit miffed that the system didn't recognize the fact he didn't kill anyone and won using only the mighty power of kicking, but then again, perhaps the feeling of satisfaction from succeeding was enough. The true reward was not the Nevermore Points at the end, but all the kicks landed along the way.

Not to say the points he did get weren't great. 1000 Colosseum Points certainly weren't anything to scoff at, and it did make him wonder if there were more similar "achievements" he could earn by not losing any matches and keeping up a good pace. Guess time would tell, as that was his plan anyway.

Mentioning that better equipment and items were now available was also interesting. Primarily that the system felt the need to point it out specifically. Every single time he had ranked up, better stuff had become available, but Jake hadn't gotten any special

notifications about it like this. Maybe this meant he could truly get some good or unique weapons.

Yeah, he should probably at least go take a look. The crafters were open any time the Colosseum was, so he still had time to go by and see if there was anything he would actually want to buy, as there were still quite a few hours before they closed that day. Jake wasn't delusional enough to think he wouldn't ever have to buy any equipment during his stay in the Challenge Dungeon. At the very least, he would need some proper weapons.

He had enough Colosseum Points to get some good stuff too.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 2740

Lives remaining: 10

Wait, he now also had to win ten matches to get promoted to the next rank? No, it was worse than that; he had to win eleven, including the Promotion Match... and he could only do one match a week? That was bloody horrible. To make it worse, how many ranks were there even to Champion?

Oh well, hopefully, Polly or Owen would know. He had already spotted the two of them coming through his sphere, both coming over to congratulate him on his promotion. After a bit of coaxing, they even convinced Jake to go to a restaurant to celebrate. Jake was initially not a big fan until he discovered something incredible... For more chapters visit **novel•fire●net**

They sold beer. Good beer. And Jake was no longer a C-grade with Legendary Palate of the Malefic Viper. While he could still get drunk on special alcoholic concoctions even as a C-grade... there was just something different about drinking some regular good old beer and the slight buzz that came with it. Alcohol was the one thing that had allowed him to function properly in larger social gatherings for prolonged periods of time before the system, and now that he was reduced to a near-pre-system state... yeah, he wanted to enjoy himself.

All of this is to say Jake was not going to check out the crafters that day.

As Jake sat there eating and drinking, he also finally began to understand how the estimation of Challenge Dungeons taking around two years made sense. Something like the Colosseum was its own little world where one could truly get lost and spend a long time. Even for someone so goal-oriented as Jake, the limited number of matches a

day - now a week - meant he would be forced to interact with the world in some shape or form.

If the other Challenge Dungeons also had similar timed events and worlds like this, it would definitely make things drag out. Sure, these forced delays likely weren't a thing in places like Minaga's Endless Labyrinth, and it was also possible some Challenge Dungeons took a lot longer than others, but he could see this one taking quite a while when just getting past the Gladiator Rank would take eleven more weeks.

He wanted to complain, but... it wasn't all bad, and he understood why this downtime was in place. As Owen explained it, all the Gladiator matches would be scheduled a week in advance, with both knowing who they would be fighting. This would theoretically allow Jake to gather information on his opponent or even prepare specific pieces of equipment he would need. It was also considered very standard to research your opponents, and Jake remembered a talk he had with Carmen quite a while back.

Studying her opponent was viewed as an entirely expected part of the fight preparation when she used to fight semi-professionally, with pretty much every real pro doing it, or at least their teams did. Watching recordings of their prior fights and laying a strategy with your trainer was a big part of winning a one versus one fight, and going in with a pre-planned approach could give you a major advantage. Knowing your opponent's habits, ticks, strengths, weaknesses, and general fighting style were all major boons. Studying who you would fight had been hard below Gladiator, but with a week to prepare for every fight, there was plenty of time now.

Of course, this also went the other way. Jake fully expected every opponent he met from now on to come fully prepared for Jake's kicks and maybe even get special equipment or something made to fight him. Against a sword or spear, having spikes on your shield just made it awkward and heavy, plus it would make deflecting blows difficult. But against someone unarmed, only kicking, it would make the shield into a powerful tool to both attack and defend.

Jake knew all of these things... and he knew that fighting using only kicks would be quite the challenge unless he met an opponent where a foot to the face was especially effective. Honestly, he wasn't even that keen on keeping up his streak of only kicking. Seeing as he didn't even gain any bonus points or anything from winning every fight by only kicking, chances are there wouldn't be any other rewards in the future, even if he continued to purposefully handicap himself.

So... perhaps it was time. Jake had achieved his silly personal goal of becoming a Gladiator through only kicking, even if he did add his Fear Gaze. Now was a good time to stop and get more serious.

It was time to retire the moniker of Doomfoot...

And become the Arcane Doomfoot.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 746: Nevermore: Gladiatorial Debut

"Are you sure about this, Jake?" Owen asked with genuine worry as they walked back to the Colosseum the next day. "You should at least go to the crafters before the match... maybe you see something you like and decide to buy it, right?"

"It'll be fine," Jake waved him off. "I will go check out the crafters after."

"But... if you lose the match, you risk getting demoted and will have a harder time rising to higher ranks. That is assuming you don't die or lose a limb," Owen tried to convince him. "You mentioned that you wanted better equipment at some point, so why wait?"

"Let me ask you this, Owen," Jake said. "That spear of yours, will you keep using that even when you become a Gladiator? Assuming you become a Gladiator, that is. Which you really should be able to, considering... you know."

"Probably not?" Owen admitted, totally ignoring that last part of what Jake said.

"So at that point, when you buy a new weapon, the spear would just be a bunch of wasted points as you can only sell stuff back for half of what you paid," Jake pointed out very accurately. "Meanwhile, if I don't buy anything, I don't waste anything."

His logic was truly flawless. Extremely risky but flawless, nevertheless.

"Okay, okay, I'll trust you, geez," Owen shook his head. "Have you considered, at the very least, allowing Polly to obtain information on your opponents? Even if you don't want to spend Colosseum Points on proper information packets, there is still a lot to discover."

"Maybe later, but not now," Jake said with a smile. "But I will say that today's match will be different than the one yesterday. I have something new to show off."

"Oh, like that weird mental trick you use to make people tense up?" Owen asked with interest.

"Not quite, not quite. I believe it will be a bit more... destructive than that," Jake teased.

"I look forward to seeing it, then," Owen smiled, clearly intrigued but not prying.

"Destructive..." Polly, who had remained silent so far, muttered. "You haven't used any magic so far, but... do you know a bit? I heard that some spellblades combine the two..."

"Perhaps," Jake kept teasing. "All shall be revealed during the fight. Well, some shall be revealed during the fight. Revealing everything at once is boring."

After that, Jake signed up for the fight and sat down to wait for it to start. He ignored any information he could have gathered and faced the entire challenge raw.

He meditated a bit before the fight as he mentally ran through his plan for the fight, as small sparks of energy circled through his body, confirming all the pathways in his physical body and Soulshape. Soon enough, he was called for his debut match as a Gladiator, and with not a single trace of worry, he walked into the long tunnel toward a far bigger arena than the one he usually fought in.

This one would be nearly a hundred meters in diameter, with a few pillars and such placed throughout to not give magicians and ranged fighters too big of an advantage while also spicing up the battlefield and opening up new strategies. They would maybe be an annoyance to him in the future, but not today.

Walking up the first flight of stairs, it became clear the layout of how to enter the arena had also changed slightly. From there being two gates, there was now only one large mesh of bars blocking the entrance, allowing each fighter to see the arena and each other before the fight began.

Jake's first opponent as a Gladiator definitely lived up to the name, just going by looks. His opponent stood nearly two and a half meters tall, really cheating in the weight-class department. He wore a big spiked helmet, ringmail pants, bracers, leather gloves, and heavy metal boots. Most of his arms were left bare, and his chest was entirely exposed, showing off what looked like a... ten-pack? He was definitely ripped. Needed to be, too, with the giant axe he carried.

His size was naturally impossible for a normal human, but Identify informed Jake of what he was right away.

[Half-Ogre]

Jake had to admit that he wasn't sure if half-ogres were even born in F-grade – on a side note, while Jake was G-grade, everyone seemed to be F-grade – or if it was just the system or Wyrmgod that messed with the rules a bit. It was entirely possible that they were born at F-grade... Jake hadn't really met many ogres. Considering this made Jake wonder about the logistics when an ogre and human or elf had a kid, but those kinds of questions were for a drunk conversation with Villy.

"Today, we have gathered for a debut match! An old veteran of the gladiatorial arena, the Crushing Edge, will take on an up-and-coming Gladiator that only yesterday reached his rank! A figure I am sure many of you are excited to see in the big arena... that's right, it's the master of kicks, a martial savant, and someone described as the scariest person they have ever faced by his defeated opponents. The one, the only, Doomfoot!"

More than ten thousand people cheered loudly, Jake using a single Pulse to see that Owen and Polly were also both in the crowd. He had no idea where the hell all these people came from, as while the city could house that many, did everyone there go to watch Colosseum matches every day? Wouldn't that get boring?

"However, even if he is a truly fearsome newcomer... do not sleep on the Crushing Edge. He has earned that name for a reason. Standing as one of the tallest fighters the Colosseum has ever seen, with muscles able to crush bones, he has won nearly all his matches by landing one devastating blow! One single Crushing Edge!"

Listening to the brief explanation was all the information Jake really needed on his opponent as he had a good idea of what he was facing.

"Now, who will win!? Will Doomfoot be crushed, or the Crushing Edge meet his doom? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"

As commanded, the horizontal mesh of bars first disappeared before the vertical ones lowered into the ground. Right when there was enough space to go out, Jake's opponent began jogging toward him from the other end of the arena.

Casually, Jake placed the bow on the ground as he stepped into the arena.

Jake began walking forward slowly at first, as he slowly picked up pace and began running. While running, a shiver of energy went down his right leg. Stamina tinged with his arcane affinity infused every vein, every muscle. If one could see beneath his pants, one would see faint veins of pink-purple covering his skin, surging with destructive potential.

Applying arcane energy to his physical moves was extremely easy, even with his reduced stats. In fact, it was far easier now than before, as there wasn't as much to control, while his pure level of skill in controlling energy was virtually unchanged compared to before the Challenge Dungeon. His energy control as a C-grade was already viewed as monstrous, so having that same level of control as a level 0 G-grade was complete and utter overkill.

Also, while Arcane Supremacy was gone, he still remembered the sensations of increased control, and even if he didn't have skills, Jake rarely ever used skills when he used his mana to begin with.

So to infuse parts of his body with extra stamina and wrapping his foot in a faint shimmer of protective arcane energy and the rest in pure destruction? Easy as pie.

The two of them approached each other as the crowd went even wilder than before. The half-ogre roared as he swung his giant axe toward Jake.

Jake, still running at full speed, jumped into the air as he spun his body around. A trail of arcane energy swirled around his foot, leaving a trace of color as he kicked, delivering a spinning roundhouse kick.

His foot connected with the head of the half-ogre as a metal helmet met leather boots. A small localized explosion of arcane energy rocked the arena as metal spikes from the helmet flew everywhere. The giant half-ogre was sent airborne and flew nearly five meters before hitting a pillar, his neck broken and head crooked.

Jake landed on the soft arena floor, feeling the sand between his toes on his right foot. The leather boots were shredded to pieces upon impact, leaving him with only one shoe left.

More powerful than expected, Jake noted as he checked and saw that the half-ogre was still alive, though, without healing, it was doubtful how long that would be the case.

Deafening silence filled the entire arena for a few seconds before Jake turned around and began walking toward the exit. As he moved, the arena came back alive. Medical staff ran toward the half-ogre, and the crowd began screaming, with the announcer also finally doing his job again.

"Doomfoot does it again! With a single kick, the Crushing Edge had his dreams crushed by a debutant! But I am sure you are all asking... what was that!? What power does the kick of the Doomfoot truly hold? Has he been hiding his power all this time? Suddenly had an epiphany? What is the true depth of his power? Ha! Who cares!? The only real question is... when will Doomfoot ever meet his match!"

Jake didn't know if he should be happy or annoyed that the announcer made it clear no one cared if you hid your power. Owen would definitely still ask, but at least he wouldn't face questions from others. Not like it would have mattered even if he did – this entire Challenge Dungeon was just about arena fights, nothing more, nothing less.

Walking out of the arena to the cheers of the audience, remembering to pick up the bow on the way, Jake walked straight to the Battlemaster, who somehow seemed to be aware of everything that had happened in the arena despite not having moved a single step from where he stood when Jake accepted the match.

After some praise and a backhanded compliment, Jake went outside of the Gladiator training area as he waited for Polly and Owen, who predictably came over right away.

After stalling for a bit, Jake finally went to a nice little corner where the questions began. Polly was the first to go.

"That... magic... what was it?" Polly asked with wide eyes. "I... I've felt powerful spells before, but that mana, that power, I-" The source of this content is *novel*●fire●*net*

"My own magic," Jake simply answered. "Asking me about it will not help. It is innate to me, and even if you trained from now till the day you die, you wouldn't ever be able to learn it."

"Why did you hide it?" Owen questioned, just as Jake had expected. Also, he really wanted to point out the hypocrisy of that question but assumed the guy had his reasons. Same as Jake had his.

"What would it have helped if I revealed it earlier outside of making the fights even more boring? It would also have been too much and risked killing several of my prior opponents. Unless my previous opponents disagree... hey, Polly, would you have liked for me to have used that kick on you?" Jake asked the mage.

She stared at him with even wider eyes. "I... I would be dead..."

"Exactly," Jake nodded. "As I said, all shall be revealed in time. Just assume that as the level of challenge increases, so shall more be shown. And we're still in the early stages of these revelations."

"Can I ask... how are you this powerful?" Polly questioned. "Do you have a great master or something?"

"You can ask, sure. But I won't answer. Anyone that may or may not have had an impact on my Path is not anywhere near here and will not show up in or around the Colosseum, so no reason to even think about it," Jake tried to explain everything away.

Going into detail on how he was so strong also wasn't that interesting and not something that could be replicated. The truth was that he was actually a C-grade. The true difference all came down to one simple thing:

Conceptual power. The sheer power and depth of the concepts in Jake's arcane affinity made it far more powerful than it had any right to be. It wasn't as simple as an Arcane Awakening-level powerup... it went far above that during the moment of kicking.

Through sheer control, he could stabilize destruction and stability until, at once, he would unleash it all into one wave of pure destructive force through his foot. In prior fights, Jake hadn't even actively controlled his stamina during the fights, but now it was time to get a bit more serious.

What's more... that one roundhouse kick wasn't even close to Jake's limits. If he wanted to, he could pour every single shred of mana he had into one singular attack. Doing so wouldn't make much sense, though.

It wouldn't just have killed the half-ogre if he did that. There wouldn't even be a head left, as all would have been consumed by pure arcane destruction.

Jake was genuinely looking forward to facing an opponent he could go full-power on. Alas, he had a feeling it would still be quite a while before that happened. Especially now that he was limited to one match a day.

However, there was at least one positive change in the points department. Based on Jake's math, then every win as a Gladiator should have rewarded 56 points, but he instead saw his points had increased by 250 from one victory. That was frankly a massive jump... then again, if he could only fight once a week, it had better give more points. It did also give some hope for this Show Matches, though.

Checking the menu, he saw how many points he had, and it was starting to add up.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (1/10)

Colosseum Points: 2990

Lives remaining: 10

"Enough talk about how awesome I am," Jake put a stop to Owen's and Polly's questions. "Didn't you two want me to go look at equipment before the match? Let's do that now since we got the time. Can't walk around like this forever."

Jake showed off his bare right foot, which was already plenty dirty from wandering around after the fight. Plus he had sand everywhere, and everyone knows the bad rep sand had, being all coarse, rough and irritating.

"Yeah, good point," Owen agreed. "You know where to go, right?"

"I can figure it out?"

"Just follow me, then," Owen said with a sigh.

"Don't you have matches today?"

"I only got one fight left before my promotion match, so I plan on doing those two today. That still gives me plenty of time," Owen explained.

Jake nodded as the three of them walked toward another section of the Colosseum. On the way, as they were walking down a long, populated hallway, Jake suddenly felt something from behind.

Two eyes staring into his back. No unusual... except there was something else.

An aura. The most powerful he had felt in this arena so far.

Turning around, Jake looked directly back and spotted the figure more than a hundred meters away. A lithe figure, wearing a cloak covering the entire body.

[Dark Elf]

The female dark elf smirked as Jake spotted her, as shadowy magic surrounded her, making her disappear the very next second. Not just from sight... she was truly gone, even in Jake's sphere.

"What are you looking for?" Owen asked, trying to follow Jake's gaze.

"Something fun for the future," Jake smiled in response as he turned around and kept walking. Always fun to have a scripted encounter hinting at a later opponent.

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Chapter 747: Nevermore: The Merciful Doomfoot

Shopping trip time! Well, kind of. For the very first time since leaving the Tutorial, Jake wasn't loaded and had to actually think twice before spending haphazardly. It wasn't even sure he wanted to buy something, despite the urgings of both Polly and Owen.

Not long after the encounter with the mysterious dark elf that was totally not a teaser for a fight much later in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake and company arrived in the section of the Colosseum that dealt with selling items.

This part looked like a huge shopping district still placed within the massive structure itself. Despite having spent over a week in the Colosseum so far, Jake had far from explored close to everything, and he knew there were even restaurants and stuff somewhere. It was a big place, which it kind of had to be with the many different arenas and huge training facilities.

Luckily, one didn't have to shop around for equipment. There was one place to go, where everything was gathered. It was a large shop with what looked like magical screens where one could simply search for items and browse for anything they wanted as long as it was on sale.

As a Gladiator, Jake had unlocked a lot better items than before... and maybe it was time to spend some points. Not all of them, though. He did need some new shoes for sure, and after searching through the footwear for a quarter of an hour, he settled on a pair he liked.

[Fleetstep Boots (Rare)] – Leather boots enchanted with powerful magic. These boots are incredibly durable and were created to make their wearer quicker on their feet, allowing them to go in and out of combat more easily. The enchantments placed on these boots make your steps lighter and increase Agility. As a rare item, these boots are insured, so should they be destroyed or lost, you can instantly get a replacement. Enchantments: Insured. Fleetstep. +1 Agility.

Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.

Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.

It was a bit funny that boots were the first item he bought. It was an investment for future fights, and if Jake had to spend one and a half to two years more in the arena, he would need equipment at some point anyway. Something like boots was something he could get now and keep till the end. Especially boots like these that offered not only a bit of Agility and proper durability but even a lightness effect. That was pretty nice when fighting on sand.

Moreover, they were insured. A very silly name, but the gist of it was there. This meant that even if Jake ended up destroying them – something his destructive arcane energy had a tendency to do – he would get new ones. That was far better than Owen, who would just lose his spear if he ended up breaking or misplacing it.

This entire insurance thing seemed a bit out of place thematically, but Jake could see it being necessary to entice people like him to buy anything before they began losing their lives.

"How do they look?" Jake asked after putting them on. The boots were made of thin, lightweight leather he could barely feel on his feet, and when he stepped down, it felt a bit odd. It was like he had indeed become lighter, but only from the perspective of the ground he stepped on. That is to say, Jake wasn't actually lighter if he decided to kick someone in the face, but if he walked on sand, he wouldn't sink in as much as before. Overall, good stuff.

“Decent,” Owen nodded. “Definitely better than no boots. Also, are you seriously wearing leather boots without socks on?”

“Yes,” Jake answered with a deadpan expression. That is what he had gotten used to, and he was not going to stop.

“Now that is just weird,” Owen shook his head. “Also, have you considered looking into any weapons or-“

“Kicking is good for now,” Jake cut him off.

“How about a wand to make use of your-“ Polly tried, Jake once more unreceptive to the suggestions.

“Kicking good.”

Both of them looked exasperated, but Jake was steadfast in his opinion.

Now, Jake would admit that buying a weapon would have made what happened the next day a lot easier and a lot less... messy. Alas, hindsight was twenty-twenty.

After spending a thousand points, Jake stuck around and watched one of Owen’s matches, where he saw his dungeon-buddy struggle for a good five minutes before finally itching out a victory. He considered staying for Owen’s promotion match but instead headed back to the training area for Gladiators to work on his own stuff.

Usually, outside the dungeon, Jake filled all his downtime with doing alchemy or playing with his Puzzle Box, but here in the Colosseum of Mortals, that wasn’t an option. Instead, Jake would focus on things he usually neglected. One of those had been internal energy control and familiarizing himself with his weakened body and, of course, the practice and creation of Fear Gaze, but he had one other thing he wanted to practice pretty badly.

For melee combat, Jake got extremely lucky with the Myriad Paths event and got a perfect teacher and sparring partner in Sim-Jake, allowing him to train in melee fighting. Even if he didn’t have a specific melee fighting skill outside of Fang of Man, he was undoubtedly better at melee combat when it came to pure technique compared to his preferred weapon.

Even Minaga had pointed out that Jake seriously needed to practice his archery. So Jake went all the way back to the basics – something only possible due to the Colosseum of Mortals.

It seemed counterproductive and useless to improve shooting an arrow as a normal human, but from talks with the Sword Saint and even Sim-Jake, it became clear he was very wrong. Jake had been good at archery before the system, yes, but he hadn’t been

an expert. He hadn't been a complete monster with the bow, the same as the Sword Saint was a beast with a sword.

That pure level of skill and understanding of the basics had transferred to conceptual power far beyond anything Jake had for the Sword Saint. So, while it was a bit late, Jake wanted to shore up some of the fundamental flaws in his basic archery.

To do that, he had booked a private shooting range. A privilege of being a Gladiator. It wasn't a big place, but it was big enough for Jake to set up targets and, with his bow and practice arrows, do the most basic of basics:

Target practice.

With no pressure from being in a fight, Jake could focus on every detail of his movements. The position of his feet, the way the muscles in his shoulders moved, the fluidity of motion when he drew the string, and his method of aiming. Jake had most of these basics down already, and as mentioned, he was pretty good... but if Jake wanted to reach the top, "pretty good" was far from enough.

Several hours later, Jake left the training room as he had to go and get dinner before sleeping to regenerate his resources and rest his sore body. He ate with Polly and Owen, who both seemed interested in his practice, especially as Polly had discovered that Jake had gone and gotten a huge batch of practice arrows and even an extra bow from the Quartermaster through her basic information-gathering.

Neither seemed to seriously consider Jake could be an archer but nevertheless encouraged him to train with a weapon. The brainstorming on how Jake could sew arrows to his boots wasn't that welcome, though, and no, it wasn't a "great way to add penetrative power to his already strong kicks."

Jake had already tried that and knew it wouldn't work.

The next day, Jake could not do another Gladiator Match, but that did mean he could try out the other option. Show Matches. Sure, he could only do one of them, but he felt a bit excited to see what he would be able to face.

Going to the Battlemaster, the man only nodded as Jake said he wanted to do a Show Match.

"This is your first time doing a Show Match, so I have some words of wisdom for you. Don't think it is like a normal duel. This is a true fight. Also, I know you aren't a fan of killing, but for the Show Matches, there often isn't a choice. Your opponents won't show any mercy to you, either. I don't even think they know the meaning of that word. You can't surrender either; it's kill or be killed in there," the Battlemaster warned.

Jake nodded, pretty much having his suspicions confirmed as to what kind of fights these Show Matches were.

“Here, let me illustrate the point. These are the options for opponents you have available today. Remember, you can only pick one fight a day, so take your time to consider the options. Oh, and the higher up on the list they are, the harder the fight is, which should be pretty obvious, considering the rewards are also higher,” the Battlemaster continued as he handed Jake a list written on a thick piece of parchment.

He wasn’t going to question why the words on the list looked like they were printed with a modern printer.

Show Match Opponents Available:

- 1. Goblin Hunting Squad (6x opponents) – 300 Colosseum Points**
- 2. Feral Orc Berserker – 250 Colosseum Points**
- 3. Zombies (3x opponents) – 200 Colosseum Points**
- 4. Sharpclaw Badger – 150 Colosseum Points** Google search **novel** *fire* **net**
- 5. Wood Puppet – 100 Colosseum Points**

“I take option 1 against the Goblin Hunting Squad,” Jake answered instantly. It wasn’t really a choice. He would just pick whatever gave the most points.

“Hm, not surprising considering your track record, but do be warned. There are five regular goblins and one hobgoblin leader. They will all have different weapons too, so even if you are stronger than each of them individually, if you mess up, things can get messy quickly. Especially considering you are not wearing any proper armor,” the Battlemaster explained. “Group combat is also very different to duels, so watch out.”

“Got it, chief,” Jake nodded with a smile.

“Alright then. Gate three, the match begins in thirty minutes... unless you need more time or have reconsidered?”

“I’m good,” Jake waved him off as he went and waited for his match to start. He saw the timer above the gate appear and begin counting down. Half an hour later, he walked through the large tunnel toward a slightly different arena than any he had been to before.

This one was about the same size as the Gladiator arena but had a lot more clutter spread around. Badly built five-meter tall wooden towers, parts of walls, with there even being a few rusty weapons and pieces of armor in piles around the perimeter.

However, the most noteworthy aspect of this place was the sand. It had an almost black color, dyed from the blood of countless creatures who had died there.

Jake stood behind the gate, looking at a large cage on the other side of the arena with six goblins inside. One hobgoblin with a machete, two small goblins with bows, two with spears, and one with a club. Just by looking at them, it became clear these were not the same as the goblin Jake had fought in his very first fight. They instead looked almost feral.

The Battlemaster had indeed been right. He was effectively fighting non-sapient monsters. There was only one way to truly win that kind of fight.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome! Today, we have a very special Show Match for you, one of new beginnings or untimely ends. I am sure you all already know. In fact, it’s why you’re here, isn’t it!? That’s right, it’s Doomfoot’s debut in the Show Match Arena! He will be facing off against six ferocious goblins captured while trying to raid a village. Their judgment has been passed down... but will Doomfoot be able to carry it out?”

Jake wasn’t surprised to hear the same announcer also worked in the Show Match arena, though he did wonder when the hell the guy slept, assuming he was even real. Okay, he definitely wasn’t real, as Jake even heard the same guy commentate Owen’s matches, but Jake did wonder if a person had put their voice to it or if it was an army of projections or something.

Anyway, tangent aside, it was interesting that the announcer gave context as to why these goblins were there and even gave a justification for killing them.

“Doomfoot is known for not having killed a single opponent so far, but today there is no choice. Will Doomfoot be able to overcome his merciful nature and be their executioner, or will the rising meteor stick to his principles and crumble to dust? Let’s find out! Lower the gates!”

In retrospect, the entire situation was a bit funny.

For Jake to be known as someone merciful that didn’t kill, and for the announcer to ask if he could overcome his nature? It was definitely bizarre. Jake was certain that Villy was laughing somewhere at the insinuation, as while Jake was many things, someone who refused to kill wasn’t one of them.

And it was time to make that clear to the Colosseum of Mortals too.

The second the gates lowered, Jake stormed forward, his new boots allowing him to run even faster than before on the soft sand. At the command of the hobgoblin, the smaller goblins reacted fast as two arrows were loosed the second Jake got within range.

With a single sidestep, he dodged both as he closed in. Two spear-wielding goblins met him first. Their weapons were raised to stop his charge, not realizing how inadequate their stances were. Arcane energy had already wormed its way into Jake's legs as he clashed with the two goblins... though to call it a clash wasn't exactly fair.

With a single sweep of his leg, two spears were broken in half, and with a spinning motion, Jake brought down his foot in an axe kick, squashing the skull of one of the goblins. The other one couldn't respond in time as Jake kicked it in the stomach, sending it flying toward one of the archers, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

The archer was hit by the corpse of his comrade and fell over before he could nock another arrow. The club-wielding goblin was next on Jake's list as he sprinted over. He tried to swing his club, but Jake kicked it, making the weapon smash into his own head, embedding itself.

Ignoring the hobgoblin, Jake ran past him as he took out the archers next, saving the best for last.

Seconds later, a broken bow flew into the air along with a decapitated goblin head. A foot was brought down and crushed the skull of a second archer who was still prone from his comrade hitting him. Leaving only one.

Turning toward the hobgoblin, Jake saw only fear in his eyes, mixed with pure feral instinct. His opponent screamed loudly, charging with reckless abandon, the machete raised over his head, ready to be brought down. Jake simply shifted his feet a bit as he got into a stance. The hobgoblin closed in, and right as he got within a few meters, Jake took one step forward, as he rotated his hips, and performed a rear kick.

His offensive move had surprised the hobgoblin so much he didn't even have time to swing down. The kick hit the goblin in its side, his entire body bending over like a folded lawn chair as Jake's kick continued, leaving a trace of crackling arcane energy in its wake.

Jake spun all the way around as the resistance he met was less than expected, and as the shower of blood from the rapidly spinning bisected upper body of the hobgoblin rained down all over him, Jake remembered one of the reasons he had held back on killing his other opponents.

It could get bloody messy – pun fully intended.

"And we have a winner, no, an utter dominator in the arena! Who said Doomfoot was merciful? Who said he was unwilling to kill?"

You did... Jake grumbled internally as the announcer said some more fluff that Jake zoned out, only really listening in to the last part as he walked back out of the arena again.

“The kick of doom has brought justice! Now go, valiant combatant. Rest, recover, and I think I am speaking for everyone here when I say... return to fight another day!”

Trying to look at least a little dignified despite his messy appearance, Jake walked out of the arena with steady steps, the sand a slightly darker hue than when he entered.

Fifteen minutes later.

“Jake... what are you doing?” Owen asked as he looked confused down at Jake.

Jake grumbled to himself as he sat in a big washroom, wearing only a wet shirt and underpants in front of a basin of water, trying desperately to clean his blood-covered pants, boots, and armor. The shirt also still had marks on it, but that one had at least been under his leather armor. Seriously, why wasn't Self-Repair a thing here? The cleaning function of that was just awesome.

Looking up at Owen and Polly, Jake wanted to complain to them as he stopped what he was doing.

Suddenly, he looked at Polly with a sinister smile. “Hey... I remember you saying you wanted to help me, right?”

Polly pepped up. “Have you finally decided to take me up on the offer? I am sure I can be of great assistance!”

Jake nodded slowly as he turned back and looked at the bloody water. “I have a great job assignment for you.”

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Chapter 748: Nevermore: An Unexpected Opponent

Jake was truly a genius. Why hadn't he thought of using Polly earlier? It was such an obvious solution! Sure, he could also have asked Owen, but Polly had been keen on finding some way to help him for a while, and this was such a prime opportunity.

After he had gotten his clothing situation fixed through Polly – partly by cleaning it, partly by buying some new stuff - he headed straight back to a small townhouse that served as housing for Gladiators. Later on, he met back up with Owen and Polly to eat before going home and to bed. When he woke up and opened the door to the small house, he saw his clothes there, neatly packaged by the professional cleaning company.

What? He hadn't actually made Polly clean them. With her whole young mistress vibe, she clearly never washed her own clothes either, so Jake had asked her where she got her clothes washed and had her escort him there. It was quite the high-end place based on what Jake could gather, specializing in cleaning armor and weapons for the combatants. As they already knew Polly, things went smoothly, and he didn't even have to pay for anything. Not that there was a way to pay for anything without using Colosseum Points, and not even the Wyrmgod was cruel enough to make people in Challenge Dungeons spend points on not having dirty clothes.

Jake's third day as a Gladiator was spent practicing with his bow, doing a Show Match, and working a bit on energy control when he was too physically tired to do any more target practice. The Show Match in question was versus some weird six-legged mammal creature that had died from just a few good kicks to the head.

The fourth day and onwards was very much the same as time passed. Archery practice was the name of the game, and he quickly got into a routine. Others would likely get bored doing the same things over and over again, but Jake had always been good at hyper-focusing on tasks until his body physically told him to stop. When that happened, he would just switch to working on something that took brain power instead until he was wrung out mentally too.

What rest he did need, he got through sleeping or during his rendezvous with Owen and Polly as they went out to eat, or Jake watched one of Owen's matches. Speaking of Owen, he pretty quickly also reached Gladiator rank, with even Polly beginning to do some matches after finding herself inspired by Jake and Owen. She still had a long way to go, but she did at least begin to win some matches after learning some basic melee fighting along with her magic.

Jake wasn't exactly surprised when she turned out to be pretty good at both. Her stats were clearly not ordinary; the only real problem was her lack of actual practice and fighting experience. Polly wasn't going to become a Gladiator or anything like that before Jake left, but she could definitely get a few more promotions.

Everyone slowly got stronger, and soon, around nine entire weeks had passed since Jake had become a Gladiator, with nothing that exciting happening during this time. Jake just did one match every day, and as he slowly made progress, he realized that his math had been a bit off.

As he could do a Gladiator Match on the second day as a Gladiator, it would actually only take nine weeks to finish all ten fights. This resulted in a total of 54 Show Matches rewarding 300 Colosseum Points each, as well as 10 Gladiator Matches. So, just a single day over nine weeks. Which had allowed Jake to rake up quite the points.

Current objective: Be promoted from Gladiator to Veteran Gladiator

Current rank: Gladiator (10/10)

Colosseum Points: 20440

Lives remaining: 10

His daily point gain was still worse than it had been the day he was promoted to Expert Fighter due to the limited battles, but he wasn't really complaining. It was still a lot of points. Moreover, Jake had gotten some damn good practice during his downtime. It was still slow-going and early days, but he felt like he was making some progress.

Ah, but not when it came to the actual fights. The Doomfoot was still dominating everyone he met. Well, okay, the domination had gotten less the more time passed. Even if the Show Matches and gladiatorial matches didn't reward more points, they sure as hell got a lot harder. He could still win every fight by kicking, but as his opponents became more and more aware of his skills and just got stronger, he was beginning to face some annoying issues. That is to say... he couldn't keep up his kicking-only challenge forever, no matter how funny it would be to reach Champion rank through kicks only.

Despite feeling a bit sad about that, there was also one pleasant surprise on the day he got done with his tenth Gladiator fight.

"Your streak just keeps going, huh? Can't say I am surprised; I do have a keen eye for spotting talent," the Battlemaster said, speaking the usual fluff. That is, until he added the next sentence. "Seeing as it is you, I assume you want your Promotion Match tomorrow? You can, of course, take some rest days if you want." This text is hosted at novel.fire.net

"Wait, I can do the Promotion Match tomorrow and not in a week?" Jake questioned with surprise.

"Obviously," the Battlemaster scoffed.

"I thought matches against other Gladiators were limited to one a week," Jake muttered.

"It is limited to one a week against others with the Gladiator rank. Did you think you would be fighting with a combatant of your own rank for promotions? Hah! No, you need to face a real Veteran Gladiator to get promoted to one! This is the big leagues now," the Battlemaster said, for some reason thinking it was really funny.

Jake just stared as he went back and checked the message he had gotten several weeks ago. And... fuck him if the wording wasn't ambiguous.

"You are limited to one fight a week against another Gladiator."

So, apparently, Veteran Gladiators were not the same as Gladiators. Who would have known! Jake sure as hell didn't! Not that he didn't welcome the opportunity to move on faster and climb those ranks. It

"But... I wanna warn you. If you decide to sign up to fight tomorrow, you will meet a rather difficult opponent. The one you will be facing was promoted to Veteran Gladiator only a week or so ago, and he has only been here in the Colosseum for a month or so more than you. Which is to say, he also isn't someone who has struggled or lost a single match. So be careful and consider if you wanna fight him. Moreover, he is a martial artist like you, so I am unsure how good that matchup is for you. Either way, the choice is yours," the Battlemaster said in an uncharacteristically serious tone.

Jake, at first, thought this was just more fluff to build up another pretty easy opponent... until the system made it clear it wasn't.

Bonus Objective gained.

Your rapid ascension through the ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals couldn't have been swifter. If you wish to keep this streak going, you will have to defeat an opponent with power out of the ordinary for this ranking.

Failing this bonus objective will lock out many similar future bonus objectives.

Bonus Objective: Defeat the Benevolent Monk.

He had definitely not expected a random bonus objective, but he wasn't against it either.

"So, what say you?" the Battlemaster asked.

"Definitely going for it," Jake smiled.

"Alright, I'll sign you up for tomorrow then. I would recommend that you get a good night's sleep and prepare properly," the Battlemaster warned him one final time.

Jake decided to take his advice and skipped the archery practice for the day as he went back and relaxed in his little townhouse. He didn't even go out and eat that day but ate something he had stocked up.

For a brief second, Jake did consider spending some Colosseum Points on improving his equipment but decided against it. Perhaps it was a bit reckless, but he wanted to face this challenge with what he already had.

The next day he returned to the Colosseum and, after the usual brief wait, found himself entering the tunnel leading to the arena itself. Checking over himself one last time, he confirmed he was in peak condition as he ascended the stairs, the coming battlefield appearing before him.

“Welcome, to the arena! Today, we have an exciting bout on our hands. On one side, we have Doomfoot, a rising star of the arena who has not missed a single opportunity to fight for us! And why would he? For he has never lost either, his foot spelling the doom of all who meet him! It’s the one and only Doomfoot!” the announcer yelled right as Jake walked up to the bars blocking the entrance to the arena.

Looking across the arena, Jake could barely make out his opponent. He saw a humanoid shape, though, from the current distance, he couldn’t quite tell if his opponent was a human or an elf. Luckily, his Identify answered that for him.

[Human]

As he Identified the man, the announcer continued.

“However... his opponent, despite his humble appearance, is not simple. Far from it. Hailing from an unknown land, this man walked barefoot into the arena only a few months ago, and so far, it doesn’t look like anyone has been able to make him leave! With a palm of mercy but a fist of indomitable power, he stands undefeated and unchallenged. It’s the unstoppable Benevolent Monk!”

The announcer definitely did make Jake’s opponent sound impressive.

“Without further ado... let the two undefeated martial artists clash! Let them finally decide who the true master is! Lower the gates!”

Jake carefully stepped forward as he observed his opponent closely. The man wore only light pants as he walked calmly out of his entrance area. His head was entirely bald, and he walked with steady steps as he entered the arena. His breathing was calm too, and he had a light smile on his lips as he regarded Jake.

His feet were indeed bare, and outside of those pants, he was entirely naked. The powerful, lithe muscles on both his arms and chest made it clear that the man was trained, and his muscles were definitely not for show.

The monk walked toward Jake before stopping a good ten meters away. Just as Jake wondered what he would do, the monk held his right fist in his palm and bowed deeply.

“This lowly monk greets he who is known as Doomfoot,” he said in a light and relaxed tone. “I thank you for sharing with me this moment on such a beautiful day. I hope our fight can be memorable for both of us and that we both may find joy and inspiration.”

Jake was a bit taken aback by his entire demeanor. Usually, he would get a bit annoyed by that kind of attitude, but this monk was different. His voice only carried pure sincerity, and his level of conviction felt unshakeable. Jake found himself getting carried along and decided to respond in kind, also giving a small bow to be polite. “Let’s have a good fight for sure.”

"If I may... would you accept imposing some honor rules upon ourselves? I do not wish to see more violence than necessary, and I hope doing this could lead to a more fruitful encounter," the monk proposed, making Jake frown a bit.

"What did you have in mind?"

He wasn't entirely against the idea. Spicing things up could be fun. Moreover, he did have the feeling that deciding to agree was the best course of action.

"Rather than risk death, how about we instead agree on this: the winner shall be the first to land ten hits successfully or be the first to draw blood," the monk proposed with a smile. "We shall naturally agree mutually what counts as a hit, both doing so with honor."

"You know what?" Jake said after thinking a bit. "I'm in."

Jake smiled as he prepared himself. The monk looked at him one final time as he sighed. "Alas, I know that you only use your legs usually, but I will refrain from placing such limitations on myself. I hope that is acceptable."

"I would be insulted if you limited yourself like that," Jake shook his head. "Let's enjoy yourselves, now shall we?"

The monk smiled as he bowed. "I understand. Indeed, let us proceed to exchange pointers."

Under normal circumstances, Jake wouldn't entertain something like a limited duel with rules such as this. Instead, he would just aim to win the fight quickly by brutally kicking his opponent in the head with an arcane-empowered foot. However, this situation was a bit different. First of all, the monk did really strike Jake as a nice and pleasant guy to be around, and he sincerely looked like he wanted to place these rules to avoid causing unmercenary harm. Secondly...

Jake's danger sense was practically screaming at him from the moment he laid eyes on the man, making Jake both excited and apprehensive.

Vilastromoz frowned as he looked at the arena where Jake stood in front of the monk. The fights so far had all been fun and games to the level of it getting kind of boring. Not that the practice time was any better, not after he worked on that ocular soul technique. Watching Jake shoot a target with the thousandth arrow of the day just wasn't that interesting.

However... this was not expected.

Turning to the Wyrmgod, the Viper threw a questioning gaze. The other Primordial obviously noted as he sighed. "It isn't as it seems."

“Yeah, it really isn’t,” Minaga agreed. “That monk is placed this early on in the Challenge Dungeon for a reason, okay?”

“But you do acknowledge why I question the appearance of someone like that, right?” the Viper said, shaking his head. “I will admit I never truly bothered learning how to make dungeons properly, and if the system agreed with this design choice, perhaps it is fine... but I still question it.”

“I do indeed acknowledge this is a unique situation, but I believe in your Chosen... though it may be hard if he doesn’t get serious with the tools he chose to bring into the arena. Rather foolhardy of him to go in without any preparations despite the warning,” the Wyrmgod said.

“Well, that’s Jake for you,” Vilas sighed. Though he did agree. This wouldn’t be an easy fight for Jake when he didn’t have a weapon. His opponent was simply too out of the ordinary and not someone the Viper would have ever expected this early on in any Challenge Dungeon.

It was a person Vilas recognized. Someone he had once fought with, even if the monk had been with his comrades at the time. What stood in the arena was an image of a pinnacle being of the multiverse:

One of the twelve Daolords of the Dao Sect – the Soulfist Daolord.

Or at least an image of the monk that would one day become the Soulfist.

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Chapter 749: Nevermore: Benevolent Monk

The air was still as Jake closely observed the monk. His opponent had yet to even take a stance but still simply stood in a relaxed pose with his palms held against each other. Yet, even so, Jake hesitated to attack.

No openings.

It didn’t matter what Jake thought up. No matter what, his intuition told him whatever he did had a low chance of not ending with him getting a punch to the face. Jake considered dragging out the time and if that would be good or bad for him, but considering the nature of the monk, it wouldn’t surprise Jake if the guy was happy with a tie where no violence occurred.

Not feeling like he had much of a choice, Jake stopped delaying and moved in. Arcane energy entered his legs as he went for a low-committal low kick to start with. He did so with the expectations of the monk dodging the foot infused with destructive arcane power.

That isn't what happened.

The monk braced himself and lifted his leg to block Jake's kick. A wave of destructive arcane energy that had sent every other opponent reeling back smashed into the man, but Jake felt none of the usual feedback. Instead, he felt like he had just tried to kick a streetlight, the monk not moving a single inch from the impact.

"I hope we both agree that a blocked hit does not count as one landed... though I would be willing to give you one point," the monk said as Jake looked at him with surprise.

"Actually landed hits only," Jake clarified.

The monk smiled, and Jake instantly leaped backward to avoid the incoming attack. The raised leg the monk had used to block smashed down into the sand, making the ground erupt all around them. With the same motion, the monk exploded forward along with the wave of blinding sand, a kick aimed at Jake's stomach.

Quickly, Jake reacted as he blocked with his own leg. At least he tried to. The monk purposefully missed him by a few centimeters, and rather than land a kick, he instead hooked his foot around Jake's leg and pulled, throwing the still mid-air Jake off balance as he was dragged back.

What the-

Jake didn't even have time to think as he instinctively responded to a fist descending down toward his chest. Both his arms were infused with stable arcane energy as he crossed them just in time. The fist smashed into his arms, making Jake feel like someone had just hit him with a baseball bat, blasting him down into the sand as the air was temporarily knocked out of his lungs.

The pain went through his body as Jake felt true danger for the very first time in the Colosseum... and he was all for it.

Right after he hit the sand, Jake twisted his body, landing a kick to the side of the unprepared monk, making him stumble to the side. This time it didn't feel like he had hit a bloody wall, but actual human flesh. Sadly for him, he didn't have the time or thoughtfulness to add any destructive energy of note to the kick.

It still gave him the time to do a handspring to get back on his feet. New novel chapters are published on *novel*◇

“What are we seeing!? Doomfoot was swept off his feet and, for the very first time in the Colosseum, used something other than his legs to block!? But who can blame him after that awe-inspiring power displayed by the Benevolent Monk! There sure wasn’t any benevolence in that first!”

Jake didn’t need to have it pointed out, but yeah... the kicking-only challenge was officially over now. In one brief exchange, it had rapidly become clear there was no way he could have kept that going without having the stuffing knocked out of him.

Regarding his opponent, he saw that the monk stood with a bright smile. Jake momentarily panicked as he wondered if he was bleeding anywhere and thus lost, but that wasn’t the case.

“Rarely does one have such a wonderful opportunity... I believe it is 0-1 in your favor,” the Benevolent Monk said.

“Make that 1-1. I count that as a landed hit, as I didn’t fully block it,” Jake corrected him. His kick had barely done anything but briefly throw the monk off balance while Jake’s back still ached. It was only fair.

Besides, with the explosive power the monk had just displayed and Jake’s own offensive prowess, there was no fucking way the fight wouldn’t end with some blood being spilled on either side.

“Very well,” the monk bowed as he shifted his stance. “This time, I shall go on the offensive.”

Jake prepared himself as the monk stepped forward with small, measured steps so as to not leave any openings before he was within range to strike. Every move was calculated, and there was not a doubt in Jake’s mind that the monk was a more experienced fighter than any he had faced before in the Colosseum.

It gave him flashbacks to fighting the Sword Saint...

But Jake was no slouch either. The first move of the monk had taken him by surprise. That wasn’t going to happen again.

Finally, the Benevolent Monk got in range to attack. With a big step, he moved forward and struck, aiming to land a fast palm strike on Jake. Responding quickly, Jake stepped out of the way of his opponent’s attack as he totally threw away all attempts at sticking to his personal challenge by throwing a jab at the monk. The brief opening from the palm strike did not prove big enough, and Jake found his hit blocked and countered, only for Jake to counter the counter.

Arcane energy revolved through his body as every single strike was infused with destructive energies, yet the monk neutralized every blow. Jake did not understand how

the monk at times seemed to become as immovable as a fortress yet, at others, was light as a feather and clearly still a human that would crumble from a single well-landed blow.

Odd concepts were at play that Jake could not fully comprehend... but it was also clear the monk couldn't grasp what Jake was doing either, as he was taken by surprise several times due to the destructive potential infused into Jake's punches and kicks or when his arm suddenly had a stable barrier covering it to block a hit.

They exchanged blows for more than a minute, kicking up sand all around them as the arena became a mess, yet despite over a hundred small and large moves, not a single blow that any of them would define as a "landed hit" occurred.

That is, until they both presented fake openings at once, attacking in concert.

Jake was hit in the chest by a palm as he managed to kick the monk in his stomach. Both of them tumbled back, Jake sent momentarily airborne as the stable arcane mana that had helped protect him shattered from the blow that seemed to send odd waves through his body.

The monk wasn't much better off as he smashed into a pillar, hitting his back hard before landing on the sand and falling down on one knee with a sizzling wound of destructive arcane energy on his stomach.

Yet somehow, neither of them shed a single drop of blood.

Getting back up, Jake scoffed as he ripped off his already torn shirt. By now, it was just a hazard and somewhere the monk could potentially grab onto. He seemed like the honorable type who wouldn't do that, but one could never be too sure.

It was 2-2 now, and Jake dove right back into it. As time passed, Jake did begin to get some semblance of feeling for what the monk was doing. In some ways, what he did reminded Jake a bit of himself. When he defended, the monk could seemingly make his entire body utterly immovable and impervious, while when he attacked, he sent out odd destructive waves. However, after quite a few more traded hits, setting the score to 5-6 in the monk's favor, Jake finally understood his initial assessment was wrong. The monk's concept was not similar to Jake's arcane affinity. It was both simpler and infinitely more complex at the same time.

When the monk blocked a hit, he did not truly nullify Jake's blows. He absorbed it instead. Rather than the physical body, he made it so Jake struck the monk's soul directly, sending destructive energies through that. However, even if he did so, the monk managed to remain unaffected. Even if he did lose energy from taking hits, it was minuscule compared to actually getting hit. As for why others didn't do something similar...

Jake had tried to suffer from soul and mental attacks before. Getting hit in the soul was a special kind of pain, unlike anything that could ever be inflicted on the body. Moreover, it was like getting punched in the brain every single time one was hit. Like taking a mental attack every time... yet the monk did this repeatedly without a care in the world. At least he didn't show it but kept a serene expression.

All of his is to say... the monk had an innate will and inner calm that was utterly monstrous. His level of mental energy was simply on another level, to the point of it not truly making any sense.

Given enough landed hits, the monk would still fall. He still lost energy every single time Jake hit him, after all. Likely all three resources at once due to how the soul tended to work. The monk also needed to actively "shift" to doing his odd soul blocks and couldn't move while doing so, creating plenty of openings.

The real way Jake found out how the monk's ability worked wasn't just through his own landed hits but those he took. He felt the odd waves go into his body every time he took a hit and soon identified them as soul-affecting attacks.

Jake himself was no weakling when it came to his soul and had thus barely noticed. But that didn't mean the monk's ability was useless, as it did allow him to deal more damage with every blow, as he could effectively infuse a soul-damaging concept into every punch.

One thing was clear... this Benevolent Monk was far beyond what anyone at his level should be. Shit, he was probably above where most C-grade should be in pure understanding and conceptual control.

But Jake still had confidence. One of the core tenets of his fighting style was to read his opponent, and as the fight proceeded, Jake did just that. Even as he fell behind and the score became 6-8 for the monk, he slowly began to edge out an advance, bringing the score to 7-8 in the very next moment by landing a fast job to the monk's liver.

They were approaching the end of their duel... and they both knew it.

Jake was breathing heavily as he backed off a few steps, sweat dripping down his brow. The monk was also far less still than before, having to heave for breath himself. Every muscle in Jake's body ached from what had only been about ten minutes of fighting total, with the true number of exchanged moves well into the hundreds.

Even so... no blood had been spilled yet. Jake had blue marks everywhere, his arms were especially looking bad, and the monk didn't look in good condition either. But, as long as the blood stayed as internal bleeding, it didn't count. With neither of them using any weapons and both able to control and strengthen their body, it was far more difficult than normal to create any open wounds.

Looking at this opponent, Jake saw the monk's calm eyes and smile. Despite his labored breathing, he looked confident in himself. The monk clearly had more in the tank and probably still something hidden up his... well, he didn't have sleeves, but he definitely had something hidden somewhere.

Jake also had one more trump card to play. One attack he had purposefully not used in the entire fight so far, as he was looking for the perfect opportunity. One technique that could shift the entire bout in a single moment:

Fear Gaze.

And he knew it was soon time to use it. Both of them were getting tired, and their bodies no longer moved exactly as they intended every time. This meant more minor opportunities to attack, and Jake was waiting for one of those opportunities.

In concert, both of them seemed to agree to resume their fight as both stepped forward and entered each other's range once more. Jake winced with pain every time he blocked but didn't let it distract him as he tried all he could to land a blow. He finally managed to land a punch as he himself was kicked.

The score went to 8-9 for the monk as the opportunity arose as the monk's kick had put him slightly off balance.

Jake leaned his head to the side, avoiding a quick jab as he moved in for the finisher. The opening he had been waiting for had finally presented itself, and there was no way he wasn't capitalizing fully. Using the same motion he had to dodge, Jake threw a haymaker – an attack the monk would have easily dodged under normal circumstances, but this wasn't normal circumstances.

As he lunged forward, he activated Fear Gaze at full power to send an arcane-empowered fist with all of Jake's momentum baked into it, barreling toward the momentarily frozen monk's face. He only needed the monk to be frozen for less than a quarter of a second, less than any of his prior opponents, and-

It fell short by a fraction.

Jake's arcane-infused punch swept across and nicked the monk's chin as he, barely in time, moved his head to the side while landing a counter-attack of his own. Jake had no response but to brace himself, having put everything into his attack.

The Benevolent Monk's body exploded with power as he stomped down in the very same second his palm hit Jake in the stomach, sending a shockwave through Jake in both body and soul. Reverberations went through him as he flew back, his entire body wracked with pain as blood pooled in his mouth before he smashed into one of the many pillars.

A crack was heard as the pillar was filled with fractures, Jake coughing up a mouthful of blood on impact as he fell to the ground, heaving. Internal wounds ravaged his insides, forcing him to cough up even more blood. He had barely managed to strengthen his back using his arcane energy, making the stone break rather than his back, but it was still cut up everywhere and filled with a mesh of deep scratches. With everything put together, Jake struggled as he tried to stand, failing to do so.

Fuck...

“Alas, one cannot win every bout in their lifetime but only carry with them the lessons from a loss,” the Benevolent Monk said in a sentimental tone, making Jake grit his teeth. He had messed up and overestimated hi-

“I surrender. Thank you for this experience. It was indeed an exquisite experience that I hope bears repeating,” the monk finished, making Jake look up in shock despite the pain.

The monk stood there with a smile on his face... with a small cut on his left cheek from Jake’s punch, a single drop of blood rolling down before dripping onto the sand below. Still smiling, the man walked over and offered Jake a hand.

Without thinking, Jake took it as the Benevolent Monk helped him stand and gave him a solemn nod before turning around and walking out of the arena, Jake still just standing there with a body that felt like shit and an even shittier feeling in his stomach.

I... didn’t win shit, Jake cursed internally as the commentator went wild, seemingly not questioning the highly questionable outcome of the fight. The only comfort Jake could find was that he was certain of one thing...

There was no fucking way he wasn’t going to meet that monk again in the Colosseum for a proper rematch.

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Chapter 750: Nevermore: Concepts

Jake barely managed to drag himself out of the arena. Nearly every one of his ribs were broken, and he had enough internal damage to kill most people. If he was not a system-changed creature, he would have been dead already.

After stumbling out of the arena, medical staff came. Sadly for Jake, they only checked if he would live, and while Jake was in a horrid condition, his life was not in danger. Seeing no other real choice, Jake bought a healing potion from one of the staff members for 100 Colosseum Points to try and at least recover a little. Instinctively, he identified it when the medical staff happily sold it.

[Colosseum of Mortals Recovery Potion (Unique)] – a potion from the Colosseum of Mortals. This potion will restore a small amount of health to stabilize the condition of anyone who consumes it while boosting the natural recovery rate of all resources for a day (24 hours). This effect only works out of combat. You can only consume one recovery potion a day.

It was a potion that was clearly made just for this Challenge Dungeon, and with it, he would maybe be able to fight the next day. Hopefully.

After drinking the potion, Jake sat down on a bench and stared into thin air for a while. He hurt all over, had a visible imprint of a palm on his chest, and he felt like shit. Jake had “won” the fight, sure, but it sure as hell didn’t feel like a victory.

If it had been a fight to the death, Jake would likely have lost his first life. Maybe he would have been able to drag out the time for a tie, but as he was currently, he didn’t see any path to victory. Not with the tools he had entered the arena with.

Magic wouldn’t have been an option, either. It was too slow to cast and use. Everything would be telegraphed, and the monk would have easily blocked it.

Despite being called it all the time, Jake was not a martial artist. He was no unarmed fighter. Every single hit from the monk left Jake reeling even when he blocked as the soul-affecting part of his strikes still went through. Meanwhile, Jake did far less damage even with his arcane energy, as, quite frankly, punches and kicks were not a good way to deliver arcane destruction. His entire fighting style was also created with the assumption that his counterattacks would be deadly stabs from katars and not just a damn punch.

This meant Jake had to dodge rather than block nearly all the time. That was his fighting style, but a dodge took way more energy and effort than blocking something. Usually, dodging would then at least allow you to take advantage of an opening as you didn’t use an arm or a leg to block and could strike with it, but what did that help if the attack you could land barely did anything?

No... he would need weapons if he wanted to stand a chance.

Gritting his teeth, Jake just sat there, partly to let the potion do some of its work and partly because he didn’t feel like getting up.

“Hey, Veteran Gladiator,” he heard as he looked up and saw the Battlemaster had walked over. “You look like shit, but I guess you won anyway. Congratulations on that and keeping your streak going. Now, you strike me as rather preoccupied, so I’ll leave you be. Get healed up, yeah? And keep up the good work; I doubt you will meet another monster like that any time soon.”

Jake slowly nodded. “Thanks, I guess...”

The Battlemaster gave him a tap on his shoulder, making Jake wince a bit in pain. He had rolled a lot of punches off his shoulder, and it was still sore as hell, with it feeling like half the muscles within were ravaged. Didn’t help that he had overstrained them with arcane energy, either.

The Battlemaster walked away as Jake stayed sitting, leaning back against the wall as leaning forward sure as hell wasn’t an option with the current state of his ribs.

With a sigh, and to try and distract himself, he decided to check the damn system message he had gotten after the Battlemaster came and talked to him. It didn’t really make him feel better.

Congratulations! You have reached the Veteran Gladiator rank, truly cementing yourself as a regular of the Colosseum of Mortals. As your notoriety and fame grow, so does the strength of your opponents, and you have begun to catch the eye of some of the more powerful entities involved with the Colosseum of Mortals.

As a Veteran Gladiator, you are still limited to one fight a week against another Veteran Gladiator.

All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.

In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Veteran Gladiator opponents in Show Matches once a day. These Show Matches are against a variety of foes and have far looser rules and regulations than regular arena fights. The possible opponents one can face in Show Matches are decided daily. Winning Show Matches reward Colosseum Points based on the opponents fought. Show Matches and battles against other Veteran Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.

The difficulty of all Show Match options has been increased.

For reaching the Veteran Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 5000 Colosseum Points. Google search
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For defeating the Benevolent Monk, you are rewarded an extra 10000 Colosseum Points.

Continue to fight, and claim your glory as you prove yourself the strongest mortal! Become the Champion! Or, perhaps, something above even that?

The message was just much of the same stuff he had been told after getting promoted to Gladiator, with some wording changes here and there. The only new things were the mention of Show Match options having their difficulty increased and the final part with the very obvious hint there was something above the rank of Champion.

Looking at the 5000 points for reaching Veteran Gladiator without losing, and especially the 10000 points from "defeating" the Benevolent Monk, left him with a sour taste in his mouth.

Jake realized it was his own mistake. The Colosseum of Mortals had just been way too easy for too long. He had fought every single day for more than ten weeks and had yet to face a single battle that made him feel actually threatened. One where he didn't always know, in the back of his mind, that he had another card to pull out and win if he so desired.

One could argue the difficulty spike had been too sudden, but Jake could only blame his own hubris.

He wouldn't say that the monk offering the honor rules had been lucky, though. It was clearly by design, either made like this by the Wyrmgod or the system directly. For the first major difficulty spike like this to be against someone literally called a Benevolent Monk? Someone who didn't want to kill his opponents and even offered rules that would make most people far too weak to challenge him lose instantly? Yeah, definitely not a coincidence.

This fight was a warning of those to come. A reminder there were other monsters out there who possessed power defying the limitations of stats. People who were able to control concepts beyond what any F-grade should ever be able to.

Jake had to admit that he had never really understood what concepts were, and based on what Villy had said, with the Path he was walking, he likely never truly would.

Still, Jake tried to at least get a basic understanding. Based on the Primordial, concepts came in two forms. The "logical" and the "nomological." It was a bit more complicated, but Jake did like to simplify things.

Logical concepts could be understood through intense study. They could be endlessly practiced and understood, like a researcher delving into a particular subject. With how deep the pit of knowledge went on nearly every topic after the system appeared, to truly try and comprehend something was a lifetime goal, even for gods. It was like there was

always more to learn, even if you felt like you had seen anything. As if there was always one deeper layer one could dive into, one more level of understanding.

Nomological concepts were nearly the opposite. These were concepts that could not be explained logically by the person who used them. Nomological concepts were often of the more mysterious kind, and some concepts simply had no truly logical aspect to them. One could try to do a logical analysis of how everything related to a nomological concept worked and its effects, but one could never truly find a satisfying answer. The point of nomological concepts often was that there was no true answer.

A great example of a purely nomological concept was the entire Avarious and Horizon-chasing concept. The one that made him deal more damage to people higher level than himself didn't have any logical groundwork; there was no theory of how it worked; it simply was. Even if someone made a skill like that, they would have no way to properly explain how it worked. They could say how they did it, the effects of the ability itself, but that didn't in any way make it replicable.

Even if this distinction seemed rather strict, most top-tier concepts were a mix of the logical and nomological, though some did lean far more in one direction than the other. This did result in two people being able to learn the exact same concept, with one taking a logical and the other a nomological approach, but reaching very similar results.

Jake was a person who leaned very much in the direction of the nomological. He never truly "understood" how concepts worked... but in some way, he still kind of did. He understood how they felt to use, the experience of having a certain kind of energy running through his body. He could experience them. In the same vein, when he saw a concept used, he could understand what it did and, from there, attempt to replicate it, not through arduous research but pure trial and error.

Of course, the final aspect of all these concepts even working was the system that often helped put all the pieces together.

The monk Jake had thought was also someone Jake was certain walked a Path of purely nomological concepts. Just being a monk, Jake already connected him to the Dao Sect – or at least a similar place – and the Dao thing sure as hell wasn't an institution rooted in logic. Instead, it was about meditating for endless years, thinking about something until suddenly you received enlightenment.

On the note of enlightenment, there were a few theories as to how or why they appeared. Based on what Villy had said, it was a mix of receiving a genuine epiphany of understanding and the system then coming in to assist by filling in the gaps, even with things not necessarily related to skills. It wasn't just understanding the fundamental truths of the universe, but instead getting an idea that the system then approved and helped make a reality.

Ah, but there was one kind of “true” enlightenment. People who had those were called Transcendents. Where their epiphany went beyond the confines of the system, and rather than help, all it could do was try and accommodate their Path.

Anyway... concepts. An easy way to view concepts was as amplifiers of sorts. If the Sword Saint “understood” better how sharp his blade was, he could thus make it sharper. This meant that should he clash with an opponent who lacked understanding, the old man would come out on top every time as his blade would simply be sharper.

Mind you, this was only truly the case when talking about fights without skills. If both of them had the same stats and used the exact same skill, things would be near entirely equalized, even if one party understood the concept far more thoroughly. That is because concepts were baked into skills, and if the concept you infused into a skill improved enough... that’s what skill upgrades were for. Sure, there could still be variance even within the same skill if one person was closer to upgrading it than the other, but if both had, as an example, just selected the skill during a skill selection and both only used the skill with the basic instinctual knowledge provided, they would be roughly equal.

This didn’t mean high rarity skills could entirely replace conceptual understanding. A lot of fighting did not directly involve skills, and using skills all the time was a great way to run yourself out of mana or stamina. Usually, you also wanted your skills to be better than what a regular attack only infused with conceptual understanding did. Finally, upgrading skills required understanding them.

What did this ultimately mean? Well... Jake running around with a high conceptual understanding of his arcane affinity meant that every single kick or punch he threw was the same as an ancient or even legendary skill for a G-grade.

The monk was the same, except more extreme. He was like a G or F-grade walking around with at least a powerful mythical skill and the mental training of someone far above a normal C-grade. Jake had a hard time trying to understand if the man was just someone created by the system and the Wyrmgod or if he was an image of a real person. Perhaps a mix of both. But if he was indeed a real person who had that kind of power as a G-grade... no, that wouldn’t be possible. Jake was positive about that. He would have gotten levels or something, right?

It was far more likely that should he be an image of a real person, he was just a C-grade who had been turned level 0, the same as Jake.

Yeah... that had to be it.

Jake tried to comfort himself a bit with the thought, but it didn’t really help much. Fact still was Jake had his ass handed to him, and not just because his opponent was monstrously powerful, but because he had been a reckless and overly-confident moron.

The system even fucking warned me, he scolded himself, shaking his head. He just hadn't taken it seriously, as all prior warnings hadn't really led to things actually getting hard.

No... there was no reason to dwell on his own fuck-up. Better to act on it.

A good twenty minutes had passed by now since Jake had fought his battle, and through his sphere, he saw Polly and Owen walking over with hurried steps. Still sitting on the bench, leaning back against the wall behind him, he turned his head and looked toward them.

"Are you okay? It looked rough out there... and you definitely don't look that good either," Owen said curtly with some genuine worry as he rushed over.

"I don't think okay is the right word to use in this case," Jake shook his head. "Not going to sugarcoat it, I look like shit outwardly, but it's way fucking worse on the inside."

"That monk... did not belong at Veteran Gladiator rank," Owen sighed as he tried to comfort Jake. "In fact, I don't think he belongs in any of the different Gladiator ranks. He is one of those monstrous people you just hope not to meet as they climb the rank ladder. Same as you."

"Yeah, I know... I knew before the fight," Jake admitted. "I fucked up by not preparing properly this time around, even if I had a warning."

Polly, seeing Jake being down, shifted the topic. "Any... anyway, are you okay otherwise? Have you consumed a recovery potion yet? If not, the medical staff sells them..."

"I have," Jake smiled. "Thanks for the concern, I should be back in top form within a few days, and hopefully, I will be fit to fight again tomorrow. Though I will ask. Polly... can you figure out if my next opponent is also an anomaly?"

"I already did, and as long as you get your first Veteran Gladiator fight done within the next two weeks, there are no outliers, just regulars," Polly said instantly.

Jake was about to say something but just sighed. "Thanks again."

Moving forward, he wanted to at least check if he would face a similar situation. He didn't know if the system would only warn him the first time he faced an anomaly or if it just sometimes happened randomly, and you had to figure it out yourself. Either way, Jake wanted to know and be ready. In more ways than one.

Checking his Colosseum Points, Jake had gained a lot.

Current objective: Be promoted from Veteran Gladiator to Master Gladiator

Current rank: Veteran Gladiator (0/10)

Colosseum Points: 35340

Lives remaining: 10

And he knew what to do with them too.

“Owen, Polly,” Jake said to the two of them. “You two wanna go shopping tomorrow morning when they open? If I am feeling in shape for it, that is.”

“You’re finally going to get some proper equipment?” Owen asked with interest.

“More than just a pair of boots, at least,” Jake smiled in response. “But that is for tomorrow... for now, I just need to relax.”

The one good thing about Jake’s recklessness was that he had fought first thing in the morning. It wasn’t even noon yet, and he had the entire day ahead of him. It was an entire day to do whatever he wanted, and he knew exactly what to do with this time too:

Be at home laying in his bed.

Because right now, just breathing fucking hurt.

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