

# The Primal Hunter

## Chapter 751: Nevermore: Monk Beating = Colosseum Loot

Sleeping was truly an overpowered passive ability. It was like using the Meditation skill on steroids and helped regenerate the body at a quite frankly insane pace compared to any other non-magical means. However, even if this was the case, Jake still woke up feeling like shit.

Looking at the window in the small Gladiator townhouse, he saw that it was still pitch-black outside, indicating it was still in the middle of the night. That was not overly surprising, considering he had gone to bed around noon the day before, meaning he had likely still slept well over twelve hours.

With a groan, he pushed himself to sit upright on the bed. He still had a bruise on his chest where he had been punched, and he still felt sore all over, but otherwise, he did seem to be in a pretty good condition compared to the day before. It was a good idea he had gone straight home with the help of Owen after leaving the Colosseum and, after getting inside, flopped down on the bed.

*Gotta change the bedsheets tonight*, Jake sighed as he looked at the messy linen. He hadn't felt like cleaning himself the day before, which could definitely be seen on the bedsheets that had been white once upon a time.

Forcing himself to stand, Jake knew lying in bed wouldn't help much anymore. The soreness would go away with time, and actually moving about should help get some of the stiffness out. Still feeling pretty dirty from the day before, he headed straight into the bathroom with a big basin of water to clean himself. Jake would have preferred a proper shower, but sometimes you just had to take what you could get.

Before putting on some of the new clothes that Polly had helped get him, he began doing some stretches in the living room to get some of his mobility back. After that, he sat down and meditated, focusing on healing but also trying to grasp the opportunity to feel the effects of the odd recovery potion he had consumed. This was his first time drinking one of those, and not taking every opportunity would be a waste of time.

Besides, what better things could he do? It was the middle of the night, and the Colosseum had yet to open. Plus, he had agreed that Owen would stop by the next morning before he headed to the Colosseum to check if Jake had died in his sleep. At least that was how the spearman-that-totally-wasn't-some-lightning mage-prodigy phrased it.

Hours passed, and soon enough, there was a knock at his door. After putting on some pants, Jake opened the door to see both Owen and Polly standing there. Polly stared for a moment before turning her head away while Owen sighed.

"Could you put on a shirt?"

"You guys watched me fight shirtless yesterday and even carried my shirtless ass back here afterward," Jake very accurately pointed out.

"Yeah, but this is different, so put one on," Owen shook his head.

Jake didn't get it but went and put on a shirt. Pulling it over his head did kind of hurt, but it wasn't as bad as it was even when he woke up. He still hoped to do a match that day, as he could do his very first Veteran Gladiator match right off the bat. Chances are that would be fine, though he would have to wait until later in the day before signing up.

Which was fine as his first plans of the day weren't to get into any fights.

Because it was shopping time.

After breakfast, of course. A healthy meal was a vital part of the healing process, after all.

Walking to the Colosseum after eating, Owen really couldn't hold himself back as he teased Jake.

"So, you're actually determined to get some proper equipment this time around?" Owen asked with a bit of a cheeky smile. "I guess it just took some old monk giving you a few good punches to knock some sense into you. And before you say anything, Polly, I can make fun of Jake now because he can at least walk straight now, while I would have felt bad if I did it yesterday."

"Still a bit mean..." Polly muttered.

"Yeah, Owen. Stop being such a bully," Jake agreed wholeheartedly.

"Apologies, I didn't realize I hurt your fragile feelings," Owen kept teasing.

"It's fine. I guess I was just a little shocked that you, of all people, would do that. It came like a lightning bolt from a clear sky, but I guess the experience was just too electrifying to pass for you," Jake said in a tone that may or may not be interpreted as threatening based on who heard it.

Owen threw him a glance as he slowed down walking, Jake feeling pretty pleased with himself. He still didn't know why the guy was being so secretive about it all. Polly was also confused, as she didn't seem to get it... until it looked like she did.

"Why did you say it like that?" Polly questioned. "Does Owen or someone he knows have the lightning affinity or something?"

Jake froze momentarily, Owen now glaring daggers.

"Eh, it's just a very common saying where I come from; it has nothing to do with Owen," Jake tried to explain it away.

It clearly didn't work... but Polly seemed to understand it was a touchy subject and didn't ask more. Luckily, things didn't have more time to get awkward, as they soon reached the Colosseum that had just opened for the day. As always, it was buzzing with activity, though the number of people that came and went seriously didn't correspond to the number of people in the audience. Not even close.

Making it to the shopping district, Jake didn't hesitate as he went straight to where one could spend their points.

During the morning, Jake had considered a lot about what he wanted to buy, and in the end, he had settled on... everything.

It was time to stop fucking around and to get some proper equipment. Even if that meant Jake would end every fight within a minute, all that would mean was that he had more time to practice, and if he did happen to meet another outlier, he would at least be ready.

Jake ended up spending more than an hour putting together a list of purchases while sticking to his budget, all with the help of Polly. When they were done, Jake nodded with satisfaction as he began the shopping spree. First on the list were his melee weapons. The source of this content is *novel•fire•net*

**[Aersteel Katar (Epic)] – This katar is made of a metal called Aersteel, making it incredibly light yet equally durable. The design of the weapon is simple and, due to the material used, has exemplary mana conductivity. Potent wind affinity energy is infused into the steel, making the weapon not suffer any wind resistance while increasing penetrative power. Enchantments: Insured.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 5000 Colosseum Points.**

Two weapons, 10000 Colosseum Points spent. Jake had thought about just getting some rare katars for a third of the price but had ultimately gone with the expensive solution. He wanted to use these weapons for a long time, and they truly fit what he wanted. Plus, he had more ideas for them later on... and if those ideas didn't pan out, he could always return them and get half back.

Next up was a pair of gloves.

**[Gloves of Hardening (Rare)] – Durable leather gloves created to allow the user to block some blows directly with their hands. If one infuses mana into these gloves, they harden and become far more durable, but does so the user cannot move their fingers. Enchantments: Insured. Hardening. Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.**

Nothing really exciting here; they just reminded him a bit of the gloves he used in C-grade. Jake liked the ability to make his gloves far more durable when blocking blows, even if this effect was a bit subpar, especially if one compared it to his old legendary gloves.

Now it was on to items that gave stats. Potentially the most important part of this whole gear acquisition trip.

Jake had a total of 152 stats combined after he had been reduced to level 0. The rule for stats from equipment was that you could only get a 20% increase in any individual stat, with the total combined bonus from all items not surpassing more than 15% of your total stats.

This meant Jake could only get 22 extra stats from more equipment. However... things weren't all that simple. Because with the rule that one could only gain 20% to each individual stat and the fact that the system didn't do fractions while always rounding down, there was a bit of math to be done. Looking at his stats – without counting in the +1 Agility from his boots - this became pretty clear.

### **Stats**

Strength: 16

Agility: 18

Endurance: 16

Vitality: 17

Toughness: 16

Wisdom: 17

Intelligence: 16

Perception: 20

Willpower: 16

With at least 15 in every stat, Jake could get a total of 3 extra in each, with the one outlier being his Perception, where he could get 4. That added up to a total of 28 potential stats Jake could get from equipment. With only 22 to actually get, there was thus 6 stats to filter out.

Jake quickly decided where he wanted to cut and where he wanted the stats. Getting +3 to Agility and Strength was a given. Next on his list of priorities were Intelligence, Wisdom, and Endurance. All of those were essential, too, especially when he was at such a low level. Longevity in fights was usually very limited, especially for someone like Jake, who could drag out far more energy than a normal G or F-grade.

No, the places chose to cut the 6 stats were somewhere unexpected. Jake had made the very controversial decision he would only get +2 to Perception and only +1 for Toughness and Vitality. He had considered just not getting anything in Toughness and Vitality but still decided on +1 for each.

Perception was still the best stat, and it would still be his highest even if he didn't get equipment for it... but he also recognized that he didn't have most of the things that made the stat so good. He didn't get the scaling from his skills, and the concepts behind said scaling was at a level far above what Jake could replicate himself.

Moreover, most of the regular effects of Perception were lost on Jake. Perception allowed one to better sense energy and such, and the better you could sense anything, the better you could control it. Jake was not bottlenecked by his senses but by his stats and limited resources.

When it came to combat, Perception was what allowed you to see attacks coming and react in time. And, well, Jake still had his Bloodline that was working as if he had more than 40,000 Perception despite being nerfed to only 20. This was probably the system's way of not instantly killing people with Bloodlines like him, as if the system hadn't done this, Jake could have potentially appeared in the Challenge Dungeon with his sphere several hundred meters in diameter, resulting in a swift death from a not-so-pleasant brain aneurysm caused by pure overload.

It was a difficult decision to skip out on more Perception, but sadly the most logical one in the moment. Ah, but if there had been elixirs giving Perception, Jake may have totally taken them, as he could at least have justified that by saying he had the biggest percentage bonus to Perception out of all his stats. Alas, elixirs were not a thing in the Colosseum... not that Jake thought they would have even worked on someone level 0.

So he would have to settle for stats from equipment... and an excellent foundation to get him to the stat cap was quite an interesting ring.

**[The 1 Ring (Epic)] - A ring rumored to be of elven origin. Enchantments: Insured. +1 to all stats.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 8000 Colosseum Points.**

The name of the ring was a bit on the nose. He did also wonder why it even needed to be insured. The ring would merge with his body when he put it on, and even if it didn't, it looked pretty damn durable, to the level where he doubted anything could destroy it, save for throwing it into a volcano or something.

Anyway, having this ring gave 9 stats total, and with his boots, he only needed 12 more overall. Something his next two pieces of equipment helped nicely with.

**[Exceptional Leather Vestment (Rare)] – A high-quality leather vestment made by a skilled craftsman. This armor is very durable and especially resistant to slashing attacks. Due to the innate power of the beast that supplied the leather, the wearer becomes more agile and has enhanced Endurance. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Agility, +1 Endurance.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 2000 Colosseum Points.**

**[Exceptional Leather Pants (Rare)] - A high-quality pair of leather pants made by a skilled craftsman. This armor is very durable and especially resistant to slashing attacks. Due to the innate power of the beast that supplied the leather, the wearer has enhanced Endurance and Strength. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Endurance, +1 Strength.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 2000 Colosseum Points.**

These two were pretty much a set and matched one another. Buying them even meant the shop threw in a free belt that didn't give any stats or even counted as real equipment. The designs of the two pieces of armor were simple and straightforward, with no decorations or anything. The leather did look like what he thought was called boiled leather, but Jake was no expert, and wasn't it all magical anyway?

Either way, this was 4 more stats. 8 to go, 2 of which came from the next thing he had bought.

**[Bracers of Counter-Deflection (Rare)] – Durable leather bracers created to better allow the wearer to deflect attacks and counter. Enhances the user's Perception**

to allow them to better see the incoming attacks and the power of their physical counterattacks. Enchantments: Insured. +1 Strength, +1 Perception

**Requirements: Soulbound. Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 1000 Colosseum Points.**

The bracers were pretty simple and had a name Jake didn't think had overly much to do with the fact that they gave Perception and Strength. Then again, it could also be because of the design, as both bracers were created to deflect blades rather than block them. Who knows.

Now, Jake had wanted to go all-out with what he bought, which didn't really seem to match him buying so many rare pieces of equipment. The reason he hadn't bought better was pretty simple... he couldn't afford to due to the next two items.

**[Necklace of the Hopeful Enlightenment (Epic)] – A well-made necklace once worn by a monk who sought enlightenment. The material of the necklace itself is unknown. Grants inspiration from the monk's attempt at receiving enlightenment to the user, allowing them to better analyze the movements of their own internal energies. Enchantments: Insured. Hopeful Enlightenment. +2 Wisdom, +2 Intelligence, +2 Willpower.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 5000 Colosseum Points.**

This necklace made up the last stats Jake had to gain from equipment, effectively capping him. In addition to that, it also provided him with that weird Enlightenment effect, which Jake barely noticed, but hey, any bonus was a good bonus.

Finally was an item Jake had looked for far and wide for the last time he had been at the store. Finally, he was getting it.

**[Ring of Deft Hands (Epic)] – A ring created by someone once known as a powerful thief who often had a need to switch tools in the middle of a job. Allows the wearer to store up to five items within the ring that can be retrieved to the hands of the wearer. All items must be pre-registered.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Veteran Gladiator Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 4500 Colosseum Points.**

Was this a spatial ring? Well, kind of, but not really. It did store an item inside a small space, but it didn't have a storage space per-se; it was more like it could absorb up to five items at once that all had been pre-marked by it. It was, by all means, one of the

shittiest versions of spatial treasures available, but it should get the job done. At least this would help Jake with his combat style, where he liked to switch weapons, which he also assumed was why it was even sold. Some people would simply be too fucked without the ability to switch weapons in the middle of combat. A bit suspicious one had to be Veteran Gladiator to unlock it... but then again, if you couldn't even make it to Veteran Gladiator, you probably weren't going that far anyway.

Now, an astute observer, such as Owen, did notice the lack of a certain item he had expected Jake to buy:

A bow.

But... its absence was very much a purposeful decision. Jake was practically out of points after buying everything else, and he knew that should he get a bow, he wanted a good one. Moreover, he still had the basic bow that could do an acceptable job... if he even wanted to use it.

Katars were more than sufficient for now. Jake would get a bow at some point, of that he didn't doubt. He also had a helmet or mask to gain, along with maybe a cloak or something. Considering he didn't need more stats, he could get special equipment there with special abilities.

For now, he was pretty damn settled, though.

Looking at his updated status after everything was equipped, there was indeed quite a difference.

### **Stats**

Strength: 19

Agility: 21

Endurance: 19

Vitality: 18

Toughness: 17

Wisdom: 20

Intelligence: 19

Perception: 22

Willpower: 19



But, these stats had come at a cost. Quite literally. It had nearly bankrupted Jake of Colosseum Points.

### **Colosseum Points: 1840**

Jake had spent more than ninety percent of the points he had saved up for the last nearly quarter of a year. 33500 points.

He didn't regret it, though. He knew that some of the equipment, like the rings and necklace, could be used for the rest of the Challenge Dungeons, with the katars likely also the same if his plans panned out. Everything else could be sold back to get him half the points returned, so even if he had spent over thirty-three thousand, one could say he had only actually spent around seventeen thousand, with another seventeen thousand owed.

Also, even if it had taken him a long time to get these points, he was confident in earning them back and more. Shit, he had a feeling that winning a single match toward the end of the Challenge Dungeon would give him more points than he had spent on all his equipment. At least if the 10000 he had gained from "beating" the Benevolent Monk were anything to go by.

Jake was ultimately still in the earlier stages of the Challenge Dungeon, time-wise.

Jake was overall happy with what he had bought. Because, standing there with the improved equipment and a katar in each hand, Jake didn't feel any trepidations for the future, but only confident about one thing:

If he met the Benevolent Monk again, the outcome would be far different.

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## **Chapter 752: Nevermore: A Man With A Plan**

Jake was not the only one experiencing the Colosseum of Mortals or who had at least experienced it prior, for that matter. There was, of course, the Sword Saint, who was also hard at work, and as a far wiser man, had heeded the warning upon being confronted with the Benevolent Monk. He had responded by buying a good sword as well as some basic equipment, which had ended with him drawing blood early on in the fight without taking any major damage himself. This didn't mean the fight had been easy... just that he had offensive prowess allowing him to easily bypass the challenge.

Carmen had also chosen to enter the Colosseum as that appealed to her far more than any of the other Challenge Dungeons. Losing her variant human race and becoming a G-grade once more did shock her at first, as suddenly becoming a soft shell of her former self was difficult to accept... but then she adapted.

She had been an okay boxer before the system arrived, and she was acceptable for her age group and weight class but still firmly an amateur. But now? Now, she would have been able to beat the living shit out of every single boxer that had ever lived pre-system. Not just because her physical specs matched any male boxer if they had equal stats, but because of the sheer quality difference between pre and post-system martial arts.

All stats equal, Carmen was superhuman with conceptual empowerment in every single one of her punches or kicks. Even without her skills, she could still imitate some of the weaker ones she had in lower grades, and even if her body had become far less durable, she knew how to make up for that with proper equipment. A good pair of gloves and high-quality bracers could go a long way for any pugilist.

Was reaching the rank of Champion possible? Hard to say, but she was sure as hell gonna give it a shot.

However, there were people who had a far harder time. Caleb had attempted it but quickly found himself facing difficulties. His fighting style simply didn't fit the Colosseum, and while he could go decently far, he was in no way a contender to become the Champion. It was a bit embarrassing to say, but Matteo, who Caleb was doing the dungeon with, performed way better, being a skilled fighter even before the system.

Casper was much the same. In fact, he had it harder than Caleb, as adapting to his level 0 body was more difficult for him than others. He hadn't become human again, but a level 0 Risen, something he had never tried to be before.

Even if he had been able to adapt, his fighting style also sucked. Plus, he didn't have Lyra with him anymore, nor could he properly wield his curse magic, use his traps, or his dungeon architect skills. All of this is to say the guy was fucked.

Maria fell into a weird middle ground between Carmen and Caleb. She was a skilled archer even before the system and had only gotten better. Plus, fire magic was known for its power, even at low levels, making her pretty strong even at level 0.

And then there were two more individuals of note when talking about people from Earth. Both were considered monsters and pinnacle geniuses in their C-grade forms, but when they were reduced to only G-grade... well, the outcome spoke for itself.

Arnold was thrown out of the dungeon after getting promoted to Initiate Fighter, having already lost two lives as a New Blood from goblins clubbing him to death. Eron, having lost all his skills and being too used to being effectively immortal, had no idea how to fight at all, and while he did manage to reach Fledgling Fighter due to his arcane affinity

and having some basic knowledge of vital points due to his former life as a surgeon, he also flunked out spectacularly. Chapters first released on *novel♦fire♦net*

This was a very important part of Nevermore. Most people simply did "okay" in the arena, even among the top geniuses. Many believed it was unfair that some were put in worse situations than others due to the nature of their Paths, but they all had missed one vital purpose of the Colosseum: adaptability.

If they had truly wanted to, Eron or Arnold could not have fought every day but spent time training with weapons. They had the stats to fight and were still C-grade, with insights and developed Paths far beyond what any G or F-grade could ever have... but perhaps they both knew they didn't have the talent to become skilled in combat and thus chose to focus their efforts elsewhere.

When looking at people of note, not from Earth, there were many outstanding individuals, but also many who did far worse than expected. People like Ghost King Azal did just as well as expected, cleaving through the ranks while happily building up power by consuming the spirits of every single opponent he met in the arena to use them as resources for when times got tough.

Others from the Dao Sect also did well, as expected, while Arnold's party of void freaks were hard to figure out. Many other elite groups also entered, with the difference in performance varying widely between each individual member.

Ah, and when speaking of notable people who did the Challenge Dungeon, there was also Ell'Hakan, who performed as expected. As for what this expected performance was, not even the Malefic Viper knew. Because the Wyrmgod refused to show him.

Anyway, this stark difference in performances, not just between groups but every individual in each group, was one of the primary reasons why it was often said that the true winners on the Leaderboards would be determined in the Challenge Dungeons, not the regular floors.

It eliminated some people entirely as they were weak as individuals and only strong in groups. Naturally, those who were only strong as individuals but sucked in a group had a harder time on the regular floors, and it wasn't like these Challenge Dungeons could make up the difference. Not truly.

Additionally, one had to remember there were five Challenge Dungeons in total. Each of them tested different things and had different themes. Reaching the top of the Nevermore Leaderboards wasn't just about being the strongest in a fight but about having well-rounded abilities and the ability to adapt. Some would perhaps claim this was unfair, as being at the top of the Leaderboards didn't even mean you were strongest, just that you were good enough in many different fields while naturally still being extremely strong. But, ultimately, this was the Wyrmgod's domain, and if that is

what the Primordial deemed to be the true criteria for being recognized as a genius, no one dared complain.

Jake, despite not being a person many would describe as well-rounded, was multi-talented and skilled at adapting. That is one of the reasons both he and the Malefic Viper had confidence Jake could do well on the Leaderboards.

Of course, there was one more thing to consider with the relationship between these Challenge Dungeons and the Leaderboards outside of the top contenders needing to be multi-talented. One big difference-maker that in many prior eras had led to people taking the top spot:

Someone performing so much better than everyone else in a Challenge Dungeon that it made up a mediocre performance in the others.

Doomfoot had been a legend in the lower ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals. He was a true master of kicks who had become a Gladiator by only using his feet. Even when he evolved to the Arcane Doomfoot, he was still a martial artist and a connoisseur of the art of kicking... but that all ended the day he met the Benevolent Monk.

On that fateful day, Jake had used his hands, and there was no going back from that. Not that anyone in the audience, nor the announcer, had expected the Jake that entered the arena the day after his "victory" over the monk. Nor did they expect how the fight would go.

Jake had still been hurting from his injuries despite waiting till the evening before he fought, so he didn't want to drag things out. Based on his opponent's movements, the orc also seemed to realize Jake was still injured and wanted to capitalize. Jake couldn't really blame him and invited his eager opponent to try and finish the fight quickly.

He had allowed his opponent to get to him first as he didn't want to waste energy running around. Dodging the first strike from the orc's sword, Jake stepped forward and punched once, his katar penetrating the chainmail of his foe and knocking him back with a massive bleeding wound on his stomach. Jake didn't even need to do a follow-up as the orc promptly surrendered, probably not wanting to bleed to death as Jake had hit more than a few important places internally.

The following days proceeded much the same as Jake returned to peak condition, keeping up his streak of fighting daily. Every single fight ended nearly instantly as Jake was done playing around. He had nothing to learn from his opponents in the arena, and it wasn't even worth it trying to practice there. Hence why he just viewed it as something to get done every day as he practiced other things.

He did consider buying a bow once he saved up enough points but wanted to wait till Polly informed him he would face a tough opponent to get the best thing possible. That was another big change from then till now: information gathering. He even once spent a

few points to buy information on an opponent Polly warned could have been dangerous. The elven mage didn't turn out to be that strong in the end, but he didn't regret being a bit more cautious than usual.

Weeks passed, and soon enough, he once more found himself at ten wins and ready to meet his next opponent for a promotion. When he went to the Battlemaster to schedule his Promotion Match for the next day, something very familiar happened.

Walking up to him and requesting the match, the Battlemaster looked a bit befuddled as he sighed loudly.

"I don't know how this happened... but it looks like we got a similar situation on our hands as we did when you were about to be promoted to Veteran Gladiator. Another big anomaly stands in your way, this one a dwarven mage that also hasn't faced any real difficulties in his ascension through the ranks," the Battlemaster warned him. "There is no way to tell if he is stronger than the Benevolent Monk, but he doesn't strike me as the sort to enter a similar deal, so it will be a full-on fight without any honor rules outside the Colosseum's usual ones."

The Battlemaster made it sound like this scenario was truly out of the ordinary, but Jake had fully expected it. How couldn't he? The bonus objective last time had very heavily hinted at him unlocking these kinds of fights as long as he managed to win against the Benevolent Monk.

But, this time, Jake would not go in blind.

"I naturally accept the fight. But do you have any information on what kind of mage he is, or should I just gather it myself?" Jake questioned.

"Can't tell you if you need research or not, but I can give you some basic information. It's a dwarf using some nasty earth magic, and he is real good at it. As I told you, he has yet to face any problems so far, simply because no one can break through his stupidly robust defenses, and if you mess up just once, you end up with an earth spear through your gut. Ah, but he doesn't seem to be able to control the sand but has to fuse it into larger rocks before he strikes with it. At least he has done that in all prior fights," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake nodded along to the man's explanations as he also checked the notification he had received from the system about a new bonus objective.

**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 Earthborn Faithful.**

The Earthborn Faithful. Jake wasn't sure what to make of the name, but he sure wanted to find out. He had a full day before he would fight the dwarf and spent that time researching with Polly to make sure he would walk into the arena fully prepared.

A day later, he did just that as it was time for his promotion match to Master Gladiator. With good luck wishes from Polly and Owen, Jake walked into the arena with confidence and a plan.

"Welcome, to the arena! Today, we have a fight between two rising stars, two absolutely outstanding Gladiators! On one side, we have the Earthborn Faithful, a dwarf of one talent and one talent only: crushing every single foe with the might of the earth! However, his opponent today is no simple man and surely not one who would willingly see himself squashed," the announcer began as Jake reached the top of the stairs.

Looking at this opponent on the other side of the arena, Jake saw a somewhat stereotypical dwarf. Small, bulky, big beard and what looked like stone armor that covered everything except for the lower side of his head. Probably to make space for the beard. In his hands, he held a metal staff filled with gemstones, giving Jake the vibes of quite a powerful weapon.

"What do we even call him these days? Doomfoot? One-Stab-Kill? The Katar King? A man of many talents and many names, so who even cares what we call him? He sure doesn't... for I think he cares for no names but to walk out of here called the victor! Let's find out if he can do just that! Lower the gates!"

Jake internalized his complaints at the incredibly dumb names the asshole announcer had given him throughout the last few weeks.

"Oi! I heard ya beat that damn monk in his little competition a while back! Don't think this'll be as easy!" the dwarf yelled from across the arena in an incredibly loud voice right as the gates began lowering. "Ya could just surrender now and save yaself the trou-"

Jake jumped over the still-lowering bars the second he could and charged forward, stopping the dwarf in his tracks. He responded instantly as he slammed his staff into the ground, creating a wave of sand that condensed into a rain of stone shards flying toward Jake.

Dodging around a pillar, Jake disjointed all of them as he also proceeded to dodge several more attacks as he closed in, deflecting whatever stone shards he couldn't dodge with his katars or bracers. Getting within less than five meters, he felt what the dwarf was preparing and used his prepared countermeasure.



Taking a large stride, Jake's entire right foot was enveloped in dense arcane mana. With a stomp, Jake diffused more than two-thirds of his entire mana pool into the sand, hardening it. The dwarf who was about to unleash the spears he had prepared beneath the sand found himself unable to use his attack and instead tried to defend as an earth wall appeared out of thin air... but Jake had already jumped, having expected that response.

Right as he vaulted over the large wall, two spears shot for him, which Jake barely managed to avoid as he fell down toward the dwarf. Frowning, the dwarf slammed his hands together as a shell of stone covered his body while he also stomped, sending a wave of earth mana into the ground that broke the stabilized sand. Then, he used another spell, and he began falling into the sand as if it had suddenly turned into water.

With a mental command, Jake executed the crux of his plan.

The reason why the dwarf had been problematic for every other opponent was primarily due to three reasons. First was his offensive powers. Stone spears just fucking hurt, okay? Second was how durable he was defensively. Stone was also very hard, after all. The third, and likely the biggest reason, was because of his ability to travel through the sand to escape if he ever did get pinned down.

As the dwarf was half-submerged in the sand, Jake flipped the stability in the arcane mana that filled the sand all around them from stable to destructive. Instantly, the sand in a large area around them erupted as the arcane mana exploded, sending the surprised dwarf flying into the air through his own earth shell that his phasing ability made him pass straight through.

What he couldn't pass through were the two katars coming for his chest. In the very last moment, the dwarf empowered his stone armor to try and block the blow... but with everything else going on, he was off his game, and a Fear Gaze sealed the deal and stopped his final attempt to save himself. Two arcane-covered katars penetrated into the chest of the dwarf, tearing his armor apart and sending him flying through the air with two streams of blood trailing after him, mixing with the sand that was still falling from the arcane explosion earlier.

Jake landed on the ground a second later, sand still falling all around him. Looking at the dwarf, he looked like he struggled for a moment until he yelled in surrender. All in all, the fight had taken not even a full minute, the dwarf never truly getting a chance as Jake managed to near-perfectly execute his plan.

It was amazing how much proper equipment and going in with an actual plan could do. Who could have known?

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## Chapter 753: Nevermore: Gladiator No More

"Oi! That was bullshit out there, pure bullshit, I tell you! How can you even call that a proper fight, huh?" the annoying dwarf yelled at Jake, who was just trying to enjoy his sandwich in peace.

"You're just mad because you lost," Jake muttered.

"Damn straight I am! What was that shit out there? You aren't a bloody mage, so why do you use magic like that? You didn't even give me a chance to do anything! Do you have any idea how much time I spent on making this staff and each of the stored spells in the gems? You only gave me time to use one of them! One!" the dwarf kept complaining as Jake hunched down his food.

"Sounds like a severe case of skill issues," Jake said in a deadpan tone.

"You..." the dwarf muttered. "I swear, we'll meet again for a rematch, and next time I'll also come prepared! Mark my words!"

With a huff, he walked away, limping slightly due to the big bandages covering his chest. Jake just kept smiling to himself. While he did find the situation amusing, he also took the threats of a rematch very seriously.

Jake was fully aware he had won that fight far too easily due to his preparation and a bit of luck. The dwarf had done exactly as expected at every turn, falling into very much the same trap Jake had found himself in before his fight with the Benevolent Monk.

Every single fight for the Earthborn Faithful had been far too easy, and nobody had managed to even injure him due to his high defenses. As Jake was doing before, the guy was just going through the motions, expecting easy victories.

So when he met Jake, the dwarf was taken by surprise. As he had alluded to, he had far more to show off, but Jake had just never given him a chance as he had struck fast with deadly precision.

That was something else to consider in these G or F-grade fights. As a C-grade, ending a battle in a single blow when there wasn't a massive disparity in power was incredibly difficult. Piercing someone's heart, blowing off a part of their body, or stabbing them fifty times wouldn't necessarily kill them, and even if you cut tendons or hit vital organs, it wouldn't really impact their movements... primarily because neither of those things really mattered to C-grades anymore.



G and F-grades were different. A stab to the heart would kill you nearly instantly, a hole through the stomach would result in bleeding to death, and just a few good stabs could easily lead to death. Not to talk about the far lower average pain tolerance. This meant fights could easily end with a single attack, something Jake was fully aware of, considering that is how he won nearly every single fight after he began using katars.

Having to only land one good hit meant that even the weaker of two combatants could easily win if they got lucky or went in with a good strategy. A single mess-up from the stronger of two fighters could mean their loss or even demise. The tools one had to fight with as a level 0 were also simply incomparable to a level 200+, further exasperating any small fuck-up..

Perhaps this was Jake's biggest advantage in all these fights... the lack of tools others had. Because when it came to melee combat especially, Jake never had a lot of tools to begin with. He had always relied on his Bloodline, something he still possessed even in the Colosseum of Mortals. Taking Jake by surprise and landing a single fatal hit was far more difficult than perhaps anyone else in the entire arena. In fact, this led to arguably an even bigger advantage than anything else: consistency.

Anyway, even if the dwarf was salty about losing, and Jake had beaten him before he could really show off his skills, the rewards were very much still there as Jake stepped into the rank of Master Gladiator.

**Congratulations! You have reached the Master Gladiator rank, proving yourself as a pinnacle Gladiator in 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 Master Gladiator, you are still limited to one fight a week against another Master Gladiator.**

**All crafters will now have better equipment and items available.**

**In addition to gladiatorial battles, you can fight against non-Master 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 Master Gladiators cannot be scheduled on the same day.**

**The difficulty of all Show Match options has been increased.**

**For reaching the Master Gladiator rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 10000 Colosseum Points.**

**For defeating the Earthborn Faithful, you are rewarded an extra 25000 Colosseum Points.**

**Continue to fight, and claim your glory as you prove yourself the strongest mortal!**

Seeing he had been rewarded a total of 35000 Colosseum Points for just this one promotion match felt oddly cathartic to Jake. That was the number of points he had spent on all the equipment that had allowed him to breeze through the Veteran Gladiator rank, all earned in one day. Alright, it was the accumulation of ten or so weeks, but the point still stands.

Looking at his updated status, this accumulation did account for nearly half of his total points earned during the Veteran Gladiator rank.

**Current objective: Be promoted from Master Gladiator to Warlord.**

**Current rank: Master Gladiator (0/10)**

**Colosseum Points: 73910**

**Lives remaining: 10**

In the Veteran Gladiator rank, every Show Match had rewarded 600 Colosseum Points, while every Veteran Gladiator match had given 500 each. This was a doubling of all points gained, which did make Jake wonder if that was how the next few ranks would be... but then again, after a single more rank-up, he would no longer be a Gladiator.

Instead, the next rank was called Warlord. Jake had heard mentions of the rank before but hadn't known it was the one after Master Gladiator, and based on all he had heard, every single Warlord was a real monster. Then again, Jake remembered Polly also talking about every Gladiator being a real monster, so he wasn't sure how accurate that assessment was. The only monsters he had seen in the arena so far were the anomalies for his promotion matches. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY novel♦fire♦net

Jake did hope that the Master Gladiator matches would begin to offer truly difficult challenges, but alas, that did not turn out to be the case. The very next day, Jake had his first Master Gladiator fight against a hobgoblin rogue who also used some weird poison magic. Aside from the odd feeling of no longer being effectively immune to all poison and having to dodge it, there really wasn't anything exciting to the fight.

He just hoped that the healers or potions could help reattach limbs as he did have to cut off the hobgoblin's right arm, but in his defense, he had done so reactionarily.

Seeing as things were not getting harder, Jake returned to his usual schedule of practicing archery and working on some basic magic practice. Part of this magic

practice was related to a plan he had for his katars, but it wasn't as easy as he had hoped.

When it came to his point progress, Show Matches once more doubled in Colosseum Point value – 1200 each - with the first Master Gladiator Match rewarding 1000 points, so another doubling there. But this turned out to only be the case for his very first one.

A week later, when he did this second Master Gladiator fight, Jake got 1100 points for the win. Show Matches stayed the same, though. They continued to improve with 100 more for every win, meaning when he won his fifth Master Gladiator fight, he got 1500 points. The next day when he went to sign up for a Show Match, he also noticed how the hardest difficulty fights now rewarded 1800 points, up another 600. So, the points no longer just doubled but increased even more than that.

The more time passed, the more Jake also considered buying a proper bow, but he restrained himself. At this point, not showing off his archery wasn't just him wanting to play around with his melee weapons but a strategic decision.

Jake had worked a lot on his archery, and he would dare say he had gotten quite a lot better at it. However, even if that was the case, it was unquestionable that the very first fight he used a bow would be the most impactful one. No one knew Jake could use a bow, not truly. Sure, they could probably figure out he had a deal with the Quartermaster for a steady supply of bows and arrows to his practice room, but considering he hadn't ever used a bow and arrow in combat yet, they likely just assumed it was a hobby or something he was still working on becoming able to use.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't looking forward to the day when pulling out his archery seemed like a necessity.

As expected, Jake reached the peak of Master Gladiator without any major issues, even if he did definitely feel the fights getting harder. When it came to scouting out opponents, he had also improved his methodology. Rather than begin to gather information on every foe, Jake tried to have Polly or Owen locate his next opponent for him. While direct contact between yourself and your next opponent was frowned upon, and making threats straight-up against the rules, there was nothing that said one couldn't scope out each other from afar, something Jake himself had experienced many times.

That Jake had an utterly uncanny Bloodline-powered intuition toward how strong people were was totally irrelevant. In either case, this proved a great method to figure out if further information-gathering was even necessary. If Jake felt like his next opponent was too weak, he wouldn't bother, but if they felt strong enough to be a challenge, he would give Polly the go-ahead.

Not a single opponent in the Master Gladiator rank got that go-ahead. He got close a few times but ultimately didn't have the need.

Jake regretted not using this method before he met the Benevolent Monk... for if he did, Jake sure as hell would have gone out to buy some proper equipment and make proper preparations.

Either way. Having reached ten wins as a Master Gladiator, his promotion match was next, so Jake had naturally gone to the Battlemaster, who had a huge surprise announcement waiting for him.

"Look, I am not going to make any excuses here, but I think someone is out to get you with all these promotion matches. Three times in a row is definitely no coincidence, so maybe some of the higher-ups in charge of scheduling are actually out to get you... then again, they do also like exciting matches like this between two rising stars. Oh, yeah, you must wonder why I am rambling... we got another anomaly on our hands," the Battlemaster said.

Jake was shocked. Shocked, I tell you.

**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 Emberlight Blademaster**

Based on the following explanation from the Battlemaster, the Emberlight Blademaster was a spell blade of some sort. He used light and fire magic to enhance his swordsmanship and was incredibly skilled in both. He had both solid ranged attacks and was a beast in melee.

Jake naturally did some more research than what the Battlemaster told him and even went and checked out the elven swordsman in person. While he was indeed strong... well...

If the dwarf had a horrible match against Jake, this so-called Blademaster ended up having an even harder time.

Jake had spent more than thirty years with the Sword Saint while delving into Nevermore. Not only had Jake seen the old man fight a lot, but they also had their fair share of friendly spars when they both got bored during downtime.

And while this Emberlight Blademaster was impressive in his own right... he still fell a bit short compared to the Sword Saint. Jake didn't really enter this fight with any game plan but had just researched his opponent to know about any dangerous trump cards,

but all in all, it ended up being a pretty straightforward fight that Jake won after landing dozens of blows over a five-minute period.

Sure, he did have to go and get his pants, gloves, and chestpiece replaced afterward, as all had taken irreparable damage from being burned by the searing Emberlight, but that's what insurance was for.

Based on Jake's estimations, the Benevolent Monk was still the strongest person Jake had met in the Colosseum so far, but his fight had been "easier" than any of the other two special promotion matches. The differences in power between the Emberlight and the dwarf hadn't been that big, though... which was why the points he got from the bonus objective surprised him.

**Congratulations! You are no longer a mere Gladiator, but a true Warlord, proving yourself a true apex combatant in the Colosseum of Mortals. By now, you have truly caught the eye of some of the more powerful entities involved with the Colosseum of Mortals, with many waiting with anticipation to face you themselves. Be prepared, for it shall only get harder from here.**

**For reaching the Warlord rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 20000 Colosseum Points.**

**For defeating the Emberlight Blademaster, you are rewarded an extra 60000 Colosseum Points.**

Jake mentally skimmed the message, cutting out the repeated message about the shop offering more stuff and more options for the Show Match and all that.

Looking at the achievements, the 60000 from beating the Emberlight Blademaster were definitely more than expected and a nice bonus to get alongside the promotion to Warlord. Things were really stacking up, and looking at his points gained...

**Current objective: Be promoted from Warlord to Paragon.**

**Current rank: Warlord (0/10)**

**Colosseum Points: 252,210**

**Lives remaining: 10**

While spending around 35000 Colosseum Points had been painful in the moment, he had definitely more than made up for it now. And as he progressed toward this Paragon rank, he hoped that now, finally, fights would get hard.

--

"Two more ranks to go, and the Colosseum of Mortals will have another champion," Minaga grinned as he watched Jake. "Him picking up some gear was really about time because, man, was it sad to see that Benevolent Monk smack him about."

"It would have been disgraceful if he had lost that early on, and it would have eliminated his chances for a true pinnacle performance indeed," the Wyrmgod concurred.

Vilastromoz just looked on, not commenting much. He did wonder how many images of gods the Wyrmgod had managed to gather, though. The Emberlight Blademaster was a god from the Altmar Empire that had reached godhood and was now a commander in their divine army, while that dwarf, the Earthborn Faithful, was part of a large pantheon primarily filled with elemental gods.

The Viper didn't like to just wonder by himself, and while it would be fun to wait and be surprised... he was ultimately too curious.

"So, pray tell, what other interesting opponents do you have lined up?"

"Quite a few, quite a few," the Wyrmgod smiled.

"Yep, definitely an impressive lineup this time around," Minaga nodded with excitement.

"Come on, give me a tease," the Viper smiled.

"Hm... fine. A small peek," the Wyrmgod said, amused as he waved his hand.

The Viper looked as projections of three figures appeared. His eyes opened wide for a second before he grinned.

Jake definitely had his work cut out for him if he wanted to beat those monsters... and Vilastromoz doubted he would want it any other way. Besides, what other chances could a mortal get to fight Primordial-level figures?

*Also... I really didn't expect to see her image here...*

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## Chapter 754: Nevermore: The End of Benevolence

Outside Nevermore, in the Order of the Malefic Viper, the old mansion that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper used to live in looked much the same as before he went to the

World Wonder. Despite not really having permission, Meira and the others kept using the place for all of their meetups, and Meira lived there full-time. It was simply the best meeting spot, even if the majority of the library was locked off to them.

This wasn't because Meira didn't have her own place now... it was more that she only really ever felt at home within the mansion. Whatever bad memories she had from the place were long replaced with good ones. Besides, she had taken care of parts of Jake's garden for so long and had several experiments ongoing there, so moving would really be a hassle.

Teacher also said it was fine to stay, and Meira saw no reason to question that.

By now, it had been a few months since she evolved to C-grade and threw off the last traces of her former identity as a slave. She still had some parts of her past that lingered, and it was about high time to address them. It was also just something she wanted to do... something she had looked forward to doing.

"I'm surprised you didn't wait for the Chosen of the Malefic One to return before doing it," Izil, whom Meira had invited over, said. "I'm sure he would have agreed to come along if you asked him."

"I know," Meira nodded. "But this is something I have to do myself, okay?"

"Are you sure it counts as yourself when you take me along?" her fellow elf teased.

"It's different, okay?" Meira said, a bit flustered. "Anyway, there is no need to bother him with something that trivial. Besides, it's about time I do it. I've delayed enough, and Teacher said that going would be good for my mental state. Records of who I am and where I come from are there, and... I want to go, okay? I want to do what I can."

"I understand, trust me. But, I have been wondering, how will we get there? It is quite a distance away based on what you told me, and there is no gateway leading anywhere close," Izil asked.

Meira just smiled. "Well... I am the Chosen of the Grand Elder now..."

It still felt weird to say, even after several months, but it would be silly not to take advantage of that fact at least once in a while, right?

The spear shot past his temple, Jake barely avoiding the hit by tilting his head to the side and twisting his body. He dove into close range of the spearman, but his opponent was ready and stepped down hard to release a shockwave of wind, spewing up sand while propelling himself backward, trying to land another stab during his retreat.



Jake deflected the spearhead and gave pursuit, closing in and trying to land a solid blow. The hobgoblin quickly reacted as a gust of wind pushed him backward even more as he raised his other hand and released a blast of condensed fire mana toward Jake.

With a swipe of his katar, Jake pushed away the fireball, stabbing forward into the chest of the spearman. The katar penetrated slightly before Jake was forced to retreat away from a swiping spearhead, aiming to separate his head from his body. Almost like an echo, a flaming wind followed the spear, making Jake block with a surprised look on his face.

Thinking he had an advantage, the hobgoblin attacked once more. Jake smiled, having predicted this, and acted surprised on purpose as he slightly side-stepped the spear, turning his side to the spearman. With his left hand, he grabbed the spear shaft after putting the katar away and, with the other, stabbed toward the hobgoblin.

With an even bigger smile than Jake, the spearman twisted the spear to spin the weapon around as a whirlwind appeared around it. He clearly intended to either make Jake let go or break his wrists, either case resulting in him being in a prime position to attack. Neither of those things happened. The hobgoblin's smile quickly faded as the spear didn't move an inch, Jake having it in a vice-grip.

Stable arcane energy swirled around his gloves as he had infused them with it to trigger the enchantment, effectively freezing his own hand. He was fully aware that the gloves wouldn't survive the ordeal, but hey, insurance was still a thing.

With wide eyes, the hobgoblin barely had time to let go of the spear and jump back to avoid Jake's attack, but with him disarmed, he knew the fight was over. Considering his body already had plenty of wounds covering it from all of Jake's prior attacks, he seemed to know the gig was up.

"I surrender," the hobgoblin said with a sigh as he held up both his hands.

Jake smiled and let the mana fade from his left glove as it disintegrated from the far too potent arcane energy before he tossed the spear back to his opponent. "Good fight."

"Yeah... not like I managed to land a single hit, though," the poor guy said in a defeated tone. "Anyway, thanks for a good one. Good luck going further."

"Thanks, and you too," Jake thanked him as both of them exited the arena to the usual commentary from the announcer. Despite wishing him luck, Jake wasn't so confident in the guy going much further. The competition was tough.

When he had been promoted to Warlord, Jake had hoped for the fights to get harder but had expected disappointment. It turned out his opponents were all actually pretty damn good. He didn't find himself fearing for his life, and his consistent performance meant he walked out of all fights where his opponent couldn't make some large-scale attack he

chose to tank unscathed. There were even a few times, including versus this spearman, where he used his Fear Gaze defensively to avoid taking a nasty wound during an exchange. If possible, Jake wanted to avoid major injuries, as that would mean he potentially couldn't fight the next day, and he had a streak to keep going.

However, even if he didn't take any major injuries, it didn't mean it was all easy. The hobgoblin was a great example of someone who was just strong. He had good stats, could do a lot of different things, and was incredibly skilled with magic, but especially with that spear of his. To call him a spear master would definitely be no understatement.

It was something Jake hadn't thought much of before, but the fight with the Emberlight Blademaster illuminated how important experience fighting against certain weapons was. Even if C-grades were far faster, more skilled, and had more tools, the basics were still the same, and all of these fights allowed Jake to get a good basis for fighting against a wide variety of opponents and skill sets.

In other words, it was a fantastic sparring ground. One that allowed every person who progressed through the Challenge Dungeon to build up a wealth of experience in a relatively safe environment. An environment where geniuses had been gathered from all over the multiverse to fight you, something that didn't couldn't be found anywhere else.

Even the Show Matches were teaching him a lot. They had definitely also gotten harder by now, but Jake still found them a lot easier than the matches against other combatants. First of all, because he could kill whatever he fought without thinking twice, and second of all, because Jake was uniquely talented at fighting against multiple opponents. Also, while he had a lot to learn when it came to fighting humanoids with different weapons, that was definitely not the case with beasts or monsters.

To conclude, the Colosseum of Mortals had finally become truly fun. While Jake – as weird as he was – liked practicing day in and day out, having a single fight every day to look forward to was nice. He was also only a single week away from having his promotion match to Paragon, so that was something to look forward to.

He also began to do one other thing to practice, something Jake had never really done before:

Spectating.

Seeing two combatants of high skill was definitely a teaching experience, and he surprisingly learned a lot just from being an observer, once more proving that Perception was truly the best stat, even outside of combat. The reason he hadn't really gone and seen many matches before, only sometimes checking out Owen's fights, was due to a rule of the Colosseum that said one was not allowed to watch matches above their own rank... a rule that made absolutely no sense if this was a real place, but as a Challenge Dungeon in Nevermore, Jake could see why it was there.

Allowing everyone to watch people like the opponents Jake faced in the promotion matches would be too big of a reward for doing nothing, not to talk about the monsters Jake didn't doubt were in the Champion rank. If one could just spectate anyone, Jake could see many people enter the Challenge Dungeon just to spend a few years watching pinnacle individuals fight each other rather than fight themselves, completely eliminating the entire challenge part of the Challenge Dungeon.

In some ways, one could even view this ability to spectate higher-level matches as a reward, and upon reaching Warlord rank, Jake found it worth it to watch at least a few fights here and there. It also counted as research if he watched opponents he would potentially face in the future.

Ah, but there was one way for lower-ranked people to see higher-ranked fights. With the invitation of another combatant, they were allowed to view it. Jake suspected this was not something that would really ever happen to someone actually doing the Challenge Dungeon. If it did happen, it would be the reward for some side objective. No, instead, it was probably there to allow the challenger to invite whatever mates they made during the dungeon to go watch stuff together. Or maybe Jake only thought that because it was exactly what he used it for. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY novel~fire~net

That day, Jake, Owen, and Polly decided to attend the match of two other combatants Jake had faced before, namely the Earthborn Faithful and the Benevolent Monk. Both of them were also Warlords at his point and were definitely top contenders to get promoted to Paragon. Maybe even have a shot at the Champion rank.

It was rare that such powerful people would meet like this, but it wasn't unheard of, and when Jake heard it was taking place, he definitely wanted to go watch. Based on the Battlemaster, there were some people in charge of scheduling that tended to avoid putting peak fighters against each other before the truly high ranks... and it seemed like Warlord qualified as a truly high rank, seeing as they had matched up the two of them.

In either case, it looked like the organizers thought the two were roughly equal and wanted to set up an exciting match. While it was true the two of them were roughly equal when it came to gathering wins, Jake knew they weren't truly equals, and for one crucial reason.

After the announcer had introduced both fighters, the Benevolent Monk once more walked into the arena and bowed toward the dwarf. "Greetings, he who serves and is served by the earth. May I propose a friendly competition to-"

"Fuck off!" the dwarf yelled loudly. "I ain't doin' ya stupid bloody competition, ya freak. Face me properly... or imma bury you here."

The dwarf erupted with energy as the sand all around him rose and began to form rocky pillars. Across from him, the monk stood silently before sighing. "Very well. I thank you

for this coming match... and I shall respect your decision and return you to the earth once more."

Jake came to learn after the fight that no one had ever rejected this proposition from the Benevolent Monk outside of the first few matches. His act of benevolence was to offer the possibility for a spar and not a true fight. However, should one reject this benevolence, the match would turn from a spar into a true battle... and when fighting for real, there was no room for mercy or benevolence, but what Jake could only describe as pure, unabashed violence.

Everyone there had likely expected the fight to be roughly equal, and while it did look that way in the first thirty seconds, things quickly changed. The defenses of the dwarf crumbled, and even as he pulled out more and more attacks and spells, nothing seemed to work as the monk proved himself far more deadly than Jake had seen him be during their fight.

Every move was one that aimed to kill, and he gladly took minor injuries himself to land blows on his opponent. Moreover, his body was clearly far more durable than it had any right to be, and after a while, Jake spotted a potential reason. While it was hard to see, even when Jake had fought him, odd energy patterns covered his body from head to toe. Like an invisible tattoo, Jake theorized these tattoo-like patterns perhaps functioned as replacements for equipment, as he did know that was possible, albeit extremely rare.

As more time passed, the fight became more and more one-sided, and while the monk was covered in wounds, big and small, he never lost momentum. By now, the dwarf was also clearly unable to escape through the sand anymore.

That was when Jake learned something more. Something quite frankly terrifying as fuck. At the end of the battle between the two anomalies, the monk moved in for a finishing strike as he peeled away the final line of defense of the dwarf, which was when Jake realized. That hit Jake had been struck with when he "won" the fight against the monk – the one that had left him feeling half-dead for several days - was not some ultimate attack... it was the first strike in the series of a combo attack.

The first punch broke the stone armor and several ribs of the dwarf. The second ruptured his heart, the third destroyed his brain, the fourth burned away all remaining vestiges of his soul, and the fifth obliterated what was left of the body.

An eerie stillness overtook the arena as the monk stood with an outstretched fist covered in blood, droplets slowly dripping from his red fist.

"May you continue to serve the earth, even in death," the monk said in his usual respectful tone as he bowed toward the huge fan-shaped blood splatter, which was all that remained of the Earthborn Faithful.

That day, it became clear as day... should you reject the benevolence of the Benevolent Monk, there would be no mercy, only death.

"Dude, I'm so glad you didn't fight that monk for real," Owen muttered as they watched the monk slowly walk out of the arena, leaving drops of blood in his wake, both from his own wounds and his fists.

"Yeah," Jake nodded in agreement. "The rematch will be quite exciting, though from the looks of it, only one of us will be walking out alive."

This wasn't just Jake wanting a fight to the death. He felt the pure killing intent and bloodlust from that so-called Benevolent Monk, and he knew that should he want a serious rematch with the monk, there really was only one way it could go. If the monk wanted a life-and-death battle, Jake wasn't going to reject it.

"It... it isn't sure you'll meet him again, right?" Polly asked, worried. "You already met and beat him once, and repeat matchups are incredibly rare."

Jake just smiled at her. There was no fucking way there wouldn't be a repeat matchup.

He just hadn't expected it would be so soon.

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## Chapter 755: Nevermore: Paragon Preparations

Jake had expected his rematch with the Benevolent Monk to be during a promotion match or at least another highlighted event, but that didn't turn out to be the case. After watching the very-much-not Benevolent Monk fight, Jake did his last match as a Warlord before his promotion the week after, and when he signed up for the promotion match, he was naturally once more met with another anomaly... just not the one he had expected.

"Look, by now, we both know this is all a setup, alright? But hey, you can't expect any easy fights anymore, being a Warlord possibly about to be a Paragon, so I guess it shouldn't come as that big of a surprise. Either way, next up is another person who has yet to lose a single match and is considered quite the monster by pretty much all opponents that have faced her so far," the Battlemaster said. Jake was honestly surprised when he heard the Battlemaster say "her" as he had totally expected to meet the Benevolent Monk... but then again, could he even meet him with how ranks and such worked?

Either way, it didn't matter. Jake was still confident they would meet sooner or later.

"So, any information on this mystery opponent?" Jake asked.

"Yeah... she may be the toughest fighter you have faced yet. You need to understand not a single opponent has even managed to land a single scratch on her clothes so far," he said, shaking his head.

Jake found his interest peaked. "Sounds strong. Do you have any tips or tricks? Maybe just some basic information on her?"

"I can't tell you much, but I can say she is one of the most feared types of mages in the world: an illusionist. The world itself is altered in her presence, and in her own promotion match to Paragon, she won within a minute by simply walking up to her opponent and cutting his throat... You may actually consider skipping this one," the Battlemaster said with some genuine concern. "But if you do plan on fighting, you better fucking plan for it properly, even if you only have a day."

"Sign me up for it," Jake just grinned. An illusionist, eh? Poor gal to meet someone like Jake.

"Are you sure? She is also known to be very ruthless and kills most of her opponents," the Battlemaster asked clarifyingly.

"I'm sure," Jake smiled.

"Alright then."

**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 Living Nightmare**

The Living Nightmare, huh? Sounded scary, but Jake didn't feel the slightest sense of fear.

Due to his Bloodline, Jake had automatically not taken her seriously. Over the last thirty years, Jake had encountered many who used illusion magic, not to talk about those he faced before Nevermore. Due to how Bloodlines worked, Jake's Sphere of Perception entirely ignored all illusions, and his own intuition filtered out all the false information

automatically, making Jake arguably the biggest counter to illusion magic in the entire multiverse.

He still went and checked her out, with Polly also gathering some sparse information. Apparently, she was some odd fairy-like humanoid Jake didn't remember ever encountering before, and he was honestly surprised that if creatures like them existed, they were born in F-grade.

### **[Fae]**

What Jake did learn was that fae or fairies, or whatever one wanted to call them, were very magically inclined creatures with downright horrible physical stats by default. Based on what Polly said, they also varied widely in size and appearance, with some the size of a finger and others several meters tall.

It was a weird race, that one. The one Jake was fighting was at least human-sized. If not, the battle would have been incredibly awkward. Oh, and as Jake also saw she had small transparent wings, he also made sure to check if she could fly. She couldn't, so that was good to know.

The match itself turned out to be... kind of interesting? The fae was about one and a half meters tall and wore a robe covering nearly her entire body, with the only thing he could see being two eyes without any pupils. As he stood behind the bars of the arena and made eye contact with her, he felt the mental magic already at work as some odd instinctual fear began to well up in his chest.

Yep, she was definitely priming him for what was about to come.

When the bars lowered, and the battle began, Jake instantly noticed all that was wrong. The entire arena was darker than before, and it almost looked like the sand was moving on its own. The fae also slowly walked out of her entrance area to the arena, stopping after only a few steps.

Jake looked at her, still maintaining eye contact. The entire arena around him had dimmed in color as if someone had turned down the contrast, and out of the corner of his eye, he felt like he constantly saw movement in the shadows. The pillars spread throughout the arena had also all turned red, with lines of blood running down their stone.

"You battle me in my world... do you truly think you can be victorious?" the voice of the fae echoed, seemingly from all directions.

Still looking at her, Jake shrugged. "We will have to find out now, won't we? I am pretty confident I can handle your magic."



"It's almost cute how you put on a brave face. Do you think you are safe just because you keep your eyes on me? That the darkness cannot claim you? That the nightmare isn't omnipresent, ready to devour you whole at any moment?"

"I'll take my chances with the darkness; I get the feeling you are the real threat here," Jake smiled.

"Believe what you may... but if I am the true threat, should you not aim to strike me down? Or are you satisfied, standing there, quivering in fear?" she continued, flashing a sinister grin.

"I guess I shou-"

Without any warning, Jake tilted his head to the side and swung his right hand upward as he felt it meet resistance. The image all around him faded as the figure of the fae at the other end of the arena dispersed, revealing her true form, now impaled with a katar through her heart. A dagger fell to the ground, a small cut appearing on Jake's neck that would have been fatal if he hadn't moved his head away.

"How... your eyes never... moved..."

"I told you I was confident in handling your magic," Jake said as he pulled out his katar.

The fae stumbled back before falling onto her back, breathing her last breath.

It was her own damn fault that she died. If she hadn't gone for a killing blow on Jake, he would have been nice and only kicked her in the head. But if she wanted to kill him, she should have expected to be killed in return.

Jake also just didn't like that she killed everyone even when she didn't have to.

After walking out of the arena and back to the Battlemaster to report, Jake read through his new system message.

**Congratulations! You are now a Paragon of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing so close to the apex you can almost feel it. Only ten more victories remain before you claim the title of Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, an honor few have experienced.**

**As a Paragon, you are still limited to one fight every week against other Paragons.**

**All crafters will sell you the best equipment the Colosseum of Mortals has on offer.**

**Show Match reward options have been maxed out. You are now limited to one Show Match for every win as a Paragon.**

**For reaching the Paragon rank without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 50,000 Colosseum Points.** The most update novels are published on *novel•fire•net*

**For defeating the Living Nightmare, you are rewarded an extra 150,000 Colosseum Points.**

**Go forth and claim your rightful title as Champion.**

A lot had changed. Annoyingly so. Fewer Show Matches sucked, but at least he was getting close to reaching the Champion rank. As for the points... getting 150,000 for a single stab with a katar felt like overkill, but then again, her illusions had been damn strong. Jake's senses were totally thrown for a loop, and without his sphere, he could have seen himself in real trouble.

Either way, another rank passed, another influx of Colosseum Points.

**Current objective: Be promoted from Paragon to Champion.**

**Current rank: Paragon (0/10)**

**Colosseum Points: 710,210**

**Lives remaining: 10**

In Warlord rank, it had worked much like in the Master Gladiator rank when it came to points increasing over time. The first win had given 4200, the next 4400, with the final one giving 6000. The same was true for Show Matches, where the first four weeks of matches had given 3000, and after he got five wins as a Warlord, it jumped to 4500. The difficulty had naturally also jumped, but far from to a level where Jake couldn't handle it.

Jake, seeing no reason to delay and fail to keep his streak going, naturally asked the Battlemaster about scheduling his first Paragon fight, and...

"Remember that Benevolent Monk guy?" the Battlemaster asked.

"Sure do," Jake nodded as he tried to hide a smile. *Here we go.*

"Well, I don't know if this is good or bad news for you, but your first match as a Paragon will be his promotion match. I will admit I found it a bit odd that they chose to make his promotion match against the only person he has ever lost to in the Colosseum, but after

looking into it, I found the reason... this match will have a referee," the Battlemaster sighed.

"And what exactly does that mean?" Jake questioned.

"That the usual rules are out the window."

"Explain," Jake frowned.

"Being demanding now suddenly, huh? Anyway, it means that the referee will decide the rules, which means that should the monk try to make any house rules again, they will be denied. Additionally, the referee will be the one to decide the means of victory, and chances are they will make it a fight either to the death or until one party is unable to fight anymore. Based on what I heard, people loved the fight versus the dwarf and want a repeat of something like that," the Battlemaster said with a sigh.

Jake frowned even more. He didn't like the feeling of being forced by the Colosseum into a death match like this, but he also knew that was likely what their fight would have turned into anyway.

"So, is the match tomorrow?" Jake asked.

"No, no, it will not be," the Battlemaster shook his head. "It will be in a week. The organizers were fine with having it the next day in prior ranks to ride some of the hype from you just winning ten fights. That isn't the case for Paragons anymore. Paragons are all rare and powerful and bring in a huge crowd no matter what, as everyone is excited to see who may become the next Champion. Ah, and it's the same for those Show Matches. Can't do one before after your first victory in the arena either, so for the next seven days, you are free to do whatever you want. I would recommend that you spend that time preparing for your fight to not end up like that dwarf."

One would think that Jake got disappointed or annoyed at being told he couldn't fight right away... but it was actually the opposite. Jake welcomed this downtime, especially knowing who he would fight.

There were indeed preparations to be made, and seeing as he had unlocked buying the best items the Colosseum had to offer, it was time to finally get a bow in case it was needed during the fight. Buying one would tip off the Benevolent Monk and any upcoming opponents, but he believed it wasn't worth the risk to enter the arena against the monk without a good bow available. While he did have ten lives remaining, wasting one on gambling on not needing a bow seemed stupid.

Heading to the shopping district right away and checking out what was on offer, Jake saw that after reaching Paragon rank, he could even buy legendary items. The problem with those was the price. Every single weapon cost between 100,000 and more than

700,000 Colosseum Points, with the shop only showing items within Jake's budget, meaning there were probably items available that were even more expensive.

While the refund policy was an option to get half back, Jake still ended up settling on an ancient rarity bow that he believed would suit his needs.

**[Immutable Hunter's Bow (Ancient)] – The best bow does not need to be complicated, but one made with the basics refined to perfection. This bow is made of a type of wood often compared to metal, making it effectively indestructible and with incredible mana conductivity. Each end of the bow is sharpened and allows the bow to be used as a melee weapon in an emergency. Enchantments: Insured.**

**Requirements: Soulbound. Warlord Colosseum Rank.**

**Cost: 26,000 Colosseum Points.**

Jake had purposefully gone for a weapon he believed would be able to handle his destructive arcane energies. While Jake didn't have the Arcane Powershot skill, the dozens of broken bow fragments in his practice room were a good indication he could still use something incredibly similar.

This bow should be able to handle that. It was one that threw away all other enchantments just for increased durability, after all.

Having the ability to hit people with the bow was also a fun little option. Blocking with it, too. Jake did a few stress tests when he received the bow, and the durability truly did live up to the name. He seriously doubted any level 0 could break it.

Jake also already had a plan when it came to the arrows he would use.

The Earthborn Faithful had used a special technique to effectively infuse magic spells into gemstones that he could activate during combat for far faster casting speed and less mana expenditure. Seeing this had given Jake an idea, and after confirming with Owen, Jake got to work.

As for what he confirmed?

That one was allowed to bring their own weapons into the arena as long as they were self-made. This honestly didn't affect a lot of people and was incredibly rare, but in retrospect, Jake had already seen it a few times. Jake seriously doubted some Quartermaster or blacksmith had given those weird hidden magical tattoos to the Benevolent Monk as an example.

What Jake wanted to do was a bit different, though. He wasn't planning on crafting any weapons to use but instead to go a far simpler route: conjuration. When Jake had asked

Owen and Polly if one was allowed to bring their own conjured items into the arena, both of them had looked at him as if he was an idiot. It was common knowledge that summoning anything drained energy as upkeep, so even if one did conjure weapons, it was usually done right before the fight started... but Jake was different.

He would make his own arrows. Doing this, he would even save points by not having to buy a quiver. The basic one the Quartermaster had given him the very first day he joined the Colosseum of Mortals was more than enough.

Due to the nature of Jake's arcane affinity, if he made an arrow with purely stable arcane mana, it wouldn't begin to dissipate at all by itself within any short period of time. To test, he had even made an arrow and left it sitting out for over a month before it slowly began to crack and break, simply due to the environmental mana slowly wearing it down.

So, for arrows, Jake would conjure them himself. He also prepared two other surprises, as he did have two more slots in his Ring of Deft Hands aside from his katars and bow. Because, yes, he could even store his stable arcane constructs within, the system recognized them as physical objects and not just normal conjured items that usually dissipated if deposited in a spatial ring. This was, for example, why the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter couldn't be stored in his usual spatial necklace... though now he was interested to see if he could store the Protean Arrow. Probably not, and it didn't really matter due to his quiver, but he still wanted to test it once outside.

But making his arrows was not the only thing Jake had worked on when it came to utilizing his arcane mana. No, he had a project he had been working on even before he began to conjure arrows.

Because while Jake had lost all his skills, that didn't mean he couldn't replicate at least some of them. And there was one thing he had wanted to do for a long time that he was now finally confident in succeeding in:

Transmutation.

That's right, it was time to turn his katars far deadlier... and save tens of thousands of Colosseum Points by not having to buy replacements.

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## Chapter 756: Nevermore: Benevolent Monk Rematch

Transmutation for Jake had always been a bit out of the ordinary compared to other alchemists, especially after he began to play around with all that Origin stuff. But one had to remember that the precursor to all that was Jake experimenting with combining transmutation and his arcane affinity.

There had been a lot of trial and error on his transmutation journey as a level 0, and throughout it all, he had leaned on the experience he had from Touch of the Malefic Viper. A skill he also did a lot of personal practice with, and it had to be remembered that when he first began practicing using it for transmutation, he had instantly jumped to using his arcane affinity, which to Jake meant that his arcane affinity was very suited for transmutation... or maybe it was just very suited for Jake to infuse into everything he used.

That was exactly what Jake was trying to do... though it did turn out to be quite a bit harder without the Malefic Viper Legacy skill. However, that didn't mean Jake wasn't confident. As mentioned before, Jake's control of arcane energy was monstrous for a G or F-grade, and the items he wanted to transmute were ultimately only level 0 equipment, so the energy he needed to transmute lacked in both quantity and quality.

However, he quickly hit a bit of a snag.

Jake had, at first, experimented with the free items the Quartermaster handed out, but they turned out to simply be too weak to handle the influx of arcane energy without crumbling to dust. That had been quite an annoyance, as Jake really didn't wanna spend points on weapons that he knew he had a high chance of breaking... but then Jake got an idea he really should have gotten a lot earlier.

See, Jake found a bit of an, let's just say, error in the way the Colosseum of Mortals operated. The rules dictated that any insured items could be replaced if they broke, but nothing said it had to break in combat, right? So what if Jake experimented with his epic rarity katars, and if he felt like he would fail, he totally accidentally went ham with infusing destructive arcane energy, breaking his weapon.

He had to admit he had been a bit apprehensive the first time. Not just because he was essentially committing insurance fraud but because he feared that the system had accounted for someone trying this and would refuse to give him replacements. That turned out to be an unfounded fear, and when he presented the cracked katar to the Quartermaster, the man had just shrugged and handed him a new one.

To make a long story short, that's how Jake broke around a hundred and twenty epic rarity katars over the course of a few weeks, with more than fifty of those being in the week leading up to the fight against the Benevolent Monk as Jake refocused his efforts. He was confident in succeeding, and only two days before his fight against the monk, he was successful. The same day, he upgraded the second katar using the exact same method as the first, giving him two identical weapons.

**[Arcane Aersteel Katar (Ancient)] – This katar is made of a metal called Aersteel, making it incredibly light yet equally durable. The design of the weapon is simple and, due to the material used, has exemplary mana conductivity. This conductivity is increased further if one channels arcane mana through it. All of the air affinity energy within has been consumed and replaced by powerful arcane energies, making it lose many of the usual properties of Aersteel in exchange for increased durability and empowering all arcane mana being channeled through it. Enchantments: Arcane Empowered.**

**Requirements: Soulbound.**

His transmutation had led to quite a few changes. First of all, there was, of course, the rarity upgrade, though that far from fully encapsulated how meaningful this upgrade was. Equally as big was how much better the items suited Jake now. The Aersteel properties that led to the katar being lighter had remained, but the mana that helped things like air resistance was gone. What he got instead was a far more durable and sharper weapon.

It was a little sad to see the insurance was gone, even if he felt pretty certain breaking the new katars was borderline impossible. No, the problem was that he doubted he could get a refund now. Alas, sometimes sacrifices had to be made. The Requirements had changed, too, no longer requiring any specific rank, even if they were still Soulbound. It could be said that many of the unique aspects of the Colosseum had been stripped away for a weapon that was now truly his.

Jake also naturally tested his Improved weapons and found the result more than satisfying. The quality of the energy Jake had infused into them had transformed the epic rarity katars into peak-quality ancient weapons, with the mana conductivity for his arcane mana, not just flowing through the weapons freely but even getting empowered.

Before, something like extending the katar with an arcane edge was costly and difficult, but now it would be incredibly easy. With how much the katars suited him, Jake doubted even legendary katars would necessarily be better. While he considered buying ancient rarity weapons to try and transmute, based on brief experiments with his bow, Jake doubted he could pull it off within any reasonable timeframe. At least not without sacrificing all of the other things he wanted to practice, and even then, it was doubtful it would take less than half a year.

Besides upgraded katars, Jake prepared two more things to put in his Ring of Deft Hands. Both took some time to get just right, but when done, Jake was more than satisfied and could only grin when he imagined the monk's reaction upon seeing them.

Overall, Jake's preparations for the fight were extensive, and he even had Polly look into all she could find regarding the monk, though it quickly became obvious Jake already knew more than the information packages provided due to their prior encounter. Newest update provided by *move! \*fire\*net*



He also couldn't help but consider what would happen when he was done in the Colosseum and returned to his C-grade form, as he had no doubt made many improvements that would matter even if he was 250 levels higher. But all things in good time. For now, all that mattered was defeating the Benevolent Monk.

"So, I assume you already know by now what you are in for. The monk is a damn monster, and with the referee there, I doubt the fight will end without any bloodshed, so be prepared for a real battle. It may even be one of life and death, and if that's the case, not being the dead one tends to be the best option from my experience," the Battlemaster said as Jake came and waited close to the gate to begin his fight. "Are you confident?"

Jake smiled. "As confident as can be."

The Battlemaster nodded. "Good enough. Go get him then, and don't get killed, yeah? I placed a bet on you winning, and I am a sore loser."

Shaking his head, Jake headed toward the arena that was now about to open up. He felt a mix of excitement and trepidation as he walked up the steps to the incoming battlefield and heard the echoing voice of the announcer in the distance.

"Countless wins, but only one loss. Today, the Benevolent Monk is not just here to fight another day but to reclaim his honor and his perfect winning streak. To make things even. But to do that, he will have to beat the only opponent who has ever defeated him: Doomfoot! Or at least that is the name I am certain the Benevolent Monk remembers him by..."

Jake listened but didn't pay much attention. Instead, he focused on the monk at the other end of the arena, and even through the bars, he noticed something. New tattoos, far more visible than the normal ones, had appeared on his wrists and forearms.

*He's made preparations too,* Jake smiled to himself. It was gonna be a good fight.

"But! Before we get the action started, we have a bit of a special announcement. This match will be overseen by a referee! We have already seen these two fight once before, so let's mix things up!"

As the announcer said this, a side door in the wall of the arena opened up, and a man wearing a suit walked out.

Jake was ninety-nine percent sure that door hadn't been in any of the other arenas.

This referee walked to the middle of the arena as he first looked at Jake and then the Benevolent Monk.

“Due to complaints after prior matches involving the Benevolent Monk, I shall be overseeing today’s promotion match. In this match, the winner will be decided when either party becomes unable to continue fighting, dies, or I stop the match and declare a victor. There will be no surrender but a true battle to the end. I will give both of you a choice now, though... do either of you wish to surrender before we begin? This will naturally result in a default win for the other party,” the referee asked.

Jake heard murmur all around from the stands, and in his sphere, he even saw Polly and Owen look nervous. Nevertheless, he didn’t say anything, as the monk also simply stayed silent.

“Very well. In that case...” the referee began, the announcer finishing for him:

“Lower the gates!”

With impressive speed, the referee ran back from the middle of the arena as both of the gates began lowering at once.

The idea of bringing his bow out from the get-go did appear, but Jake decided not to as he walked forward toward the Benevolent Monk. His opponent did the same as they met toward the middle of the arena.

“Here we stand again,” the bald man said with a smile as he bowed when he got around ten meters from Jake.

“Indeed we do,” Jake said as he also bowed slightly. “Though this match won’t be a friendly competition.”

“Alas, it shall not be a spar of learning but a true fight that will only result in a valuable experience for one of us,” the monk said, standing up straight as he smiled radiantly. “So let us fight to our heart’s content. Let us determine whose Path shall remain and who shall embrace samsara. There shall be no grudges, no animosity... just two souls trying to prove themselves.”

With those words, all air of benevolence disappeared as the monk took a stance. The runes on his arms lit up as Jake saw what appeared to be ethereal bracers covering both his forearms.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment before launching forward toward the monk. In prior fights, he had tried to focus primarily on countering, but in this one, he planned to go on the offensive from the get-go to try and get some momentum.

Katar met forearm as the arcane-empowered weapon failed to cut the spirit-like bracers. The monk countered, but Jake wasn’t a slouch either. Dozens of blows were exchanged within a few seconds before a palm and katar smashed into each other, sending both sliding back, only stopped by the sand after a few meters.

A slight smile marred Jake's lips as a trail of blood trickled down the monk's palm. He was strong... but he couldn't fully block Jake's weapons.

He seemed to realize this, too, as he went on the offensive. Jake was ready and engaged the monk as their duel continued. The monk's attacks were downright savage, every one of them aiming for vital spots, but even so, one party had a clear advantage.

Jake messing up meant his already powerful soul took a small blow, losing him a few health points. Meanwhile, the monk slowly began to accumulate wounds all over his arms and upper body. Every single blow also left a tinge of destructive arcane mana, almost making it look like Jake's attacks left electric burns.

It wasn't an equal exchange of blows, either, as Jake landed far more minor attacks compared to his opponent. He and the Benevolent Monk had fought once before... but the version of Jake back then didn't have his equipment. He didn't have katars that switched up how he fought, and his stats were also lower as he hadn't used proper gear. In addition, every single blow that meant to pierce his soul also had to go through a bit of armor first, lessening the impact slightly. It wasn't by a lot, but it definitely played a part.

This ultimately resulted in Jake having a far better feeling for the Benevolent Monk and his fighting style than the monk did for his, giving Jake the initial advantage. After a few minutes, the monk did improve and make the exchanges more equal, but he had already paid the price.

The two of them utilized much of the arena as they switched between retreating and advancing, trying to get the better position or cornering their opponent. Jake once more had the advantage here. While the monk seemed to be able to sense Jake in an uncanny way – probably some kind of soul-sensing – that wasn't the case for random pillars placed around the arena.

Not that Jake was entirely untroubled, either. The monk had several things he never had to show before, giving Jake quite a few injuries. Outwardly, it didn't show much, but inside his body, his organs were suffering.

During all this, the referee simply stood back, observing silently. He never showed the slightest inclination to end the fight, even as both of their wounds worsened. Not that this was bad for Jake, because the more time passed, the bigger his advantage would become.

If nothing changed, the monk would run out of energy or simply fall due to blood loss, especially after he tried a risky exchange where he ended up with a shallow stab in the stomach. The Benevolent Monk had tried to use that insane combo he had killed the Earthborn Faithful with and won their first fight, but Jake had been quick and done the only logical thing:

Minimized the damage.

Jake had blocked it as best as he could while also countering as the monk had been left open, allowing Jake to land his stab, truly putting the monk on a timer. In return, Jake did get a nasty palm to the chest that broke a few ribs, but before the monk could combo, he had managed to get some distance.

Jake was happy he had survived the devastating attack that had left him half-dead the last time he took it, but he knew the monk had to at least have one more trump card as he felt some build-up within the monk. Something he had also felt during their first fight. It almost reminded him of Hunting Momentum... and Jake would be ready.

As their fight passed the twenty-minute mark, the sand had been covered in blood all around them. Jake breathed heavily as the monk also looked nearly wholly spent. The spirit-like bracers were pretty much entirely destroyed by now, while Jake's katars didn't have a single mark on them besides blood. The same couldn't be said for the rest of his equipment. Definitely had to file an insurance claim on all of it.

Both fighters looked at each other after another bloody exchange. Jake smirked as the monk also smiled despite his bloody body.

At once, they charged against each other as the monk released the attack he had been building up to all this time. Both went for an attack at the same time as a spiritual projection of the monk superimposed on his own body, words echoing out despite the Benevolent Monk's mouth not moving.

### **“Soul-Reversing Fist!”**

Energy stored in the monk's soul was unleashed at once as he punched toward Jake's chest. It was a strike that seemed based on all the damage Jake had done to the monk during their fight, and it would no doubt prove lethal if it landed. Jake reacted as he used Fear Gaze and raised his left hand to block as he punched with his right, willing to trade blows in a mirror of what had happened in their first duel.

But with a far different result.

Jake's katar penetrated into the shoulder of the Benevolent Monk as the monk's blow also landed. Jake twisted his wrist to turn the katar as an explosion of arcane energy sent an arm flying into the air at the very next moment. The monk stumbled back from the explosion with wide eyes when he realized... his attack had done nothing.

His eyes lowered and saw the two plate-sized aegis' of stable arcane energy summoned into Jake's left hand that had been pressed against his chest from the monk's punch. The monk smiled upon seeing a fist-sized cracked indent on the first of the plates. “I see... a fault in my Path...”

Soul attacks had one crucial weakness: they only worked on souls. It was pretty obvious just from the name, but compared to most other forms of attacks, those on the soul were especially primed to be countered by making them hit a target that wasn't a soul. Soul attacks still worked against many traditional means, such as armor, but proved incredibly weak against certain other methods.

Such as making the monk hit a two-layered shield of stable arcana mana instead of Jake's body, turning the blow absolutely harmless outside of cracking the aegis. The two layers had especially sealed the deal, as that meant even the semi-ranged wave of soul-destroying energy released had to try and pierce a second layer... something it had failed to do.

The Benevolent Monk had stumbled back several steps before stabilizing himself. He didn't even look at the arm now lying on the sand or seemed to care that he had lost an arm, nor the blood actively spewing out of the massive open wound. Perhaps because he knew the fight was over... that his Path was over.

He sighed with melancholy as he stared toward the sky for a few moments before he looked back down at Jake.

*His... eyes changed*, Jake thought as he frowned.

"Samsara awaits... I would say. Alas, such shall never be my fate," the monk said in a different tone than he had ever used before. In fact, Jake wasn't even certain he was talking to the same person. "I acknowledge your Path, even if you didn't show me all you were capable of. However, even with what you have shown, you are more than capable, and your arcane affinity is certainly something to further nurture. I also see that you do not yet fully grasp the true concepts behind it, and while I doubt you will be able to see through its true nature any time soon, continue reflecting on it. Continue seeking answers. Also, do know that while my true self will never be aware of this encounter, that does not mean the true lord will not, for he sees your Path, and it is for *he* that I speak."

Jake frowned. "Who are you?"

"I am Just an old monk asked to pass some sage advice, and I hope to truly meet you one day, Harbinger. So does the lord, who you will come to know, of that there is no doubt. But for now... farewell."

With those words, his eyes turned blank as the monk's soul ceased to exist.

"What happened there?" the Viper asked the Wyrmgod and Minaga. The screen had gone black the second the fight had ended, and the monk looked toward the sky, ready to surrender, only for it to turn back on again with the monk already lying dead on the sand.

“Yeah, that was weird... hey, partner, why did you cut off the feed like that? Did the monk have any cool last words?”

The Wyrmgod remained silent for several seconds before he muttered: “It wasn’t me...”

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## Chapter 757: Nevermore: Images

“When you say that you didn’t cut the feed off... what exactly do you mean? Did the system interfere directly, or was it something else?” Vilastromoz asked. If it was the first, then he would have many more questions, but if it was the latter... well, he would still have a lot of questions.

“Certain... concessions had to be made in order to gather all the images I wanted. When the system assists in extracting an image and downgrading it to F-grade, the targeted entity will have the ability to interfere with the aim of vetting what the left image will be capable of,” the Wyrmgod explained. “This was primarily made with the intent for the god to filter out certain hidden abilities they wished to keep hidden, but it has also been used to implement certain things that didn’t necessarily need to be there. I have actively chosen not to attempt to moderate this, as I do not see any tangible downsides, and overall see the benefits outweighing the losses.”

Vilastromoz frowned at the explanation. He had already been aware that these images weren’t actually copies of people at F or G-grade. No, if that was the case, Jake would have been able to simply kill every single one easily. While someone like the Soulfist had been powerful in F-grade for sure, he simply didn’t have the time to gain insights anywhere near the level of even a weak C-grade.

No, the images were instead created directly from living gods with the assistance of the system. The image would then be downgraded to have insights roughly to the level the gods had in early or mid-tier C-grade before making them level 0 - all done with direct assistance and management from the system to ensure balance.

For certain gods to not just accept having such an image made without any input was understandable. Vilastromoz would not have accepted to have an image made without controlling how it would turn out. However, as the Wyrmgod said, this method did make it possible for images to have things implemented by the gods who made them... or even someone close to these gods.

"So what you are saying is that the Daolord implemented something that would trigger an opportunity for him to deliver a personal message to a combatant winning the fight? Naturally, with this trigger also including a blackout for any observers, something that you agreed to?" Vilastromoz asked. "And I assume that means you know what was said?"

"A part of the agreement was that I would not be listening either, so no," the Wyrmgod shook his head.

"The Daofather is behind it, huh?" the Viper nodded. "Wonder what he is up to these days to want to deliver messages directly to random powerful Nevermore attendees. Is he desperate for new monks or something?"

Concluding that the Daofather was involved wasn't difficult. While every one of the Daolords was a respectable figure in their own right, for the Wyrmgod to agree to not even listen in on a conversation within his own dungeon wasn't something he would do for any of them. The Daofather was different.

Vilastromoz had to admit that out of every Primordial, the Daofather was the one he had the least interactions with throughout the eras. The Daofather wasn't a very active participant in the happenings of the multiverse, so it wasn't overly surprising, and the Viper barely heard anything about what he was doing. When it came to fights he joined, information was even more scarce.

In conclusion, he was an enigmatic figure that no one knew much about, not even his fellow Primordials. Vilastromoz had heard that he and Eversmile had interacted quite a bit throughout the eras, but that was about it. He tended to do his own things, and if the Dao Sect ever got involved, he would simply send one or more of the ten Daolords. Each of them was considered a pinnacle existence in their own right, and together, they could even stand up to Primordials. No need for him to ever get personally involved when that was the case.

"I believe there is a misunderstanding," the Wyrmgod corrected Vilas after a slight pause, making him frown.

"What did I get wrong?"

"The message was not left for random participants but for a select few only. Your Chosen among them. Also, while I cannot tell you what was said, I am sure you can simply ask your Chosen once he leaves Nevermore."

The Viper's frown deepened upon hearing these messages were targeted. What was the Daofather up to? It wasn't like this was a unique case, as he was used to the Dao Sect doing things he couldn't fully comprehend, but it was rare that it ever involved people like the Chosen of another Primordial.



Moreover, was this a good or a bad development for Jake? Was it even something meaningful he left behind... or was he just planting a seed?

Only time would tell.

--

Jake walked out of the arena after giving the corpse of the Benevolent Monk one final bow. The referee had promptly announced his win after the monk had died, the announcer and audience all going wild. He even saw Polly and Owen both look incredibly relieved through his sphere, with several more individuals in the arena standing also keeping a close eye on him. It was not the kind of looks that a bunch of casual viewers would have, but the kind of looks people studying a potential future opponent would.

*I guess I am a person of interest by now, huh?*

He did have nine more opponents to go before he would be able to do his promotion match and become a Champion, and based on the auras he felt, the matches should, at the very least, be entertaining.

Fully exiting the arena, Jake first went to the Battlemaster, who looked happy as a clam.

"You bloody won. Great, I was afraid I would lose my bet for a second there. Either way, good job, though it was sad to see such an interesting fighter fall in combat. He fought well and died an honorable death, which is the best most of us can hope for," the Battlemaster said with a sigh. "Now, want me to schedule your next Paragon match a week from now, or did you take too much of a beating?"

"In a week is fine," Jake answered. He wasn't in a great condition after the fight, and he definitely planned on buying one of those recovery potions to make sure he would be, but he had been in a far worse state after his last match with the monk.

"Alright. Also, do remember you are allowed one Show Match a week, too, the earliest of which can be done tomorrow if you so desire. It usually takes a bit of strategy to know when to have these Show Matches to make sure you are ready for your Paragon ones," the Battlemaster further explained. "And before you ask, there will be a break of a week between your tenth Paragon win and the Championship Match if you make it that far, so even if you wait a few days for the Show Match, you should be fine with getting in all your possible matches for optimal Colosseum Points gain. You seem to care a lot about those for some reason despite not really spending them."

"Well, that's good to know," Jake smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a potion and to get my ruined equipment replaced."

"Can't help you with the equipment, but take this," the Battlemaster said as he tossed a potion to Jake. "On the house. You can view it as your spoils from my winning bet."

Jake kept smiling as he shook his head and proceeded to drink the potion and get done with all that had to be done. Owen and Polly joined him for his trip to the shops, both having plenty of free time from the looks of it. Owen was understandable as he had advanced to Gladiator just recently, and as he didn't do any show matches at all, he quite frankly didn't have a lot else going on. Polly was still not advancing through the ranks and seemed more interested in assisting Jake and Owen with their endeavors.

Especially after poor Owen had been forced to reveal his lightning magic in his promotion match before he reached Gladiator. While the guy had become pretty skilled with his spear, he was still only considered "okay" by Jake's standards. His base stats were pretty high, though, which was what had allowed Owen to even make it as far as he did without using his best weapon.

It was a bit sad for Jake to lose his perfect teasing method, but he did at least discover why Owen had been so intent on hiding his abilities. His lightning had an odd deep blue color that was apparently unique to a special school of lightning magic... that a Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals also used.

That's right, the big plot twist was that Owen was actually the son of a Champion. A huge twist that had left Jake incredibly surprised... but not by the fact he was a Champion, but the entire expression "a Champion."

Apparently, there were multiple who had managed to reach the Champion rank, though it was less than ten. So, Jake was ninety-nine percent sure the way to become Grand Champion was just to beat every other Champion.

Of course, he had to make it through Paragon rank before he could figure out who the rest of these Champions were and how strong they would be.

Before they parted that day and Jake went back to relax, Owen made a comment that made Jake reflect on his fight with the monk a bit more closely, especially regarding how the Colosseum operated in regards to it.

"It was a bit sad to see that monk who genuinely didn't seem like he wanted to kill someone be forced into a life-and-death match like that. Even if he did seem fine with it."

Jake already had conflicted feelings about the whole thing, but Owen's comment only confirmed those feelings were well-founded. He didn't like being forced to kill someone he had no animosity with, especially when it didn't even give any experience points. At least when he hunted for levels, it was with a purpose and not just to kill someone. But with the monk, he had only killed him because the rules made it pretty damn clear it was either that or be killed.

However, he also had to consider that they both knew what they walked into. It was a duel between two willing opponents who were there just to fight one another. It had been a good fight that Jake didn't regret having, and he respected the monk's power despite the exploitable weaknesses in his Path. Weaknesses Jake didn't doubt had been long fixed by the true monk.

Because, oh yeah, there was also the fact that the Benevolent Monk was just an image left behind by someone Jake assumed to be a divine being. It wasn't like Jake had actually killed someone, and with that final message, it even seemed like the Benevolent Monk had wanted him to win. Or, at least, whatever had taken over toward the end had wanted Jake to win.

Jake also found it a little weird that no one seemed to comment on the monk seemingly being possessed and saying some cryptic shit before falling over with his soul extinguished. Then again, dungeon-fuckery was a truly powerful concept that he had learned not to question too much lest he wanted to go insane.

Anyway, when he got back to his little home, Jake lay on his bed as he checked his menus. The link to the origin of this information rests in novel•fire•net

**Current objective: Be promoted from Paragon to Champion.**

**Current rank: Paragon (1/10)**

**Colosseum Points: 709,210**

**Lives remaining: 10**

When it came to points, every win in Paragon seemed to have taken quite a jump. His victory had earned him a total of 25,000 points, up from the 6,000 his final win as a Warlord had granted him. It was a good jump, but more than the jump for his gladiator matches, Jake wanted to see how much more the Show Matches now gave.

He was still 1,000 points short on points compared to when he got promoted due to buying his bow, which honestly did put into perspective just how many more points fights gave now than when he was in lower ranks. This single match had earned him more than all the ranks below Gladiator combined... the two months spent in the Gladiator rank itself included.

After reflecting on his point gains, cleaning himself up, and tending to his wounds, Jake rested for the rest of the day. The next day, he did some light practice, and on the third, he went back to the Colosseum fully recovered and ready for his Show Match.

Seeing as he was also limited to one a week of those, he definitely expected a spike in both rewards and difficulty. In all honesty, the Show Matches had all been far too easy thus far. Again, Jake was pretty damn good in fights against monsters or multiple

opponents, so his standards were definitely above the regular fighter, but he still hoped for appropriately challenging fights. Maybe not Benevolent Monk-level fights, but at least ones that could get him excited.

So, with great hope, he opened the menu and saw the options available... and damn, did the rewards get a bump.

#### **Show Match Opponents Available:**

**1. Minotaur Brutes (2x opponents) – 30,000 Colosseum Points**

**2. Luxwolf Pack (7x opponents) – 27,500 Colosseum Points**

**3. Dwarven Punisher – 25,000 Colosseum Points**

**4. Vicious Fire Salamander – 20,000 Colosseum Points**

**5. Scalekin Prisoners (3x) – 15,000 Colosseum Points**

30,000 Colosseum Points for one win was definitely damn sweet. However, one had to remember that as he could now only do one Show Match a week rather than day, it would need to give at least six times as much to average out to the same amount weekly. He had earned 4,500 per win before his promotion per match, so that was 27,000 weekly... meaning it was actually only a jump of 3,000 points every week.

At least the fights would get hard now, though, right?

An hour later – fifty minutes of which had been spent waiting for the fight to start – Jake stood in the arena with a slightly disappointed expression on his face and the head of a minotaur on the ground in front of him, its headless body lying not far away. Another minotaur could be found around fifteen meters away, filled with wounds from head to toe and a big hole where its heart had once been. As for Jake? Well, his armor had gotten ripped a bit here and there, but that was it.

So, yeah, it was pretty disappointing. The damn announcer didn't make things better either.

"Doomfoot! Katar King! The Purple Poker of Death! So many names, so many talents, all to describe one man: a true Paragon! Who knows, maybe even a coming Champion? I guess we will find out! Now go! Leave the arena and rest. You've earned it!"

He didn't need to be told that twice as Jake headed straight out and, after visiting the Battlemaster, went to his practice room... because, disappointingly so, he still had the resources to get in a good practice session.

Jake had grown stronger, and while he was still practicing and still had the trump card in his hidden archery, he had just about reached how strong he would get within the Challenge Dungeon. That meant he was only waiting to hit his limit and meet an opponent that was either truly equal or superior. The Benevolent Monk had been close, really close, but he had some too easily exploitable weaknesses.

Now the only question was... would Jake be forced to pull out his bow before or after he became the Champion? His reason for keeping it hidden was still partly so he could catch an opponent by surprise, but also for one more major reason:

He really wanted to avoid getting another stupid fucking nickname.

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## **Chapter 758: Nevermore (Not Really): Willowood Clan**

Pietra looked through the newly arrived shipment as she picked out the best silk from what was left. Most of it had already been taken by the other seamstresses, and Pietra felt lucky that at least some had been left behind she could work with.

If not, it would be hard to ever save up and buy their freedom, not to mention pay the monthly dues.

Putting all she could get in her spatial bag, she paid at the exit of the warehouse before heading home for the day. Renting a spatial bag had luckily gotten quite cheap recently as their clan had a lot fewer members than they used to.

On the way home, she couldn't help but peek at her neighbor's small residence. It looked worse by the day due to a lack of maintenance, but Pietra couldn't really say anything. They had lost the patriarch of their family and thus their position, despite him being the late son of an elder... alas, all that was from the days of old.

Getting home, Pietra smiled the moment she opened the door, fighting through any feelings of exhaustion.

"Mom!" her youngest yelled as she got up from her little bench and ran over.

"Hey honey," Pietra said with a radiant smile, kneeling down and scooping up her daughter in a hug.

Holding her daughter tight, she looked out the small window showing the neighbor's house, and inside, she saw a tall but very thin elf sitting in front of a small worktable with listless eyes. Pietra couldn't help but sigh internally at the sight, holding her daughter even closer than before.

Deliah was truly an unfortunate soul. She had lost not only her husband but also her eldest daughter due to unfortunate timing when the Order of the Malefic had taken over. It had been a few years since it happened, and even if there had been some changes for their clan, it hadn't really impacted the normal clan members much. It was more the higher-ups who had to deal with new rules.

Things were pretty bad initially. Right when the Order took over, they required the clan to send a certain number of E and D-grades to the Order every month and year, respectively. That had ended pretty fast, though, and since then, they had only been required to pay taxes.

Of course, if they didn't pay the required taxes, the Order would make up for the difference by taking something else of equal value – more often than not, a few slaves. Which was honestly getting off pretty cheap, considering they were all slaves of the Order to begin with, though Pietra guessed they were considered some other kinds of slaves than those taken to the Order? The members of the clan didn't have any contracts, after all.

That was why everyone had to contribute, and as a widow, Deliah had to contribute extra as her husband couldn't. Her remaining children weren't old enough to contribute much yet, and as she was responsible for them, she had to pay their share.

Honestly, it was a miracle she hadn't given up any of them yet by sending them to the Order. Pietra already had a hard enough time as a single mother paying for her one daughter and herself, and even if Deliah was a pretty talented jeweler who could use some of the many raw gemstones found in the mines, she had to be struggling to provide for four people alone.

"Mom?" her daughter interrupted her train of thought.

Pietra smiled and shook her head as she stood up and looked down at her daughter. "I was just thinking about adult stuff. Now, what do you want for dinner?"

Deliah coughed as she suppressed the pain. The kids were still in the small academy the clan had established, so she had to finish work before they came home. After a moment of hesitation, she reached into a drawer in her desk and pulled out a potion. It was her last one, but she was too low on resources to keep going.

She hadn't been able to fully regenerate her stamina and mana pool for several months by now, and it was starting to take a toll. The healer had said she was at risk of taking minor soul damage from overexertion, but she didn't really have a choice. Thus, she

quickly drank the potion, ignoring the slightly rancid taste of a low-quality product. Low-quality but cheap product.

Her husband had been a pinnacle D-grade, which had given their family a respectable position in the social hierarchy, not to mention who her husband's father was. The fact that her father-in-law was an elder of the clan had helped to at least allow the kids into the academy to put some pressure off Deliah, and if all things went well, they all had a good chance of reaching D-grade. Assuming Deliah herself could continue to support them... something she would do everything in her power to do.

No matter how many years passed, she still couldn't forgive herself for what had happened to her eldest daughter. Her husband had been insistent on Meira being their way out of the clan and a way to a better life, and Deliah hadn't done enough to try and convince him otherwise or protect her daughter.

Despite her initial reluctance to go along with her husband, perhaps Deliah herself had begun to believe that marrying a young master from the Brimstone Conglomerate would have been a better fate than staying in the clan for the rest of her life. She would be a slave in both places, but at least she had a chance, however minor, for a bright future as the bride of an influential young man. Meira was smart and a talented healer, so as long as the young master had taken a liking to her, she could definitely have reached D-grade.

Now, none of that mattered. Deliah had agreed to let her husband take Meira to meet the young master, and the rest was history. The Brimstone Conglomerate had been destroyed, gods had fallen, and she had lost her eldest daughter and husband. What made it worse was that she could only blame herself, as blaming such massive factions with untold power like the Order was utterly meaningless.

So Deliah still hadn't forgiven herself yet for letting Meira leave that day. The night before Meira and her husband had gone to the branch of the Conglomerate, Meira had told her mother she wasn't sure she wanted to go and if she couldn't just stay home and work as a healer for the miners... and Deliah had been the one to convince her it was for the best to follow her father.

She had effectively sent her daughter to her death. Unknowingly, but that was still what she had done. At least if she had stayed back in the clan, she would still be alive. Especially now that the Order at least offered a way to earn true freedom through buying yourself a ticket to elsewhere...

That's why Deliah wouldn't give up on any of her children. She hadn't fought enough for Meira, and there was no way she going to let her little brother and two little sisters down in the same way. Who knows, maybe she could even get them off the Great Planet and take them somewhere safe one day.



So she worked. All she could hope for right now was that her body would hold up until the three of them could begin to provide for themselves, and the rest was simply hopeful thinking. But for her children, it was worth it to at least try.

Tanyl and Sakala were her two youngest. They were twins, a boy and a girl, both having just turned twenty this year and both in mid-tier E-grade. Elves having twins was incredibly rare, and while Deliah knew that it was considered relatively common among humans and even half-elves, it had come as a massive surprise to her and her husband. They had never planned on having more than three children but had ended up with four. Despite the struggles that had brought, Deliah had never once viewed the two of them as anything but blessings.

Kythela was their older sister. She was only four years older than her two siblings and was also in mid-tier E-grade. Meira had been quite a bit older than both the twins and her sister, and being more talented, she had been close to D-grade before she passed away. Deliah also knew that none of her kids were fully over losing their father and older sister, which was part of the reason why they worked so hard these days.

Hours passed, and Deliah finally managed to finish her work for the day. Her quota was high, but she could do it. Moreover, recently, she had even gained a few levels. She believed she had already exhausted all her potential, so that had been a welcome surprise and had helped her get her work done quicker and better. She was still only mid-tier D-grade, but that was already considered pretty good within the clan.

Looking at the sky outside, she still had a bit of time before the kids came home, so she went to take a quick nap. She would get a delivery again around nighttime and had more jewelry to complete while everyone else slept, so she had to try and restore her resources now to be able to do her job later.

She had barely managed to lie down and close her eyes when she heard a commotion at the door. With a brief glance out the window, she saw that around an hour had passed, but she still hurriedly got up right as the door opened.

"We're home!" Kythela yelled loud enough for even the neighbors to hear. It wasn't like their house was even big, having only three bedrooms total, so yelling was totally unnecessary.

Deliah didn't scold her, though, and quickly went to the door, where she saw her three kids walk in with an older man. He was tall and well-built, with bushy brows and a short beard, giving off a certain air of power. It was her father-in-law. Of course, more importantly than that, it was one of the elders of the clan and a C-grade at that.

"Greetings, elder," Deliah bowed as the man walked in with her kids.

"No need to be so formal, Deliah," the older man smiled.

She raised her head and saw her father-in-law look around the house while suppressing a sigh. Deliah did feel slightly embarrassed at the dilapidated state of her home, and she would have cleaned up if she knew they would have visitors. However, she also knew that the elder wasn't holding back a sigh of disappointment but that it was due to his powerlessness.

One would think that as an elder, he would have the power to change things or help, but in reality, it was an empty title that barely did anything. A single word from a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper would supersede anything he ever said or did, and the rules of the Order were very clear that each family had to contribute on their own, not even allowing him to pay their required taxes.

He still helped where he could, but it was incredibly limited.

Deliah invited them all inside and prepared to get something to drink when a shiver suddenly went down her spine. She froze mid-movement, her entire family doing the same. In fact, throughout the whole clan, they experienced this at once.

An aura had fallen over the clan.

"Get outside!" the elder yelled as Deliah did just that, ushering her kids out with her. Right outside, she saw her neighbor Petria also rush out, holding her daughter's hand. In unison, they stared up and saw what looked like the arrival of the apocalypse.

The sky had split open as space shattered, the entire world shaking. It was a sight reminiscent of what the clan had also seen a few years ago, and they all knew what it meant... someone powerful was coming. Someone influential.

Out stepped several individuals, and before Deliah had any chance to do or say anything, her father-in-law had already shot into the air along with eight other figures from different places in the clan. It was the nine elders, their only C-grades. However, they had not flown up to fight. This content belongs to novel•fire•net

Instead, they stopped in mid-air, not far from the hole in space, as a single figure walked out after several who looked like guards. From below, Deliah could not see who or what had appeared, but words seemed to be exchanged, and only a minute later, a clan-wide order was given.

Every single member of their clan had to gather... for there was about to be made an announcement regarding their future.

There was no questioning this order, no protests. All they could do was to comply. Over the next several minutes, the entire clan gathered in the large central square of the clan's main village. Women, children, men, young and old. Everyone was present as they stared at what happened in the sky above.

Out of the large crack of space had floated a large platform of gray stone with hundreds of people on it and what looked like a podium in the middle. Looking at the people there, Deliah recognized them. She had seen one before.

They were enforcers from the Order of the Malefic Viper. However, the last time she saw one, there had been only that one. But... here, there were hundreds. Every single one of them was a B-grade, capable of wiping out any of the small clans in this entire section of the Great Planet. What's more, there was the leader of this group. A dragonkin with black and dark green scales radiating power far beyond any of the others.

She had heard of these beings. It was a Malefic Dragonkin, a being closely connected and always blessed by the Malefic Viper himself. It was also this man who was the origin of the aura that had frozen the entire clan.

*Why is someone like that here?* Deliah asked herself as a shiver ran down her spine. Had they done something wrong... had some idiot provoked the Order of the Malefic somehow.

"Did... did your father-in-law tell you anything?" Pietra, who stood beside Deliah and her kids, asked in a worried tone.

"No... he didn't know or had even heard anything either," Deliah shook her head and answered in a low whisper while not taking her eyes off the platform above.

"Then what do you think is-"

"Shh!" a third person shushed them, Deliah agreeing that staying silent was probably best. To attract attention was not something anyone wanted, and while Deliah was curious, questioning out loud wouldn't help anyone.

On the platform above, the dragonkin that seemed to be the leader stepped forward.

"Today, we are here to celebrate a joyous occasion. A change in your way of life. The sole disciple and Chosen of Grand Elder Duskleaf has laid claim to the Willowood Clan from this day onward," the Malefic Dragonkin said in a voice that echoed so loud every person heard it.

Deliah was even more confused as she heard this. Why was some Chosen in this backwater mining clan, and why would they claim it? Was there something they didn't know?

With a wave of his hand, the Malefic Dragonkin summoned a sea of gemstones that quickly gathered to form a rectangular gateway before stepping to the side.

Everyone kneeled as the gateway activated. Even the Malefic Dragonkin went down to one knee as they prepared to welcome someone clearly recognized as their superior. In unison, the entire crowd also kneeled, with some even kowtowing entirely. Deliah naturally did the same, keeping her stare firmly directed at the ground.

“All welcome, the honored Mistress Dawnleaf!”

A new aura appeared at that moment. One clearly amplified by the platform above.

“A high elf...” Pietra muttered beside her, feeling the sheer qualitative difference between a regular and a high elf.

However, Deliah hadn’t even noticed the high elf aspect. Instead, her head had whipped up due to the sheer familiarity of the presence of the person who had just stepped out of the gate.

She was a tall high elf, wearing a white dress with minimal jewelry. Deliah only really looked at the face of this elf, and despite the distance, she recognized her... even if a sliver of doubt still remained.

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## **Chapter 759: Nevermore (Still Not Really): A Small Speech**

Meira thought it was overdoing it... but Izil and Irin had both insisted this was necessary. Even Viridia had come by to insist that if Meira really wanted to break out of her shell and completely throw away all the burdens of who she had once been, she had to embrace her new identity fully. Teacher hadn’t seemed to care either way but had simply said:

“What you choose to do has nothing to do with me. You are now my Chosen, that is true, but I have no intent on limiting what you do, even if your actions are done through taking advantage of my position. If you feel that visiting or even taking charge of your old clan is what’s best, just go do that. No one will oppose you, and if they do, just tell me, alright? Can’t have any unnecessary conflicts delay you from fixing your personal issues and returning to doing alchemy. Ah, just don’t make any promises that I will do something or show up somewhere... because I won’t.”

While it didn't sound like Teacher was overly supportive, Meira knew he cared. She even knew that should she ask him to come with her to visit her clan, he would. Not as himself but disguised as someone else to not attract unneeded attention, but he would come. She wouldn't ask him, though. This was something she had to do without him... even if she did borrow his name and influence.

The problem was just that Meira had no idea how she would go about visiting. Should she disguise herself and go? No, that wouldn't work, as she wanted to actually help her family there, and her only way to do that was to leverage her position somehow. She had considered for a long time how to do that, as Irin had made a suggestion... why didn't she just take it over? Why didn't she just declare that the entire Willowood Clan now belonged to her? No one would oppose that. Who would want to argue with the Chosen of the Grand Elder over some random small elven mining clan that only had a few C-grades in it? It was the type of faction where even if some A-grade from the Order destroyed it on accident, he wouldn't even have to file any paperwork or be questioned for not reporting what had happened. In the grand scheme of things, the Willowood clan was that insignificant.

After some deliberation, Meira decided that was what she wanted to do. She would take over the clan and have that work as a shield of sorts. While no member of the Order would get in trouble for destroying a random C-grade clan, they would certainly want to avoid messing with somewhere of interest to the Chosen of the Grand Elder.

This was when the next problem arose. How exactly would Meira take it over? As in, what practical steps would she take? Well, luckily, she had people around her with ideas. People who knew far more than her and were more than willing to help. Some of them because they were her friends, but many because – as Izil put it – they wanted to earn her favor, as she had the ear of the Grand Elder. Some even wanted favor directly with Meira as they concluded she would become a far more influential figure in the future, even without relying on others.

It did still feel odd that people wanted her favor and not just the favor of others through her. But she wasn't going to say no to help when offered.

So, in the end, Meira had just listened to what the people around her recommended as they laid a plan to claim the Willowood Clan for herself.

During this, Viridia had sent someone to help her. It was an A-grade peak administrator who worked closely with the Hall Master, sent solely to plan Meira's trip to her old clan. It was her idea to get a newly evolved S-grade Malefic Dragonkin to come along to truly communicate the meaning of this visit, and it was her idea to make a spectacle of it all. New NOVEL chapters are published on *novel✂fire✂net*

In her words, Meira needed an entrance worthy of the Grand Elder's Chosen. She couldn't just be teleported there with a few guards, or worse, with just some of her close personal friends. No, they needed to go all-out, especially considering this was her first public action as a

Chosen. After all, she didn't have some grand reveal, so many would also view this as her first public appearance.

Meira even had to step in and reduce some of the spectacles... having a bunch of dragons circling the platform combined with an army of more than ten thousand to flank her just seemed like too much, and it was only through struggle she managed to get this army reduced to "just" a few hundred enforcers. It was a compromise of having more powerful but fewer people to still show roughly the same level of prestige.

When the time came for the actual ceremony, Meira simply walked out of the massive gate as she tried to remember all the tips she had been given. She tried to remember how Jake had acted during his own Chosen ceremony, and while this was far more private and not a grand announcement in front of the whole Order, she still didn't want to embarrass her Teacher.

Holding her head high and spreading her presence, she hoped it would work. Meira knew that her aura was far from Jake's, but based on the reactions of the crowd, it apparently still seemed intimidating. She knew a big reason for this was her Blessing getting mixed in there, but things were still better than she had expected. Oh, it definitely also helped she was a high elf now.

Glancing down toward the crowd, she tried to get a sense of how many people there were in her former clan. If she had to do a rough estimate, she would say it was about a million elves total, with nearly every single one of them gathered below. It was a testament to just how big the mine was to keep them all employed... but she also remembered how her grandfather had talked about the clan once being tens of times larger.

However, more than counting her audience, she looked around for a few specific people. Meira had already made sure they were still around before coming, and after looking for a few seconds, still just standing there while radiating her presence, she saw them.

She saw her two sisters and one of her brothers – the youngest and one of the twins. She didn't see her four other half-brothers anywhere. They were brothers from her father's first and second wives, whom Meira had rarely interacted with, and she honestly didn't care much for them. They were all older than herself by quite a few years, and even before everything had happened, they were already very much living their own lives as miners and builders, a Path her youngest brother also wanted to follow.

The reason she spotted them was because a single elf in the entire crowd raised her head when Meira let loose her presence. It was a face she recognized, if barely. The elf's skin looked more sunken, and she looked exhausted, but there was no mistake... it was her mother.

Meira would be lying if she said she didn't still hold some resentment toward her parents. Her father had been controlling and never once cared about Meira's own opinions or thoughts in any matter, but just viewed her as a piece of property to use. Her mother had been complicit, and while she had tried to be caring and loving, she never did so at the expense of making her husband angry. Meira still remembered when she was a teenager, and her mother had tried to explain to her how important it was to never make her future husband dissatisfied, or she would risk losing his favor, and he would turn to his other wives or concubines. Back then, Meira hadn't questioned it at all, but now she realized it was some truly messed up logic.

However, even if she held resentment, she understood. In the same vein as how Meira had never questioned her mother's words before after meeting Jake, so had her mother never questioned it either. Perhaps even her father was also a victim of circumstances... but Meira didn't want to even think about that too much. He was dead, and Meira trying to make him out to just be a misunderstood man who wanted the best for his family wouldn't help with anything besides possibly making her feel worse about his passing.

Looking at her three full siblings, she didn't feel any resentment at all. Instead, she had to hold back a small smile from seeing Tanyl and Sakala both looking nearly all grown up. They were still barely adults, being only twenty, and when she had left, they were still at an age where every year brought noticeable changes. Kythela also looked healthy and a bit older compared to a few years ago, but otherwise, she was mostly the same, not just in appearance but in level.

It truly put things into perspective. Meira's clan hadn't changed in the last few years, while Meira had become an entirely different person.

*"Milady, perhaps an announcement from the Chosen would be appropriate,"* the S-grade Malefic Dragonkin spoke to her telepathically, throwing her out of her thoughts. Probably for the best, too, as her standing there just looking down at her family for a few dozen seconds definitely wasn't helping her look like some noble young mistress.

After quickly getting over the weirdness of having a powerful person talk to her so respectfully – something Meira was luckily getting more used to - she nodded and did just that. Meira did have a speech prepared, after all.

Stepping forward and tapping into the formation beneath her to amplify her voice, she spoke.

"Greetings, members of the Willowood Clan. Or should I say, we meet again, my former clan."

Her opening lines already had a visible effect on the crowd. Not of awe or surprise but sheer confusion. Like the fact she had once been a member of the clan wasn't even possible. Nevertheless, she continued.



"I am here today not only as the Chosen of the Grand Elder but as a former member of the Willowood clan. My name is Meira, a former healer in the miner's barracks. Perhaps some of you recognize me... and perhaps you don't. I myself only see a few familiar faces."

It was the truth. Meira saw a few family members, but that was it. Meira never had many friends or acquaintances. She had always been working and practicing the things her parents wanted, and when she wasn't doing that, she was helping take care of her siblings.

"You may question if I truly was connected to the clan, so let me tell you my story. My past is no secret. The day the Order of the Malefic Viper destroyed the Brimstone Conglomerate, I was captured by the Order and brought to their headquarters as a slave. After grueling training and being forced to evolve to a D-grade as a slave, I resigned myself to my fate. The day I was assigned as a slave to a new arrival from the newly initiated multiverse, I didn't question anything but only hoped to survive. Yet when I met my new master, willing to do anything to gain his favor, he rejected me at every turn. He did not want me as his slave... but he allowed me to stay. Not with the objective of serving him but to learn how to find my own Path. Decide my own Path. At first, I resisted, but then I saw hope. Hope toward a life where I could make my own choices and determine my own future. My master, the one who gave me that hope, was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

The decision to share so much personal information about her journey was not made without serious deliberations. Meira had talked for many days with not just Izil and Irin but even Reika and Bastilla. They knew most of her story already, and after checking in with the administrator sent by Viridia, they settled on going ahead with it. Meira had very much wanted to give this speech... because she felt like if someone had given it to her while growing up, it could have changed many things for her. Maybe that was just wishful thinking, but she wanted to believe that.

"I was lucky in so many ways. It was through his initial guidance and rejection I was forced to make decisions myself. Even then, I resisted until I was worn down and left with no choice but to choose what I wanted to do. The reason I am saying all this is not to brag or to prove how superior I am... but to tell you all that not even five years ago, I would have been one of you. I was given opportunities, and I grasped them. All the while, he supported me... until the day I was a slave no longer but a fully-fledged member of the Order of the Malefic Viper. I was made the disciple and Chosen of Grand Elder Duskleaf... my fate changed due to one lucky encounter that became an impetus for a new Path."

A bit of muttering came from below, but Meira didn't shush them. All the enforcers had also been explicitly ordered to never make any aggressive actions unless it was to defend her or others from actual danger.

“One of the things my former master made clear from the beginning was that he didn’t want any slaves. He would still accept people working for him, but never as slaves. That is one of the reasons he freed me... and today, I will do the same. For my entire life, the Willowood has been a clan that has lived in slavery in all but name. No contract may bind you, but your fates are not yours to control. Today, that changes. Call it my final gift to the Willowood tribe that put me into this world. You may not have my lucky encounter or my opportunities... but I can at least give you all a bit of hope for a better future.”

Silence followed as no one did or said anything. Meira looked over at the dragonkin and gave him a nod, the man smiling in return.

The Malefic Dragonkin once more stepped forth, his voice booming. “Details as to how these desired changes of Mistress Dawnleaf will be implemented shall follow in the coming days. Rejoice, for not only was her fate changed due to her fortunate encounter... but so has all of yours.”

The voice of the dragonkin faded as Meira hoped she had done well with her speech. She had stuck mostly to the script, so it would be okay. She also felt incredibly nervous about what was coming next. It was the thing she had both dreaded and looked forward to the most:

Her family reunion.

Duskleaf smiled as he watched Meira perform the speech she had spent so long preparing. She had done well, and even if she was clearly nervous, no one seemed to notice, and those who did wouldn’t bring it up.

Truthfully, he did not have a smidgen of care for this small elven clan. They were one small clan of millions on the Great Planet alone, with truly nothing of interest about them... except for the fact that Meira had come from there. Which was enough to at least make Duskleaf a little interested. Not because he believed the place had something unique from it but because he believed understanding the environment she grew up in could help him understand her better. Natural affinities and such were partly environmentally based, after all.

He also thought that going to her old clan would be healthy for Meira. It would allow her to fully close a chapter of her life and potentially begin a new one. After she had begun all this planning to go visit, her alchemy had suffered as her mind was elsewhere, and it would be good for her to get everything out of her system.

Duskleaf did hope Meira would not feel too responsible for the clan. That could become a chain that weighed her down, after all. While she had promised she didn’t want to actually rule the clan, there was always a chance, however slight. So many young geniuses had been lost to meaningless responsibilities or drowned in useless emotions toward families or clans that had ultimately only served as distractions on their true Path.

He did believe she could go far, if not all the way. Sure, before her latest evolution, her class and profession had been, to put it nicely, garbage. But by the time she reached just B-grade, none of that would really matter anymore. Much less in A-grade or beyond. No, the biggest threat to Meira was getting distracted and no longer feeling the rush of inner motivation she currently had.

Alas, only time would tell if reuniting with her family would become a burden that would drag her down and hurt her Path... or another source of motivation to keep her going. At this point, it could be either, and all Duskleaf could really do was guide her as best he could, whatever happened.

For now, he would just be happy for her and sincerely hoped that this reunion could bring her some genuine happiness. Because a happy alchemist was definitely better than a sad one.

Unless they worked with curses.

Well, that, or certain poisons.

Or some elixirs... and flasks... also rituals... formations too... and, well, a few more things here and there...

Anyway, in conclusion, Duskleaf just preferred that Meira would have a happy reunion.

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

## **Chapter 760: Nevermore (Partly Back): Looking Forward**

The nine elders of the Willowood tribe. They used to look so scary to Meira... even her own grandfather always had a frightening aura about him. One of absolute power that commanded respect. They were all C-grades, and Meira remembered thinking their power and position were utterly unattainable for someone like her.

But now, sitting across a table from these nine, Meira felt no fear or apprehension. She no longer saw nine unapproachable existences. Instead, she saw nine aging men and women trying to suppress their fear of the A-grade administrator and S-grade dragonkin. This was mixed with a good deal of confusion from the two standing behind Meira, who was the only one of them sitting at the table. Their meeting occurred inside

the clan's "main house," where only the elders and high-ranking members usually were allowed.

One of the elders in the room looked more out of place than any other. Meira couldn't really blame him either. Just a few years ago, he had been someone Meira hadn't even dared look at for too long, someone her father whom she feared, feared himself. Her own grandfather.

In truth, Meira didn't really have any animosity toward the old man. She also wasn't sure how many emotions he ever held toward her either. He was over a millennium old, and her father had been one child of hundreds, with Meira herself just one grandchild of what had to be close to a thousand. Her father had been considered decently talented with a chance to reach C-grade, so her grandfather had put more attention on their family, but that didn't mean Meira had ever really talked with him.

The times he had been around hadn't been terrible, and he did seem to care in his own way. If that care came from him not wanting his direct relatives to be embarrassments or if he truly cared for them as people, Meira had no way of telling.

"Being back in the clan feels oddly nostalgic. I hadn't thought I would feel this way," Meira said, not really looking at anyone in particular. "How is everything around here these days?"

Now, Meira did have one genuine problem from here on out: she had run out of cue cards and plans. Sure, she had discussions with different people, but pre-planning conversations were difficult, so Meira could only do her best... and she wasn't sure if she hadn't already messed up from the beginning. In either case, she wanted to keep this short.

"There is truly nothing to complain about, honored Chosen, and the clan has only flourished after being allowed to serve the Order of the Malefic Viper," one of the other elders answered. The head elder and one of the oldest members of the clan. She was a few thousand years old and had reached late-tier C-grade, also making her one of the strongest in the clan.

Meira could only sigh at the woman's answer. It truly felt weird being at the other end of the table, but if she had learned one thing from how Jake dealt with being a Chosen, it was to "cut through all the bullshit" and try to force an honest conversation that wasn't just a dance of platitudes with small hints of truth here and there.

"Head elder, I am not here to do an inspection or to scold anyone. I am here as a former member of the Willowood Clan to deliver a gift to the place that gave birth to me. So, please, do not obscure any truths or hide anything."

The head elder hesitated, and sensing that she still wouldn't get a proper answer, she turned to the one man in the room she hoped could give straight answers.

“Grandfather,” she said, making the man look at her with surprised eyes. “How is the clan doing these days? And please be honest.” This text is hosted at *novel♦fire♦net*

Be it through sheer confidence from having known her before she became Chosen or because the man summoned all the guts he had, her grandfather actually gave an answer, effectively overruling the head elder.

“Things have not changed much since the Order of the Malefic Viper took over. There have been some adaptations that had to be made, but it is very much the same for the average clan member. The only difference is that things have been better in the last year or so... was that due to you?” her grandfather asked.

Meira just nodded. “I couldn’t do much at the time, but others around me did communicate to ones they knew to lay off the clan a bit.”

“Thank you,” her grandfather said as he bowed in his chair. “If I may... your father, is he-“

“Dead,” Meira shook her head. A pang of sadness fell over the old man’s face, but he quickly recovered.

“I see...” he just nodded. Being an old and experienced man, he seemed to understand that pressing the issue would be unwise. Instead, he talked about people Meira would perhaps care about.

“Your mother is... one of the people not doing so well. She has had to pick up many burdens after you two disappeared, and it hasn’t been easy on her. I have done what I can for your siblings, but due to the rules of the Order-“

He stopped abruptly as Meira threw an annoyed side-eye at the S-grade Malefic Dragonkin, making him back off his killing intent. Meira was beginning to understand Jake’s complaints that people from the Order often overdid it.

“Please continue,” she said, her grandfather’s forehead now filled with sweat.

“The... the rules made things difficult for her, but your siblings are doing well... are... are you interested in seeing them?”

“That’s why I came here in person,” Meira smiled. “I won’t be involved in much that happens from here on out. At least not directly.”

Turning to the administrator standing behind her, she spoke: “Would you please take over dealing with the rest of these matters?”

“Certainly, Mistress Dawnleaf,” the administrator smiled as she projected an image into the air. “Now, please keep up, for chances are you nine will be responsible for facilitating much of this transition, so don’t hesitate to ask any questions.”

With that, she prepared to begin the presentation in front of the nine elders. The start was only delayed slightly by Meira getting up and leaving with the dragonkin, the elders all standing up and bowing as she walked out, even her grandfather.

Meira didn’t need to stay for what came next, as she was already roughly aware of the plans. As rare as an occasion like this was, where a member of some low-grade clan rose to a high position and wanted to incorporate their birthplace into the Order, it wasn’t unique. In fact, there were records of this happening thousands of times before... though it very, very rarely involved a Chosen or was this sudden and extreme.

This meant some existing procedures were in place for the Willowood Clan to officially join the Order of the Malefic Viper. That would hopefully make things go smoothly.

It would work the same as any other clan that had been incorporated into the Order of the Malefic Viper. It wasn’t like every single member of every vampire clan had joined the academy or anything like that, after all. It was far more similar to the citizenship of an empire, with every member of the Willowood clan being granted their own identification tokens and an official status within the Order that gave them certain benefits, such as free travel and protection.

Teleportation gates would also be established in the clan, and a grand defensive formation would either be placed down or the area would be included in another nearby formation by expanding that one. The entire area was already covered by the defensive barrier put down by the Order in all areas they controlled, but that one was more for detection than actual defense and would only work against certain attacks, such as celestial objects falling or two S-grades deciding to have a fight in the airspace above the clan.

Meira would not do much more than make the clan official members. She, in truth, had no interest in ruling the clan. Perhaps she was a bit similar to Jake in that vein, but she didn’t believe herself qualified in the slightest and would prefer to focus on alchemy and her own personal progress instead.

In her speech, she had called this a final gift to her clan, and Meira very much meant that. She was no longer a member of the Willowood Clan. That identity had been stripped of her when she first became a slave, and she had no intentions of regaining it. This entire visit was just a sentimental goodbye to a life that had once been. They would all get a chance now to claim a better life for themselves.

All of this naturally only concerned the clan as a whole... her immediate family was an entirely different matter.

Meira was currently headed to the home her mother and siblings currently lived in. She wasn't that surprised when she learned they had been forced to move to a worse area of the clan after her father's death, but when she saw the state of the house, she was still a bit taken aback. It was small and shabby, far worse than the place she had grown up in.

On the way, they didn't see many people as most had hurriedly gone back to their own homes, waiting to hear what would happen to the clan. Those who did still venture out didn't notice Meira due to her bodyguard, who easily hid them. She was grateful for the S-grade's conduct throughout this... he never really talked outside of reminding her of important things, and she didn't even ask for him to hide their presence nor to stay outside and out of sight when they reached the house to not scare those inside too badly.

Due to her interactions with Jake and Teacher, Meira could handle being in the presence of an S-grade without any issues, but her family would naturally not be the same.

Standing before the door to the house, Meira would have thought she would have been nervous... but she was oddly calm. Listening in, she heard the voices of several people inside.

"Are you sure that was Meira? I couldn't see all the way up there... and wasn't it a high elf?" she heard Kythela ask.

"It was," her mother, Deliah, said with certainty. "You also heard what she said. It must be her."

"Do you... Do you think we can meet her?" Tanyl asked nervously. "If it really is big sis..."

Meira, standing outside the door, failed to hold back a smile. Without much hesitation, she raised her hand and knocked on the door.

Everyone inside went silent, and after a moment, her mother went to the door and carefully opened it.

When she did, she froze when she saw Meira... but the twins didn't have the same apprehension.

"Sis!" "Meira!"

Without any second thoughts, they both ran over, but they did manage to get their bearings before they tried to pull her into a hug or anything.



“Hey, Mom,” Meira said with a smile as she turned to the twins and Kythela. “How... how is everyone?”

Yeah... keeping up her façade as a figure of authority wasn’t something she was *that* good at quite yet, especially not in circumstances like this.

“Meira...” her mom stammered as tears welled up in her eyes. “I’m... I’m sorry... I...”

Meira took her hand. “Let’s talk about that stuff later, okay? Today is a good day... and we have plenty of time to get through everything, alright?”

Her mom held back tears as she nodded.

“It’s really you,” Kythela said, staring with eyes as big eyes. “But... how?”

“I did a whole speech up there about how,” Meira shook her head.

“You... you really went through a lot,” Kythela muttered. “Are you, you know, okay now?”

With a nod, Meira smiled. “Yeah.

After a few more assurances and questions, Meira finally went inside and sat down with everyone. They, of course, had more questions, and Meira happily answered while also asking many of her own. She learned how everyone was doing and what her siblings were studying at the academy. It was also only now she finally took proper notice of how haggard her mother really was.

As a healer, she had skills to see people’s conditions, and her mother was in the initial stages of soul exhaustion. It was a rare condition for anyone above D-grade to ever experience, as it came from, quite literally, exhausting yourself so much over a long period of time it led to potentially permanent soul damage. Usually, it was only seen during long wars where the battle never subsided, and soldiers had to keep fighting and never had any time to rest, so to see it in a jeweler...

It definitely made Meira feel less angry at her mom, seeing her willing to sacrifice so much for her siblings.

They kept talking for what felt like hours as perhaps the most pertinent question was finally asked:

“What will happen to us now? What do you want us to do?” Sakala asked.

“Yeah, what will happen?” Tanyl echoed his twin, a hint of excitement in his voice.

Meira just smiled and held their hands. "That's the entire point of this. That's not for me to decide. You can do anything you want; go wherever you want. I am not going to tell you what to do or what you can't do. Those are your choices to make. All I will do is help you be able to choose your own future."

That was the greatest gift Jake had given to Meira: freedom. And now that she was able to grant it, she wanted to give this freedom to her family, too.

If Jake was sincere, he had found the entire Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon a bit too easy overall. The entire structure of the Challenge Dungeon didn't lend well to someone like him who wanted as many hard fights as possible, as it was more a long-term test of skill and ability to improve when circumstances changed.

Since he became severely limited in the number of fights he could do, Jake had leaned into this and begun to practice archery or basic magic daily. He had filled the downtime with something he found productive and had managed to get by the days like that.

However... the Paragon rank proved itself to be different. Jake could no longer enter every fight expecting his win to be a foregone conclusion. This wasn't just because his opponents could now match him in power but due to how the Colosseum operated.

Jake's opponents would study him. They would prepare counters to Jake's usual weapons and practice strategies effective against him. If the fights were done blind, neither Jake nor his opponent knowing anything about each other, Jake would have felt confident in winning pretty much every fight easily. However, if he went in unprepared against a prepared foe, even if they were slightly less powerful than him, he would no longer feel as confident in his victory.

This forced Jake to properly prepare for every single opponent he met in the arena. He did still get some blind fights with the weekly Show Match, but for the Paragon fights, Jake had gone all-in with the studying.

He watched recordings of matches, went and saw live matches, and practiced to fight against every opponent specifically. When applicable, he also prepared unique pieces of equipment or summoned powerful, stable arcane mana constructs he believed would be beneficial.

In his second Paragon match, Jake met a human mage with a trident who did water magic. He primarily used his magic to make what were essentially water cutters while defending himself with large waves to push away anyone approaching him. Jake had watched his opponent's matches and began to notice certain attack patterns he could exploit, and while the water cutter was powerful, it hit a small area that Jake was confident blocking with his katars. Which is exactly what he did, resulting in a relatively quick victory. He still had to go replace his armor after, though.

The third match was against a scalekin archer – something he had been happy to see all the way at Paragon rank. Her primary fighting method relied on her ability to mentally control her arrows and her incredibly high speed due to her powerful wind magic that outmatched even Jake by a significant margin, allowing her to borderline fly around. Jake had been very tempted to pull out his bow for a proper archery duel but had resisted and instead went with another plan. Seeing as she primarily fought by moving about a lot, Jake had set up a trap throughout the long fight where he slowly wrapped incredibly thin stable arcane threads around two of the pillars throughout his chase and then goaded her into trying to dodge that way, resulting in her getting entangled and giving Jake his opening to finish the fight.

Many of the subsequent fights were very similar. Every fight, Jake went in with a strategy, and his own “simple” fighting style proved to be a big advantage here. As Jake primarily fought by countering what his foe did, he was harder to prepare against than most, meaning his preparations often proved more valuable than his opponent’s. You could only study a guy who liked to charge straight at you and try to stab you with katars that much.

Not to say he walked away from these battles unscathed.

Ever since being promoted to Paragon, Jake constantly consumed those recovery potions to not fall behind. Despite winning his fights, he never walked out without severe injuries. At this point, doing so was simply an impossibility, as while he definitely out-countered pretty much every counter... he was still countered. There were still weaknesses they could find and exploit, and when they unleashed their trump cards, not taking at least a minor injury was unavoidable, even for Jake. Seeing this happen did make Jake happy as it helped him clean up flaws in his combat style and hammer out bad habits, though he could have gone without the stab wounds.

Even so, he went through the ranks without missing a single beat or getting behind schedule. Even in the ninth Paragon fight, where he ended up losing an arm, he managed to reattach it after using the recovery potion, bandages, and four days of rest, followed by a Show Match done mostly one-armed.

The tenth fight proved to be easier than the ninth, primarily because it was against a mage – the kind of fighter he tended to counter quite nicely.

With all ten fights down... only a promotion match remained. Once that was won, the announcer would have no choice but to add Champion before any stupid nickname he assigned to Jake, resulting in it definitely sounding more stupid than before.

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## Chapter 761: Nevermore: The Championship Match Begins

One opponent remained between Jake and the title of Champion, but as expected, it wouldn't be easy.

"Your final opponent before you become a Champion is definitely a gatekeeper," the Battlemaster said, looking Jake in the eye. "I can't tell you if she is the strongest opponent you will have faced in the Colosseum so far, but she is definitely the most consistently powerful one."

Jake was a bit confused by the phrasing, as the Battlemaster elaborated.

"Alright, alright. I can't give out information for free, but I will give you one massive warning: prepare a lot if you can. Because she will. If there are any weaknesses in your fighting style or any exploitable patterns, she will find them, and she will make use of them to put you on the back foot. Out of everyone you will ever meet here in the Colosseum, she is probably the one who is the best at analyzing and adapting to certain opponents, so expect to be countered, alright?"

As the man finished explaining, a window popped up in front of Jake. It was not a bonus objective this time, though, but just a message informing him this was the final fight before he would become the Champion.

**A final battle stands between you and the Champion rank.**

**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.**

**This will be the final match to determine if you successfully ascend all the way through the ranks flawlessly.**

**Bonus Objective: Defeat the Valhalian Valkyrie**

Ignoring all the changes in flavor text, this one communicated that all time restraints – outside of the regular one placed by Nevermore – would disappear if he won this match. There would be no "streak" to keep going.

Aside from that, he saw the name of his opponent... and it was one that took him aback. Valhalian Valkyrie. Actually, thinking back, this was probably the first time someone had a name that directly connected them to a major faction.

He wasn't sure what to make of that, and ultimately, it didn't really matter much as he knew what to do.

Jake followed the advice of the Battlemaster, and he started researching. He sent Polly to get whatever she could and even gave her permission to look into things that had a Colosseum Point cost associated with them. Meanwhile, Jake would focus on fight analysis, and luckily, she had a Show Match scheduled the next day.

Watching that show match had been... enlightening. Her name definitely fitted her. The Valhalian Valkyrie wore tight-fitting full-plate armor that looked relatively light yet also durable. Her entire body was covered, with even her face obscured by a helmet that left only a small slit.

She used a short spear for attack and not one, but several different shields throughout the Show Match. From the looks of it, she had a spatial storage of some kind to swap at least shields, so she always had one for every situation. Jake saw four different shields during the show match before she killed the last enemy.

When it came to her fighting style, it was... basic. It was so basic that Jake had a feeling she was aware he was watching the fight, something that was proven to be accurate when someone handed him a note after the fight, asking him if he enjoyed the show.

This made Jake question if he had even seen her use her real fighting style. It didn't help when Polly came back the same day and had widely conflicting reports on what kind of fighter she was. Some claimed she was a mage, some claimed a warrior who focused purely on speed, and there were even those who said she was actually a shapeshifter capable of changing her form and stats.

To summarize, lots of bullshit with no bearing had been spread, likely by the Valkyrie herself. This Jake did find genuinely odd... because Valhal was known as a faction that fought enemies head-on. It was not a faction that acted all shady and used strategies like this. Well... there was one person like that in Valhal, wasn't there? One person that Jake could see be the Promotion Match to become Champion, who was naturally also a god:

Gudrun, the de-facto leader and chief strategist of Valhal. She was the wife of Valdemar, and if the Primordial was the brawn, then she was definitely the brains of the operation.

Even if it wasn't her, it was at least someone related to her. Maybe someone who had studied under her. Either way, Jake decided to go into the fight with the expectation she was Gudrun, and his intuition made him think he was onto something. Again, it ultimately didn't matter who she was outside of Nevermore. In the Colosseum of mortals, she was just a very annoying opponent that he had to overcome one way or another.

Jake's final hope to get at least *some* information on who he assumed to be Gudrun was recordings of her prior fights... but he couldn't find any. Neither could Polly. It was entirely possible they were out there, but Jake would have to pay a ridiculous amount of Colosseum Points to get them, something he simply wasn't willing to do.

Now, he did question how realistic it was that no one had any recordings or even proper information to give out, considering the number of audience members for Paragon fights was well into the hundreds of thousands. Sure, even if they did not have the means to record the fight, it had to be possible to interview viewers and build a solid profile, but nope, it wasn't. So, yeah, there was definitely dungeon-fuckery going on telling him that he either had to pay way too many points to get information or fight her without being able to prepare that much.

So that is what he decided to do. He would enter the fight with very general preparations only. He would lean a bit on what he knew about Valhal and their general methods, most of that stemming from conversations with Carmen. It wasn't much, but it was honest work.

The thought of buying better equipment or getting a cloak or something also crossed his mind, but he decided against it after going shopping. He only really had the option of upgrading his armor or getting a helmet or cloak. There were some okay cloaks, but helmets were out of the question as they all at least partly obscured vision and made moving his head around harder. There was nothing like his usual mask, so that was a bit of a bummer.

A week was both a long and a short time – luckily helped by a fun and easy Show Match in the middle - and soon enough, the day of the Championship Match had arrived. Jake entered the battle with just his usual equipment, a few shields of stable arcane mana, and a quiver filled with stable arcane arrows on his back. Twenty-four of them, to be exact. He had wanted to store the quiver inside his storage ring, but alas, that was not an option because the quiver was not recognized. Well, okay, the quiver itself could be stored, but not all the arrows.

Walking up the steps to the arena, he knew he would be fighting an opponent who had prepared for everything Jake had shown so far... which was why the quiver was so important. Because that represented something he hadn't shown.

If it was dumb luck or genius foresight, no one could truly say – though Jake leaned more toward the latter – but it turned out to be a brilliant idea to keep his archery hidden for a moment just like this one. Seeing as he had walked around with a quiver since he entered the arena, perhaps probably-Gudrun did prepare some countermeasures for archery, but Jake seriously doubted she had prepared for what he had in store.

Everything was set for the fight... including the damn announcer.

“Today, we have gathered for a special occasion. A rare treat for us all! Many matches take place every day, nay, every single hour, but this one is unlike any other. For on this fateful day, we will have a new Champion of the Colosseum! “

Roars and cheers all around as Jake looked at the familiar figure he had seen in the Show Match stand across from him. Not just her Show Match but his own that she had naturally shown up for.

“Do these combatants even need any introduction!? One is a man of many talents, a master with both his katars and feet, who has proven himself an opponent none could stand up to so far, with a list of titles that nearly rivals his true power! The Purple Poker of Death, Doomfoot, Harbinger of Stabs... alas, we have decided to only call him one thing for today: Doombringer!”

Jake was about to curse internally at the stupid names as he heard the last one, and... well... it wasn't *that* bad? Doombringer was kind of okay, right? Yeah, it did have a certain ring to it. Definitely better than Doomfoot.

“But perhaps today, he will meet his match. Because if anyone can find his weakness and avoid their doom, it's gonna be the Valhalian Valkyrie! Akin to the Doombringer, she has reached this stage undefeated, but unlike her opponents, she was in no rush. With steady steps, she won every match with a plan in mind, and today, she surely has entered with a strategy to bring doom upon the Doombringer!”

Not much information was given in the little speech about her, not that Jake had expected that. Everything was pretty much as expected, including the questionable announcer.

“Enough from me! Let the words lie and take up arms... and may the Championship Match begin! Lower the gates!”

Jake watches the gates slowly lowering, not in a hurry. His opponent was much the same as she patiently waited for the bars to be all the way down before she confidently walked forward. Jake saw she carried her short light spear as well as a shield, the same as during her Show Match. Her golden armor was the same, too, with her face nearly entirely covered.

The shield was circular in design and had a curve to it, making it purpose-built to deflect attacks. Especially those of the piercing kind.

“I gotta ask,” Jake said as they reached about the middle of the arena. “Would you happen to be called Gudrun?”

His words did seem to surprise her for a moment based on how she had a slight pause in her step. “Are you trying to come onto me, or are you simply dying to know the name of the one who will defeat you today?”



“Neither,” Jake answered unperturbed. “Just curious if my assumption is correct or not.”

“Will the answer hold any meaning?” she questioned. “Will you surrender if you know the truth?”

Jake shook his head at the dumb question.

“Then let us not concern ourselves with such silly things as names,” the woman who was totally Gudrun said as she lowered her stance. “And as it appears you will not make the first move, allow me the honors.”

With those words, she shot forward spear first. Her stab was clearly a probing one, and Jake easily dodged it and tried to move to her right side – the side without a shield. Jake’s move clearly didn’t surprise her, and she was already turning before Jake had fully dodged her stab, sweeping her spear toward his torso.

Using his one katar, he blocked the spear as he moved in with the other, but Gudrun – yes, he would mentally just refer to her as Gudrun from now on – was fast and jumped back before he had any chance to even get close enough.

Giving chase, Jake tried to close the distance as she kept backing off, making sure to never corner herself. To the average fighter, the fight just looked like Jake had the upper hand as he was always on the offensive, but in reality... nothing was really happening.

At least not on the surface. Progress was happening, quite literally, beneath the surface.

It had taken Jake a few moments to notice, but Gudrun was moving in a very exact pattern, and focusing on her boots, he felt the slight infusion of energy from her feet into the sand. When he noticed it, Jake began to try and counter by purposefully messing with her, but it didn’t seem to have any particular effect. Even when he stomped down to send in a wave of destructive arcane energy, whatever Gudrun had infused was barely affected.

The reason was due to how deep down this odd energy submerged itself before settling on what he assumed to be the bottom of the arena. At least it looked like the bottom through his sphere.

Jake, knowing she was planning something, took advantage as best he could. While she was fast, Jake was still slightly faster. Her analysis of his fighting style was pretty damn spot-on, and between the spear and shield keeping him at bay, Jake had a hard time getting anything done.

But just because he had a hard time didn’t make it impossible. Jake went in for an attack as usual, but the second she tried to stab him, he dismissed his katar and instead

grasped hold of the spear as he infused his gloves with energy. This did not take her totally by surprise, and she was ready for Jake's other katar... but not a kick.

Jake spun his body and used her spear as leverage as he kicked her on the shoulder, his foot exploding with arcane energy and sending her staggering. Still holding onto her spear, Jake tried to yank it to get in another attack, but in a wise move, she let go of her weapon and jumped back.

Before he could even feel happy about disarming Gudrun, she snapped her finger. The spear Jake was still holding onto suddenly began glowing with runes as it exploded, releasing a jolt of golden lightning that slithered across his entire body, both inside and out. The explosion was over in an instant as metallic fragments fell to the ground while Jake clenched his fist, gritting his teeth.

*She got me*, Jake admitted mentally, as he, for the first time since the battle started, had stopped moving for more than a second. The lightning had done a number on him and temporarily stunned him just long enough for Gudrun to pull off whatever the hell she was preparing.

Jake sent a rush of destructive arcane energy through his own body to break the stun faster, but at that point, it was already too late.

Kneeling down, Gudrun slammed two summoned spears into the sand as she yelled loudly.

**“Winds of the Ancestors.”** The most update novels are published on **novel♦fire♦net**

What happened next was something Jake had seen videos on the internet about but never thought he would experience in real life. From below the sand – deep below – a flow of wind appeared. The sand began bubbling all around him, and Jake felt himself get dragged down.

In an instant, Gudrun had turned nearly the entire arena into one big fluidized bed.

With a blast of destructive arcane mana, Jake got himself free as he launched himself toward Gudrun, who instantly switched her usual shield out for a large tower shield with an odd red gem in the center. Still mid-air, Jake blasted arcane mana ahead of him, not just to try and attack, but to stop his momentum... and just in time.

The entire shield exploded in golden light the very next second, launching Jake back all the way to the other of the arena, luckily unharmed.

Jake landed near his own entrance area, outside the range of the large formation Gudrun had placed down. Looking up, he saw Gudrun standing in the middle of the formation, smiling as a mound was slowly rising. Raising her arms, javelins with golden

lightning surrounding them appeared embedded in the ground all around them as she reached out to grab one.

The fight had barely started, and Jake found himself standing before a small hill of fluidized sand with a Valkyrie ready to throw spears standing atop it, both of them fully aware of her advantage.

She had the high ground.

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## Webtoon Is Out!

Hello there, ladies and gentlemen, the genderless, and eldritch beings who are yet undecided.

Coming in today with a bit of an announcement. My Webtoon has officially been released on Webtoon.com!

Link: **Webtoon.com**

Very exciting day all around, despite my morning being screwed up by the power company deciding to cut a cable, forcing me to work on my laptop for a few hours while trying to restore a Word file. But enough about that, Primal Hunter webtoon hype! Official source is [novel★fire★net](#)

The webtoon does have some story and artistic changes (Jake is definitely less in shape, and wearing glasses was not in the original version), but so far, the response seems pretty good. At least, I hope people like it, as people not liking stuff related to your story sucks. Even if I was not that involved in the creative process, as you people already keep me busy posting chapters all the time, I, needless to say, still want it to do well.

This leads me to the utterly shameless part of this announcement/marketing-like post. I implore you, my loyal readers, to go forth to Webtoon.com, click on the novel, and give it a read. Even if you don't feel like reading it or are critical of the adaptation, at least help your good friend Zogarth out and give the story a follow and a rating. Also, on a totally unrelated note, did you know even 9-stars is considered low on Webtoon? Crazy, right, that you need 10-star ratings to not be considered bad. It would really suck if Webtoon decided the webtoon is bad, as that would mean no more seasons and less

money/exposure for me. I like both those things. So getting 10-star ratings would be really nice. Where was I again?

Oh yeah, and if you wonderful people would also leave some comments shamelessly shilling the fact there is also a book version of the comic, I would find that entirely acceptable. Encouraged, even.

Also, I may as well put this here and do a double-whammy announcement. I am taking off the 25th and 26th of December as well as Jan 1st. So, yeah, there will be a few chapters in between Christmas and New Year for all you greedy bastards. That's three days I could have totally taken off, so view that as a nice little Christmas present! Only rude people don't return gifts, and the only thing I want this year is for the webtoon to do well. Anyway, that's all for today.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and blessed (True Blessing) Promote-My-Webtoon Day.

- Zogarth

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## Chapter 762: Nevermore: Warrior of Valhal

Jake seriously questioned the validity of what Gudrun had just done. No, not how the magic worked or if the strategy was good, but how the hell she had even pulled it off. The massive sand mound she had summoned had to cost a shitload of mana, and what's more, the sand was still running down its sides like water, making it borderline impossible to climb. That had to have a constant mana upkeep, right?

Yet, upon scanning her, it looked like she had barely touched her own mana pool.

Looking at the mound through his sphere, he soon spotted how it worked. Within the sand were two spears she had stabbed into it, both pumping out mana and feeding the entire formation. Rather than supplying anything herself, she instead used them as catalysts and batteries.

That is when Jake came up with a theory...

The announcer said that Gudrun did not participate in these matches very often but had taken her time, yet he also knew that she did a Show Match every single week. This begged the question... what was she using all the Colosseum Points she earned for?

Unlike Jake, these natives of the Challenge Dungeon only had one use for their points, and that was to buy equipment for their fights.

So what if Gudrun saved up for long periods in preparation for these fights and bought an arsenal of weapons and tools to win? Ones prepared explicitly for every opponent she met in the Paragon rank? If that was the case, Jake could see how she had managed to pull it off. The magical items one could buy did hold much inherent mana, and if she had a way to tap into that... yeah, that would explain a lot. The fact she had just exploded her shield and even that spear he had grabbed, along with all the javelins now at her feet, supported this theory.

To summarize, Gudrun was a fucking pay-to-win character. She was the type to just spend exorbitant amounts of Colosseum Points on every fight to make sure she would come out victorious.

Returning his attention to the fight, Jake didn't make any immediate moves. Looking at the flowing mound, he was pretty damn sure he had no way to ever climb that. Due to the sand constantly being replaced, stabilizing it using his arcane mana to climb up was out of the question, and while he could try to use one of the pillars to jump, that would put him in quite a perilous situation while in mid-air. Also, if he didn't hit the mound, he would be fucked.

He also had to consider that Gudrun likely had countermeasures prepared for every obvious solution he could think of on the fly. For now, she did seem happy with not making any moves as she just stood there with a javelin in hand, staring down at Jake. She probably knew that he would dodge anything she could throw at him... at least for now.

Because time was on her side.

The formation was subtly expanding below the sand, growing a few centimeters every second. Within two minutes, the entire arena would be one big fluidized bed, with the only safe spot on top of the mound. He did consider if just waiting out the formation to run out of power was an option, but by the time those two spears were out of mana, the entire arena would already have been fully covered for several minutes.

As Jake was acknowledging her strategy, Gudrun finally made a move to attack. Probably to distract him from trying to think up any countermeasures of his own, but also because her energy infusion into all the javelins was complete. Throwing one of her weapons, Jake jumped out of the way pretty easily as the javelin embedded itself in the ground before exploding with golden light, sending out more of her golden lightning and leaving an area of weird, electrified sand.

*She is shrinking my area of movement even further.*

It wasn't even close to hitting him, but it still kept him on his toes as she threw another, clearly to just buy time for the arena to shrink further as more areas of golden lightning appeared around him. Jake kept dodging a bit longer before he made a big leap to get some distance.

*I guess it's about time*, Jake thought. In all honesty... he had hoped not to have to do this before becoming the Champion, but alas, Gudrun had indeed near-flawlessly countered Jake's usual fighting style.

Holding out his hand, a bow appeared. His action seemingly took Gudrun by surprise as she paused her attack and yelled down from her sand mound.

"I will admit, I thought for a good while that quiver was just for show. Turns out you do have a bow, huh?" Gudrun said, still full of confidence. "I would very much like to learn if you actually know how to use that thing."

Jake just smiled. She'd asked for it. "Alright then."

With one swift movement, he pulled out an arrow and nocked it.

Now... going back a bit, Jake had considered how to improve his archery for a good while. At first, he had just gone back to the basics. He had focused on every subtle movement that came with drawing the string, activating the right muscles, and naturally aiming. It was the foundation of all archery, after all, and someplace Jake was already pretty confident due to his pre-system experience with a bow.

Shooting a bow was simple on the surface but highly complex when you really dove into it. A slight misplacement of a finger or the most minor twist could make an arrow entirely miss, especially for someone like Jake, who didn't use a modern compound bow.

Draw strength was also not simply "pull as hard as you can and let go when you can't pull the string back any longer." Sure, that would allow you to shoot a pretty powerful arrow, but it was not even necessarily the most powerful arrow one could shoot and definitely not the most accurate. There was also the problem of consistency when shooting like that.

Arrows still had a drop-off while in flight, even if it was incredibly minor over short distances. Usually, it wasn't something Jake had to worry about; however, this concept was reintroduced with full force when one began to use curved arrows. Based on how much power one put in, the arrow would curve more or less than one desired, and hitting the same target consistently quickly got hard.

This is where Jake's unique talents came in. Perception was a stat that not only helped you understand your surroundings better but even your own body. And Jake had a lot of Perception.

Even with reduced stats, Jake could consistently hit the same exact spot dozens of times in a row, even when curving arrows. In other words, his accuracy was utterly ridiculous due to his high Perception and ability to manipulate his own body to a near-perfect level.

When it came to pure power, there also wasn't much Jake could really improve on. He improved some small subtleties here and there and just optimized the process, but it was nothing really groundbreaking. At least not when it came to the purely physical aspect of drawing the bow.

So... Jake began to focus on one thing, and one thing only:

Speed.

Overwhelming speed.

Every single time Jake drew the bow, arcane mana surged into its body and the string. The second he released, so did he activate this energy, and for the briefest moment, he turned the bow and string slightly more rigid than before, which resulted in him effectively increasing the bow's draw strength.

This did result in reduced accuracy... that instantly got nullified by the next aspect he had infused. Even before he entered the Challenge Dungeon, Jake had infused plenty of mana into every single arrow he released, but he had been slacking when it came to infusing his Willpower properly.

Whenever Jake released arcane bolts, he could control them all throughout their flight. This was mainly because they were so much slower than arrows, so one would think that Jake making the arrows fly even faster would make controlling arrows in flight even harder.

And it did.

Which was why Jake didn't try to control them mid-flight quite yet. Instead, he controlled their flight before he even released the arrow. Making curved arrows was already one aspect of doing this, but he wanted to introduce more nuance and make the flight path even more unpredictable.

Before his practice, he could not make an arrow take a sudden turn. It always had to have a semi-consistent curve to its flight, like if one threw a ball with a spin. Jake's new way would be more equivalent to throwing a ball with a spin that also had a small bomb with a timer attached to it that would go off at a certain time to affect the flight path further.



As a level 0 G-grade with shitty stats, all these improvements couldn't show their full power yet. Ultimately, the Challenge Dungeon was just a minor event, and all upgrades he aimed for were with his true level and future scaling in mind.

Not to say that Jake's level 0 archery was something Gudrun could easily handle.

Arcane energy surged through Jake's body and weapon as he loosed the first arrow. Gudrun, who had already taken out a shield looked smug... right up to the moment the arrow curved around her shield and hit her in the shoulder.

Taken aback, she responded quickly as she summoned a second shield, but before the second one had even fully appeared, a second arrow came from the other side, hitting her in her other shoulder. Each arrow had pierced through her golden armor and penetrated several centimeters into her flesh, making movement harder.

Not helped by Jake smirking as he sent a mental command.

Both arrows exploded while still embedded in her shoulders, sending blood and broken armor flying. Gudrun's shields momentarily faltered as an arrow struck her in the stomach, making her tumble back. She barely managed to get out of the way of the fourth arrow while the fifth hit her in her thigh.

One of the problems with her strategy was that the top of the mound didn't really have any space to dodge. Her own plan had turned on her in an instant, as Gudrun had made one major miscalculation... Jake was far superior in ranged combat compared to her.

Gudrun also clearly realized this as she rapidly retreated down the other side of the mound as the formation stopped working. In an instant, the sand turned from fluid to solid, allowing her to land safely as she retreated behind one of the pillars, with shields still held up despite her injuries.

Jake wanted to explode the two arrows he had embedded in Gudrun but found himself unable to. She had done something to block it, Jake reckoned, though he wasn't sure how she did it. It felt like he just couldn't "find" his own arrows somehow, despite clearly seeing them still sticking out of her through his sphere.

Several more arrows flew after Gudrun as she retreated, but she managed to block all of them except one that flew by and left a cut on her already exposed forearm. She got behind one of the pillars, and right as she breathed a sigh of relief, an arrow descended from right above her. Jake had aimed for her skull, but in the final moment, she managed to tilt her head, making the arrow side by her helmet and pierce into her left collarbone.

The sheer impact of the arrow forced her down on her knees. The follow-up arrow she still managed to block, if barely. Jake had expected her to raise her shield in time, so he

made it explode right in front of her, making the explosion hit her shield and knock her back into the pillar, worsening all her existing wounds.

No more arrows came immediately after that, and the reason for that was quite obvious... Jake only had five left. This was one of the clear downsides of his current level 0 stats. This text is hosted at ***novel★fire★net***

Summoning new arrows also wasn't an option either. Jake had spent more than fifty mana on every single one of the arrows and had spent a few minutes on each. He had effectively created twenty-four small Protean Arrows made purely of stable arcane mana.

Jake put his bow away and charged forward. Gudrun, hiding behind a pillar, threw what looked like a golden ball over her shoulder toward him, and Jake instinctively looked at it, trying to find out what it was... right as it exploded in a flash of white light. Jake was instantly blinded and felt an odd sense of vertigo as his balance got all out of whack for a fraction of a second.

Immediately, Gudrun stepped out from behind the pillar and threw one of her remaining javelins. Jake, thinking quick, did not dodge but allowed himself to be struck in the shoulder as he reached for his eyes. Gudrun, seemingly not having realized the full extent of Jake's Perception skills and feeling empowered from seeing Jake failing to dodge her javelin, charged toward him with a newly summoned spear, aiming for his heart.

Her body was not in good shape, but she still pushed through, trying to take advantage of what may be her last opening. She believed Jake was blind and unable to dodge in time... so when he avoided her spear at the very last second and stabbed her in the chest with a katar, her eyes opened wide.

Jake held nothing back as the weapon exploded with arcane destruction, launching Gudrun across the arena, splurts of blood dripping in her wake.

Hitting the sand, Gudrun somehow managed to land on her feet, but she quickly fell to her knees as she gritted her teeth before spitting out a mouthful of blood and yelling.

### **“Ancestral Offering.”**

Jake had been certain the fight was over after he landed that hit... but she had one more card up her sleeve. Golden light enveloped her entire body as her armor began to disintegrate. The spears still below the sand that had been used to power the formation also ran out of energy, and even all the javelins she didn't have time to throw before lost their golden luster.

When the golden energy faded, Gudrun was left in only linen clothes with nothing but a spear and shield remaining. Even the storage ring on her finger had reappeared,

signaling it was no longer an item. Through sacrificing her equipment, she had managed to heal herself nearly fully.

Jake was still blinded and had only seen everything through his sphere. He was pretty sure his eyes would take at least a minute or two more to fully heal, and Gudrun clearly knew that as she charged and tried to take advantage.

But... it wasn't really an advantage. Not against Jake.

Gudrun was fast, but she was not the fastest. She was strong but not the strongest. Her magic was powerful, but not the most powerful. The only place where she was truly at the peak was her equipment and her ability to use this equipment. She was just considered okay in every other area, meaning as soon as Jake overcame her strategies... she had no way of winning.

Because Jake was faster, stronger, and had more powerful magic. Moreover, he was the pinnacle in the entire arena when it came to dodging attacks. Even if Gudrun had managed to get herself back in temporary fighting condition, she was in no position to win.

Even if Jake was also injured, he had the upper hand. Over the next minute, Jake slowly overpowered Gudrun in a melee brawl, and even if he did take a few more wounds himself, he gave out far more than he got.

When his eyesight returned, the final nail was in the coffin. With a Fear Gaze, he managed to land a nasty stab in her stomach that easily penetrated through her clothes, which barely offered any defenses.

Gudrun, stumbling back, fell to her knees. She tried to get up, but her knee buckled under her own weight, making her unable to stand. She looked up at him with resolute eyes as Jake had stopped, now certain the fight was over.

"Heh," she smiled with bloody teeth. "Good fight. Now finish it. I am a warrior of Valhal... so at least honor me with a warrior's death."

Gudrun said this while looking him straight in the eye. There were no more strategies or attempts of deceit. Despite how she thought, Jake firmly knew she wouldn't use the name of Valhal like that or the sense of honor of another warrior. Because, in the end, she was indeed a warrior of Valhal... and from the beginning, he had known this fight would never end in her surrender.

Jake met her gaze and nodded, respecting her wishes. "Thanks for the fight."

Without any hesitation, he stabbed Gudrun in the heart, and with a smile still on her face, she fell forward onto the sand, ending the fight.

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## Chapter 763: Nevermore: Gauntlet of the Grand Champion

Jake walked with steady steps out of the large arena, which was quite frankly a mess by now. Gudrun's formation had screwed it up a lot, and Jake's subsequent barrage of exploding arcane arrows certainly hadn't helped. Javelins were also lying haphazardly everywhere, and he did not envy whatever clean-up crew was in charge of putting the arena back to how it was.

As he walked out, the announcer naturally also did his thing.

"We have a winner! No, not just a winner, but a new Champion! What are the true limits of the Doombringer? Despite all of the Valkyrie's preparations and plans, she could not have predicted the Doombringer would bring out a bow and wield it with such overwhelming power!"

Jake still found the commentary horrible, even after he at least wasn't called the Purple Doom Poker or whatever bloody name the announcer decided on.

When it came to Gudrun's body, two people from the Colosseum had already walked out to retrieve it. Jake had given her a final look before he walked down toward the small tunnel leading down to the training area once again. While Jake was not that damaged, he still wasn't in the greatest of shapes, and not just because of what Gudrun had done to him.

Jake was, for all intents and purposes, too powerful for his own body. The power of his arcane energies was more than he could handle, even if he controlled it as best he could. This was one of the downsides of training his archery with his C-grade body in mind. With Arcane Supremacy, he was confident in handling it when he infused his body with a rush of arcane energy with every shot, but without it, he would leave minor damage every time.

Didn't help that Gudrun had fried him with that weird golden lightning a few times, either. She had definitely been a worthy fight before one would get promoted to the "final" rank of the Colosseum. If one had any major flaws, it would be game over. Without having his archery, Jake would have likely lost, as he honestly still wasn't sure how he would have overcome that sand mound with only his katars.

Of course, he would only lose a life and could try the fight again, this time knowing what she had in mind. At least, he assumed that is how it worked. He didn't fully know, as he hadn't died yet, after all.

"Go rest, Champion Doombringer. Walk away today, a victor of the Arena of Mortals. A fighter who has reached the apex. Of course, should you return to climb the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion, we would all be more than pleased!"

And there it was.

Jake had kind of beaten the Colosseum of Mortals now, but there was still one final optional challenge to go. Opening the system message he had just gotten confirmed he had indeed completed it.

**Congratulations! You are now a Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing with the other Champions as a titan at the apex.**

**The main objective of the Challenge Dungeon has now been completed. You are free to leave the Colosseum of Mortals for a final evaluation unless you want to attempt the bonus objective. Nevermore Attendee shall get a bonus for every unspent life remaining. This bonus will be forfeited should the Nevermore Attendee attempt the bonus objective.**

**So, are you truly satisfied to be one of eight Champions? Or do you wish to truly prove yourself the true apex of the Colosseum? To stand where barely anyone else has ever stood?**

**To become the Grand Champion.**

**As a Champion, you are allowed to challenge other Champions. Be warned that should you challenge any Champions, you are required to challenge all of them, and there can, at maximum, be one month between each challenge issued.**

**For becoming the Champion without losing a single time or losing any lives, you are rewarded an extra 500,000 Colosseum Points. Final rewards upon Challenge Dungeon completion have increased.**

**Bonus objective gained: Defeat the other Champions to become the Grand Champion.**

**Current rank: Champion (0/7)**

**Colosseum Points: 1,883,010**

**Lives remaining: 10**

Reading the message, Jake could only nod. While he couldn't say everything was as expected, he wasn't entirely taken by surprise. There were a few things that sprung to mind, though. One was naturally his massive amount of Colosseum Points. Getting half a million points for becoming a Champion was already massive, but the points he had gotten during the Paragon rank were nothing to scoff at either.

The first victory had awarded him 15,000 points, the second 20,000, third 25,000, and so on and so forth, with the final one rewarding a whopping 60,000. The Show Matches had kept giving 30,000 for every victory throughout the Paragon rank, but this still meant Jake had gained 375,000 and 300,000 points, respectively, from these two.

When it came to spending points, he had used a bit over a thousand, pretty much all of it on those recovery potions.

The second thing with the system message that stood out was what was missing. First of all, there were no mentions of Show Matches anywhere, making him wonder if those were unavailable now, and secondly, there was nothing about only being able to challenge other Champions once a week, just that if he did decide to go for the Grand Champion rank, he had to challenge at least one every month.

Also, the bonus objective revealed to him there were seven other Champions besides himself. So, seven more fights to go...

Jake did wonder if there was more after Grand Champion or if the Challenge Dungeon would just end. Alas, he still had those seven to beat before he had a chance to find out, and as he was way too curious about who exactly he would be fighting, he went straight to the Battlemaster, even if his body was hurting pretty badly.

Yeah, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion he would give it a shot. Sure, he would apparently lose some bonuses if he lost any lives, but Jake didn't really care much about that.

The Battlemaster was already waiting for Jake at his usual spot, standing with his arms crossed.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the newest Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals," the Battlemaster said with a genuine smile. "I will admit I was a little surprised when you pulled out that bow of yours. Gudrun sure was, too. Say, do you also know how to summon a horde of monsters, or maybe you can transform into some powerful beast? At this point, I pretty much expect you to have more hidden cards up your sleeve."

"No, but I can create a clone of myself made up entirely of energy from an ancient curse stolen from a forgotten land of vampires, the clone itself being based on a simulation of myself from a fake universe," Jake answered casually.

“Ah, yeah, I figured,” the Battlemaster smiled, shaking his head. “Anyway, congratulations are in order. You’ve beaten the Colosseum of Mortals... unless you want to keep going?”

“Enlighten me what that would involve,” Jake smiled in return. Usually, the guy had some information the system message didn’t, so it was definitely worth asking.

“It’s called the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion, and it’s quite the ordeal to undertake... in fact, only a single person in this generation has completed it,” the Battlemaster answered. “But don’t think about that too much quite yet. You don’t even know who you’ll have to fight yet if you do decide to attempt the Gauntlet!”

“Fair enough,” Jake shrugged, now definitely sure there was at least one final boss of sorts if he became a Grand Champion. “So... who will I be fighting if I decide to go for it?” This content belongs to *novel✕fire✕net*

“That one is easy to answer; it isn’t like the Champions aren’t famous, to begin with. It’s honestly weird you don’t already know,” the Battlemaster said as he nevertheless produced a list of names.

Jake wanted to curse the man, as he fully agreed it was incredibly stupid that he somehow couldn’t figure out who the Champions were. It was only due to pure dungeon-fuckery, and before getting promoted, he only knew of Owen’s dad.

Taking the list of names from the Battlemaster, Jake quickly skimmed over the titles of the seven other Champions.

- Lightning Monarch
- Warmaster
- Phoenix Queen
- Lord of the Hunt
- Archmage
- Mistress of Shadows
- Necromancer

So, one by one, starting with the Lord of the Hunt, because who the hell was that asshole to take a title Jake actually liked? His initial assessment was that this was some kind of archer like him, but he would naturally do some research to figure out if that was the case. Anyway, moving on from this Lord of the Hunt, Jake actually started at the top.



Lighting Monarch was Owen's dad, Jake was pretty sure. A lightning swordsman.

Warmaster was probably some kind of warrior.

Phoenix Queen was interesting. Maybe a beastkin of some kind? It couldn't be a beast.

Archmage was truly a name full of mystery, and after much deliberation, Jake guessed it was a mage of some kind.

Mistress of Shadows was probably that Dark Elf Jake had seen a good while ago. He had faintly felt a familiar aura from her back then, but he would have to confirm if she was Umbra, as he suspected.

Necromancer was also a super boring name, but it did kind of excite him. He had never really fought a necromancer, had he? How would a level 0 necromancer even work? Could he summon weak-ass skeletons or something? Definitely something to check out.

After he had read the list, Jake decided to keep trying to get some more information out of the Battlemaster. "I see there is quite the mix of Champions... how come none of them have tried this Grand Champion Gauntlet?"

"Think about it for a second. All seven current Champions are incredibly powerful in their own right, but they are not equally powerful in every field. The Mistress of Shadows, as an example, is a rogue using shadow magic – hence the name – and against any of the mages, she will have a clear advantage. However, against any of the warriors or the hunter, she will find herself struggling. And before you ask, the reason the rogue doesn't just kill the mages and stop is that if one begins the challenge to become Grand Champion, they are required to challenge *all* of the other champions, with at most a month between each challenge," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake already knew the last part from the system message he had gotten earlier, but it explained well why someone like the Mistress of Shadows had just beaten the mages and then stopped. Well, if she had done that, then one of the others, likely a warrior, would have taken her down in turn, with a mage then killing the warrior. No, anyone who wanted to become Grand Champion had to be so overwhelmingly powerful that they were able to beat even people he or she was terrible against.

"To clarify, does that mean if I want to try this Gauntlet, I could technically challenge a Champion every single day and be done in a week?" Jake questioned further.

"Technically speaking, you could, but do note the wording. You can challenge another Champion at any time, but that does not mean they will fight immediately. Every time you issue a challenge, the other Champion is more or less forced to accept, but the fight just has to be scheduled within thirty days of the issue being challenged, the exact time at the sole discretion of the challenged party," the Battlemaster continued explaining.

“So, if all of the other Champions decide they want as much preparation time as possible, the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion can take up to seven months.”

“That... sucks,” Jake muttered.

“I doubt it would take that long. All the time before a fight is for the other Champions to prepare, and more often than not, they don’t make more preparations than are needed. Moreover, you can also use this time to prepare against them, so if they feel like the time serves you better than them, they may want to schedule the fight as soon as possible to catch you off guard,” the Battlemaster pointed out. “In your case specifically, as you have just become a Champion, they will likely accept the fight pretty fast to not give you much time to prepare either. However, should you wait too long to begin the Gauntlet for too long, they will likely want more time, as they assume you spent this waiting period preparing.”

“Are there any of the other Champions who are considering trying the Gauntlet?”

“Wouldn’t tell you even if I knew, but I can disclose that all of the current Champions have made plans to face each other. Not necessarily because they want to try and become a Grand Champion, but in case one of the others gives it a shot,” the man shook his head. “Anyway, what will it be? Based on how many questions you are asking, I get the feeling you are keen on attempting the Gauntlet?”

“Can’t say I ain’t,” Jake grinned.

“I kind of figured,” the Battlemaster also smiled. “Do note that you can begin the Gauntlet at any time by challenging any of the other Champions, so if you want to make some preparations and go heal up, you have plenty of time to do that.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, I definitely need a good rest before I go fighting any Champions.”

“Definitely recommended. Now, one final warning. Should you begin the Gauntlet, be aware that you only have one shot. Should you ever lose to any of the other Champions, you cannot retry after making more preparations, and you will lose your Champion rank for at least five years. After that, you can reattempt the Gauntlet, but the next lockout will be even longer.”

“Can’t say I am surprised that’s a rule,” Jake shrugged, assuming it didn’t really impact him much due to his multiple lives. If he did lose, he doubted it would count as a loss in the storyline of the Colosseum. Well, alright, it could impact him if he tried to game the system. “I assume that rule is there, so you can’t just surrender any time you think you will lose and then re-challenge again when you feel like you have properly prepared?”

“Something like that,” the Battlemaster semi-confirmed. “Now, you don’t look too good, so go rest up already and come back here once you are back in top form. Well, unless you really want to rush into a fight immediately. I am sure that should you challenge

another Champion now, they would accept in a heartbeat and whoop your injured ass with ease.”

“Or I could cause a massive upset,” Jake grinned. “But, yeah, I should head off. Ah, but one last thing... can I still do Show Matches?”

“Nope,” the Battlemaster shook his head. “And you won’t earn any Colosseum Points from beating the other Champions either, but only get a reward once you either complete or give up on the Gauntlet. The more you beat, the more points you will get.”

“I see, I see,” Jake nodded. That was good to know. “Well then, I’ll be off. So you in a few days once my insides don’t hurt anymore.”

“Fighting with hurting insides does tend to be ill-advised,” the man said. “And, once again... congratulations, Champion.”

Jake smiled as he walked away and back toward his house, where he had already pre-arranged to meet up with Owen and Polly. Now, he just had to actually make it back there... because the second he got close to the exit of the Colosseum, he saw the area swarmed with people, and from a distance, he heard the chants of the crowd... the horrific chants.

“Doomfoot! Doomfoot! Doomfoot!”

Perhaps the true challenge of the Colosseum was not the fighters along the way... but the psychological damage caused by the announcer and audience.

*Just focus on the seven people who checked you out on your way out of the Colosseum, Jake...*

By now, he truly regretted not just buying a damn cloak as he walked out of the only exit that wasn’t a massive detour, bracing himself to face the crowd.

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## **Chapter 764: Nevermore: Seven Champions & Side Quests**

Jake spent far longer than he would have liked to get home. How in the hell did an entire crowd even manage to gather outside the arena in the relatively short time spent

just talking to the Battlemaster? He had no idea, but they somehow had. There were thousands upon thousands of spectators who wanted to see the new Champion and to celebrate him.

While he had wanted to avoid them entirely, Jake somehow ended up spending nearly an hour placating the crowd before using his injuries as an excuse to head back to the small townhouse. Speaking of the townhouse, Jake had been offered other accommodations from the time he hit Warlord, but he really didn't want to move around anymore. He only ever slept or sat in meditation within the townhouse anyway, so why would he need a fancier temporary home?

At least his fans were nice enough to not follow him home, and when he got there, he saw Polly and Owen both already inside, having even set up the table with some snacks.

Jake, already feeling a bit better just from his recovery potion doing work, headed inside and went to the small living room where the two of them were sitting patiently chatting among themselves. They quickly went silent when they heard Jake, and both greeted him the second he walked into the room.

"You made it all the way..." Owen said with a smile, but he clearly hid some apprehension.

"It's amazing!" Polly said, with a far more purely positive attitude. "I must say, I was fearful when I saw the Valkyrie summon that giant sand hill, something I honestly think was cheating as she clearly couldn't even fully control or supply the spell with enough mana by herself, but then you pulled out that bow of yours! Your archery training clearly paid off amazingly well."

"I don't think Jake just trained archery during the Colosseum," Owen added. "You were already an expert before you came here, right?"

While "expert" was a bit of a loaded word, Jake definitely was one by level 0 standards even before arriving at the Colosseum of Mortals. Probably mid-tier C-grade standards, too, but due to the high level of his melee skills, Jake hadn't been super confident calling himself an expert archer before. Now, though? Now, he thought he had earned that title, even in the outside world.

"I was originally an archer, yes. In fact, my katars are usually my secondary weapon I switch to when using ranged attacks isn't viable or optimal," Jake responded truthfully. "And, not gonna lie, I was just waiting for someone to force me to pull out my bow. The Valhalian Valkyrie definitely warranted it."

"I will admit, you never struck me as the highly strategic kind, but to keep your best weapon for so long was damn impressive," Owen smiled, but that smile quickly faded. "I also get the feeling that you aren't done with the Colosseum yet... are you?"

“What do you mean?” Polly asked, confused. “He is the Champion already! What more is there to do?”

“The Gauntlet of the Grand Champion,” Owen said in a serious tone. “A... difficult challenge, to say the least. One that very few have ever attempted, much less completed. Jake... by now, I guess you already figured out the Lightning Monarch is my father?”

Jake just nodded, reading the atmosphere enough to know that joking with Owen right now wouldn't land well.

“Remember when I said my father used to teach me a bit? Yeah, that happened because he tried the Gauntlet and failed, making him go back to a quiet life for a few years before returning here. And he didn't just leave because of the Colosseum rules, but to recover. He spent nearly a year recovering before he could fight again.”

Polly looked at Owen with sad eyes as she put a hand on his shoulder to comfort him. Owen looked at her with grateful eyes as he continued.

“And now he wants to try again. He is training to try again, but I fear things won't end as well the second time around. I know I have no right to ask you this... but please don't kill him if you fight him. Yet, at the same time, don't let him off easy. Make him never return to the Colosseum again, but return home to my mother and siblings. Return to the damn home he has abandoned.”

Owen looked visibly angry as he said the last part. Jake finally began to get a proper understanding of Owen ... he was there to beat his father or at least somehow convince him to go home. Follow current novels on novel•

Jake's pet theory was that Owen was meant to be some kind of rival to the regular Nevermore Attendees, while he served more as a guide and an introduction to different aspects of the Colosseum for those on the more powerful side while also creating a more personal connection to at least one of the Champions.

After being silent for a few moments, Jake nodded. “Alright, I will do my best, but no guarantees. As a Champion, he is no doubt powerful in his own right, and I can't say for sure if I will have any leeway to hold back or even have a convincing enough victory.”

“That's all I can ask,” Owen said with gratitude. “I will, of course, help you with any preparations. Back during his recovery, he taught me the same techniques and concepts. I know his strengths and his weaknesses.”

Jake hid a smile as he gave the young man a nod. He wasn't going to reject intel on any of the Champions if it came to him.

The next to speak was Polly.

Polly didn't really fit into any solid mold when it came to determining her role within the Challenge Dungeon, though she had proven to be incredibly effective at gathering information despite not really having any rank to speak of. Somehow, she had a lot of contacts to pull on, and people were more than happy to discuss with her, even those at a higher rank. Of course, she still had her limits, and the information brokers still required payment before offering any help whatsoever, but Polly even got cheaper rates than Jake himself. So, even if she didn't fit any mold, she was definitely helpful.

Ah, but Jake did learn she had one more "function," so to say. One Jake probably should have seen coming, one that also helped explain why it was so easy for her to gather information.

"The Archmage... he never told me he was actually a Champion, but... that's my teacher..." Polly said with a mix of nervousness and anger. "I just learned it today... and I didn't know you wanted to do this Gauntlet thing, so I didn't want to share it needlessly to ruin the mood, but now..."

"You also want me to not kill him if we ever meet?" Jake asked though he felt a bit unsure about his question as Polly seemed to have an oddly angry look on her face.

Polly just sneered before gathering herself. "You got an actual chance to win, right?"

"Duh," Jake said, not really honoring the question with a proper answer.

"If you can, please kill that asshole," Polly said, spitting venom.

"Wait, what?" Jake asked, confused. Owen also looked taken back. "I thought you liked your master?"

"I tolerated him... I had to. I was his student, and he is the chief mage in the kingdom I come from. When I was fifteen, there was this big evaluation event put on by the mage's guild, and when I tested to have good affinities and talents for magic, the asshole practically kidnapped me. My parents protested but were told that should they cause issues, they would be arrested as traitors to the crown, with my new teacher also telling me that should I be a bad student, my parents would pay the price," Polly said, giving exposition about her backstory.

It was a bit on the cliché end, and Jake seriously questioned any recruitment tactic that required you to first piss off whoever you trained to shoot fireballs, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he just nodded. "He does sound like a royal asshole, so should I get the chance, sure. I won't hold back."

"Thank you," Polly said, tears welling up in her eyes. Jake gave Owen a quick glance, the guy picking up on it as he took her hand. She grasped it, and the two of them sat there for a while as Jake looked at the cookie bowl on the table.

*It would definitely be inappropriate to take one, right?*

After a few minutes and Jake expertly sneaking a cookie, the two of them calmed down, and Polly also swore she would tell him everything she knew about the Archmage. She even offered to act as a double agent by going to the Archmage and giving bad information. Jake rejected that one, as that would just put her in needless danger. Even if he knew Owen and Polly were just natives in a Challenge Dungeon, he treated them as normal people.

Also, by now, he was kind of interested in whether the two of them would finally get together officially, considering they definitely had a thing for each other.

Anyway, from that day onward, the research into the seven Champions began. Polly naturally knew about the Archmage and Owen about the Lightning Monarch, but for the other five, he would have to gather intel from other sources. Well, as long as he confirmed that the Mistress of Shadows was indeed Umbra, it was limited how much Jake had to research on her, as he had a strong feeling no information he could get would be more useful than what he already knew.

When it came to the last four, Jake didn't really know. The Warmaster was potentially someone more from Valhal – maybe even Valdemar himself – with the Necromancer, Phoenix, and Lord of the Hunt entirely new characters.

It quickly turned out that, no, the Warmaster was not related to Valhal or any faction Jake knew of. In fact, there wasn't really much information on the guy at all. Apparently, he was a former general of some war and had been dubbed the Warmaster due to how dominating he was during that conflict. He was also a master of all weapons and a powerful warrior who didn't have any magic to speak of. There were no recordings of his fights or anything, and he hadn't fought in the arena for quite a few years but was considered semi-retired. Jake wasn't delusional to think that would make him weaker, though... in fact, it may just have made him stronger if this Warmaster was slowly training to attempt the Gauntlet.

Getting anything on the remaining three wasn't exactly easy either. All Jake could get was the most basic of things, such as information that the Lord of the Hunt was an archer who used nature magic, much akin to druids. While that was something, it wasn't overly helpful.

The Phoenix was indeed a beastkin woman who was probably related to phoenixes somehow. She used incredibly powerful fire magic and was a full-on mage based on all Jake could gather. Upon further research, Polly discovered that the Phoenix Queen also had some illusion magic, so that was good news for Jake.

Finally, there was the Necromancer, who did break expectations by a bit. Jake had assumed it to be another mage, but nope, it was more a warrior who just used death



and poison magic. He wore heavy armor, always had his head covered, had very pale hands when he took off his gloves and apparently had a very cold handshake...

Yeah, he was definitely a Risen.

After a few days and some initial research, Jake was back in top form and went to the Battlemaster to issue his first challenge. Based on all he had gathered so far, he believed the two easiest opponents to be the Phoenix and the Dark Mistress. The Dark Mistress was indeed Umbra, or at least someone closely related to the Court of Shadows, and while he did not doubt she was incredibly powerful, Jake hard-countered assassins to a ridiculous degree.

When it came to the Phoenix, he believed she would be an easy opponent due to her being a mage and her illusion magic. Illusions did not work on Jake, and while fire magic was most certainly not something he wanted to play with, shooting arrows of stable arcane mana through the flames was something he was very confident in being able to do. His stable arcane energy was incredibly robust against magic, after all.

However, despite believing these two would be the easiest opponents, he decided to prioritize beating the Lightning Monarch and the Archmage. First of all, because he had more information on these two than any other opponent, and secondly, because Jake wanted to get the side quests of Polly and Owen done.

Ultimately, he wanted to beat all of them, so the order wasn't overly important. Considering that, he may as well start with the two he had a reason to fight rather than any of the others.

"Hello again," Jake said as he walked up to the Battlemaster, who looked like he had been expecting him.

"So, you've decided to commit and try to go the whole way?" the Battlemaster asked. "To attempt the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion?"

"Yes," Jake said with resolution.

"Remember, there is no taking it back. You either reach the top or fall from grace," the Battlemaster double-checked to ensure Jake was certain.

"I am fully aware, and I still wanna give the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion a go."

"Very well," the Battlemaster said with a huge grin. "Now, who would you like to challenge first?"

"The Lightning Monarch," Jake said.

“Oh? Interesting choice; I was sure you would have gone for one of the mages or maybe even the Lord of the Hunt to have some kind of archery competition,” the Battlemaster said with some surprise.

“I have my reasons.”

“Fair enough. I guess it is related to the Monarch’s son, right? That Owen kid? You don’t have to answer; it doesn’t really matter. Either way, I will issue the challenge and get back to you when I get an answer,” the Battlemaster said.

Jake was thankful the man didn’t probe more than he had to. Jake really didn’t want to spill the family drama of others for no good reason.

“Thanks for the help,” Jake nodded. “Say, how will you contact me when he answ-“

“Alright, I got an answer. The fight begins in five hours,” the Battlemaster interrupted him.

“What?” Jake blurted out.

“The fight. You know, the thing you just asked me for? The one with the Lightning Monarch? Yeah, it begins in five hours, so get yourself ready,” the Battlemaster said, shaking his head while grumbling something about Jake being weird.

“I thought you said you were going to check in with the Lightning Monarch or something to schedule the fight...” Jake muttered.

“That is what I just did,” the Battlemaster said, exasperated. “Are you sure you are in any condition to fight?”

“... you literally just stood there for five seconds...”

“You asked me to schedule the fight, didn’t you?” the Battlemaster said.

“Yes...”

“So I scheduled the fight,” the Battlemaster sighed. “Now go get your head straight before the fight begins. It would be sad to lose because you aren’t all there mentally.”

Jake wanted to say more but held himself back. He realized he had committed one of the cardinal sins of Challenge Dungeons:

Trying to understand dungeon-fuckery.

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## Chapter 765: Nevermore: The Gauntlet Begins

Vilastromoz had to admit that the Wyrmgod had managed to gather quite the respectable images to be used as Champions. To see Gudrun had already been surprising, as she wasn't really known to be that huge of a fighter these days. Even before she became a god, she had been more of a shaman or leader than a Valkyrie that used a spear. Well, it was not like she could have been one, as Valkyrie wasn't really a term before Gudrun, as she was the one who more or less created that Path.

Yet the seven Champions were even more noteworthy. Two of them were entirely system-created, and their images did not stem from "real" beings – those two naturally being the Lightning Monarch and Archmage. Truthfully, the Viper didn't care for these two. The only slightly interesting thing about the Lightning Monarch was that his arcane affinity had been taken by the system from a now-dead S-grade that failed to ascend to godhood.

But the other five were quite something.

As Jake had theorized, the dark elf was Umbra. However, based on the Viper's assessment, it was a significantly weakened Umbra in every single way, with many of the things that made her truly dangerous removed.

The Phoenix Queen was, interestingly enough, the daughter of the Phoenix that the United Tribes had sent to Jake's Chosen reveal party. In the outside world, she had managed to become a god a few eras ago and now worked alongside her mother.

Vilastromoz didn't have many comments on the Necromancer. He was a divine general from the Ghostlands and was an incredibly powerful necromancer when he was still a mortal.

That Lord of the Hunt was an archer god Vilastromoz had never interacted directly with. However, she appeared to hail from the Pantheon of Life, so it should be a fun fight.

Finally, there was the Wargod... who was definitely an interesting fellow to include in a Challenge Dungeon like this. Mainly because he – despite the name – was not truly a fighter in the outside world but a renowned blacksmith.

One thing had to be clarified, though. Even if these gods were not fighters or pinnacle beings in the outside world, it truly didn't matter. The Wyrmgod could have taken any random S-grade and created an image from them, and chances are they would have been far, far beyond Champion material. If he chose to copy their S-grade conceptual understanding and technique level, that is.

However, all these images were made by copying the skill level that the image sources possessed in C-grade. In some ways, it was close to fighting the C-grade version of gods, but even then, there were big differences... because when in C-grade was the image copied from?

There was a vast difference between a level 200 and a level 349 in their technique and conceptual comprehension. For many of the earlier fights, it had been early C-grade images, while the further one got, the further in C-grade the images were also copied from, with many of the Champions copied from late-stage or even peak C-grades.

That is to say, Jake was not fighting a level 0 with the understanding of a level 250 like himself, but more often than not, a level 0 with the understanding of someone above level 300.

“So, what level is Umbra copied from?” the Viper asked.

“Roughly level 280,” the Wyrmgod answered. “The Warmaster is level 349, with the others between level 300 and 340. I believe they will offer your Chosen quite the challenge, and I would be impressed if he manages to eke out victories against every opponent without losing any lives.”

“At least there are no real penalties to losing lives anymore,” Vilastoromoz shrugged.

“Yes, I believed it to be counterproductive to penalize those who attempt to beat the Champions further than the lost bonus from every remaining life. Should he beat two Champions, he will have made back the potential loss,” the Wyrmgod explained. “There has to be balance, after all. And beating the Champions without losing lives is far from intended.”

“Hm, let’s say Jake wins... who is this mysterious Grand Champion you got hiding for the grand finale?” Vilastromoz asked with a smirk. “It has to be a big one when you have Umbra as just a Champion..”

“You will see if your Chosen manages to make it that far, but do be aware that should that happen, I believe that will be the end of his journey. Not a single person has defeated the Grand Champion yet, after all,” the Wyrmgod said with quite the confidence.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, you may have overdone it with that one... then again, it is meant to be the end of the Challenge Dungeon if you beat the final boss, so maybe it’s fine?” Minaga chimed in.

“Now you got me all curious...” Vilastromoz smirked even more, but he knew not to probe more than necessary. He had some personal theories about who the Wyrmgod could have gotten. Of course, there were also some notable people he knew it couldn’t be.

As a former Progenitor himself, many would potentially have expected to see Yip of Yore show up somewhere, but the Viper knew better. And it wasn't because the Wyrmgod didn't want an image of Yip, but Yip himself, who would have refused. In fact, he hadn't really left anything of note with anyone else.

No, any Legacy he ever left behind was in meticulously designed Challenge Dungeons, and he would never risk giving anyone else the slightest level of freedom with an image of his. Due to his Path, he wanted, no, *needed* to be in full control of everything related to him, including his legacies and anything left behind associated with him.

For him to leave an image around would be the antithesis to his Path. Especially if it was an image that someone was meant to be able to beat in a fight. No, it definitely couldn't be him... but that didn't mean there weren't more complete monsters it could be.

"So, any bets on if Jake will beat all the Champions without losing any lives?" Minaga said with a cheerful grin.

"Rather than all the Champions, how about we make the bets one by one for every opponent? That way, we get seven times the bets," the Viper offered. "And I am willing to bet Jake will beat this Lightning Monarch on his first try."

"Are you telling me you don't think Jake will beat all the Champions without losing any lives?" Minaga teased.

The Viper just smiled. Looking at the lineup... he wasn't going to answer that one.

Four hours wasn't a long time, and Jake presumed the Lightning Monarch had chosen to accept the fight so fast to try and take Jake by surprise. In fact, it wouldn't shock Jake to find out that the shortest time there could be between an issued challenge and the actual fight was four hours.

This instant acceptance of the duel also indicated the Lightning Monarch had already researched Jake and believed that any additional research time would benefit Jake more than him. Of course... it was also entirely possible the guy was just so damn confident he didn't believe he needed any time to prepare, and based on what Owen said, that was actually a legitimate possibility.

According to Owen, his father had always insisted he had only lost the Gauntlet last time because he hadn't been careful enough during the fight and slipped up. He had simply refused to believe his opponent had been stronger than him. Find the newest release on **novel★fire★net**

Jake also learned that the primary reason for Owen's father's overwhelming confidence was his lightning magic. Owen described it as a "rare and unique affinity only passed down in their family," but Jake instantly recognized it as an arcane affinity. Based on

conversations with Villy, he also knew that inheriting talent, even for things like arcane affinities, was totally a thing, so seeing Owen and his both be capable of displaying a so-called “unique” affinity wasn’t surprising.

When it came to the affinity itself, Jake luckily had a wonderful test subject. Owen could summon the odd blue lightning, which allowed Jake to analyze it and figure out how it worked, and through his tests, he had discovered a few interesting peculiarities.

Lightning had the innate property of “burning” mana when it hit someone, but the blue lightning appeared to have almost the opposite effect. At least when Owen used it on himself... and this was where Jake found the biggest difference between normal lightning affinities and Owen’s.

Owen’s was more suited as a body-buff rather than an offensive weapon. He couldn’t really shoot powerful lightning bolts, as the energy got a lot weaker while outside the body, while inside, it made Owen both faster and stronger while giving him significant resistance to any energies that invaded his body by burning it away.

Offensively, it did have some properties, but those really only ever showed when the lightning coated a weapon. That was why Owen was still so intent on using a spear and why his father used a sword.

In conclusion, it was a great affinity for spell blades. During Jake’s preparations, he also studied whatever he could concerning the man’s fighting style and whatnot, but there wasn’t that much available outside of what Owen could teach him.

Could he have gotten more information by paying Colosseum Points? Potentially, however, Jake decided that he knew enough after seeing all Polly had gathered and being taught by Owen.

Back to just before the fight began, Jake was standing ready to enter the arena, with Owen beside him, looking visibly nervous. “You know... I didn’t really think about how messed up this situation is... I am asking my friend to beat up my dad to make him go home and live on a farm...”

“If it helps anything, I’ve beaten people up for worse reasons,” Jake shrugged. “Also, shouldn’t he be rich if he is a Champion? Why live on a farm?”

“Well... okay, it isn’t really a farm, more like an estate or compound placed outside of a large city... Owen said, scratching the back of his head. “Just... be careful, alright?”

“Don’t worry; I already said I’ll do all I can to not kill your old man,” Jake tried to reassure him.

“I mean that you also need to be careful for your own sake. While I admit my father is delusional if he thinks he can become a Grand Champion, he is still incredibly powerful.

His title of Champion is earned, and while you have promised to try and not kill him, he will not show the same mercy. It doesn't matter if he knows we are friends or not; he will do all he can to win," Owen said, his nervousness somehow getting even worse as he began to fidget.

"I already told you that should he be too strong, I won't show mercy either," Jake said, padding the guy on the back. "Alright, how about we make a bet... if I win and beat up your dad so he sees reason, you'll ask Polly to accompany you back home. Deal?"

"I... what does Polly have to do with anything?" Owen asked, visibly flustered.

"You know what? I'll take that as a yes," Jake grinned, having timed his tease perfectly with the gate opening up in front of him. "Now go find her on the stands, yeah? I got a Lightning Monarch to beat up."

Owen looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept silent as Jake walked off into the tunnel leading to the arena.

It did not take long before Jake heard the clamors of the crowd. Failing to resist, he sent out a Pulse of Perception and saw that the arena was somehow even more massive than any of the earlier ones. Not in size of the battle area itself, but the stands. There had to be more than half a million spectators at this point... with Jake still no closer to learning where the hell they all came from.

Ascending the stairs leading to the small entrance area of the arena, the battleground soon appeared before his eyes. A few seconds later, he saw his opponent at the other end of the arena, right as the announcer began to speak.

"To be a Champion is a privilege, an honor, and a promise. A promise to remain one of the strongest the Colosseum has ever seen, standing side-by-side with other titans. Yet some are not satisfied standing beside others... they seek to stand above them. To truly prove themselves the very best. We have one such individual here today. One man who refuses to not be at the apex, and despite having only become a Champion recently, he shows no intentions of stopping his ascension. It's the one, the only: Doombringer!"

Yep, Jake was definitely happy they called him Doombringer now. It was definitely better than any of the stupid prior names.

"However, barring his path on the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion is another man who has attempted this ascension once before. A man who failed, but not after leaving a mark by even daring to try. I am naturally speaking of the Lightning Monarch, a veteran of the Colosseum who has been a Champion for well over a decade! He is a true warrior who has proven himself again and again and, after a long absence, is back to do so once more. So let us ask: Will Doombringer succeed where the Lightning Monarch failed? Or will the Lightning Monarch teach him just how difficult his quest is? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"



Jake had kind of expected this introduction message to be longer, but maybe it was intentional that the announcer didn't mention a smidge of information about either of them? Nevertheless, it didn't matter to Jake.

Looking across the arena, he finally saw his opponent properly. The Lightning Monarch's entire body, save for his head, was covered in silver armor, and he wore a single sword in his hand. His face reminded Jake a bit of Owen, except for his sharper features, stubbled beard, and the several scars that covered it.

Focusing more on the sword, Jake felt quite the power from it, making him certain it was of a very high rarity... likely even legendary. The armor wasn't anything to scoff at either. While he wasn't a pay-to-win character like Gudrun, he definitely hadn't cheaped out on his equipment.

He did look a bit intimidating, but Jake didn't feel any fear. His aura was also respectable, and Jake knew this wouldn't be a walk in the park, but he was walking into the arena a man with a plan.

His opponent quickly walked forward as he observed Jake closely. As was almost customary by now, they both stopped toward the center of the arena as the Lightning Monarch spoke. "I must applaud your bravery. To attempt the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion is a decision not made haphazardly and one I truly and deeply respect. Ah... and I also heard you have some kind of connection to my son? I hope you have been a good influence on him, but do not think I shall show the slightest restraint for his sake."

"I, too, have heard quite a lot about you," Jake said as he smiled, not even much in the mood for a long conversation. "Including that you are considering reattempting the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion despite nearly getting beaten to death the first time around."

"Alas, one failure shall not define me. I was not at my best that day, and I am even more powerful now... who knows, perhaps today shall even be my unofficial start to the Gauntlet by beating you?" the Lightning Monarch said with a small chuckle.

"Have you considered that you lost the first time around because you aren't cut out to be a Grand Champion?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Your feeble attempt at making me doubt myself is useless," the man waved him off. "Now come. Bring out your bow and show me what you got."

"No," Jake shook his head. "Prove that you are worth it for me to bring out my bow. Prove that you are worth spending these arrows I have painstakingly created. If you do that, maybe you'll have a shot at becoming a Grand Champion... but if not, maybe you should just go home and be a family man?"

With those words, Jake pulled out both katars and charged forward, preparing to do as Owen had asked. He would not just beat up his dad but truly hammer home the difference between someone with the make of a Grand Champion and someone without.

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## Chapter 766: Nevermore: Lightning Monarch

Jake was arrogant; no two ways about it. But his arrogance was also always backed with a certain level of well-earned confidence and a powerful intuition. He did not declare others weak or strong or claim himself superior based on pure narcissism, but his own reading on his opponent... and while the Lightning Monarch was powerful, Jake had full confidence in himself. Especially when he saw the man be momentarily surprised at Jake's charge... oh, and the fact that he had a damn good plan.

Nevertheless, his opponent reacted fast, proving he was no slouch.

A rush of blue lightning covered his body in an instant as his blade moved down to block in the blink of an eye. Sword and katar clashed as Jake was pushed back, a small stream of lightning running across his body from the impact. It was important to note here that it ran across his body and not into it.

Below his clothes, Jake had covered himself entirely in a stable layer of arcane energy made specifically to block out the lightning. He didn't need it to be incredibly durable, just resilient enough to handle the remnant lightning energy from when weapons clashed or whatever was left in the air after a swipe from the Lightning Monarch's sword.

Giving pursuit, the Lightning Monarch attacked relentlessly, forcing Jake to retreat repeatedly. The man's attacks were fast and deadly, and Jake could only defend himself as more than a dozen blows were exchanged.

After his combo, the lightning around the Monarch lessened visually, making Jake go on the offensive. The second he did, the lighting aura around the Lightning Monarch exploded once more, making Jake go back on the defensive instantly. A few dozen exchanges later, his opponent slowed down again, making Jake attack the very second he did, giving the Lightning Monarch no time to rest.

While the Lightning Monarch had entered the battle full of confidence, Jake had done the same because he was a man with a plan. His fighting method, where he retreated and

attacked to keep the Lightning Monarch constantly engaged, was entirely intentional and his strategy from the very beginning.

When Owen had first explained how the lightning arcane affinity worked, Jake had quickly come to a realization. To make your arcane energy flow through your body in order to make yourself stronger, faster, and more durable while even coating your weapon in the energy...

Yeah, that was just a boosting skill, wasn't it?

Mind you, Jake did boost himself using arcane energy even as a level 0, but he was not constantly boosting. Instead, he used the energy in small bursts, such as in the middle of a kick or while stabbing forward with his katar. Could he technically keep the arcane energy constantly running through his body and use a skill similar to Arcane Awakening? Yes, but only for a very short period of time. A level 0 simply didn't have the resources to sustain a boosting skill for any reasonable amount of time.

At least not normally.

The arcane affinity of the Lightning Monarch was explicitly suited for this kind of boosting, making the boost far more efficient than using any regular affinities. He could effectively reuse the same lightning energy over and over again, resulting in potentially the only viable level 0 boosting skill out there.

However... it was still a boosting skill.

Jake had naturally been curious how the Lightning Monarch lost when he attempted to become Grand Champion the first time around. Especially how he lost in such a devastating fashion that he was left crippled for around a year.

It turns out that the fight he had lost was a prolonged one. He had been fighting and winning for many minutes until suddenly, he slowed down significantly and was hit hard. The Lightning Monarch had then tried to get up, boosting himself once more before ultimately losing.

So... yeah, he had been so damn injured because he had pushed his boosting skill further than he should have, and no matter how much he had improved, the Lightning Monarch still had this one crucial weakness:

Endurance. And not the stat.

So, Jake's strategy couldn't be more simple. He wanted to exhaust the Lightning Monarch, making him dance to Jake's tune from start to end without ever gaining any ground. Jake did learn that the Monarch had learned to turn his boosting skill on and off rapidly after his last attempt to become a Grand Champion to try and shore up this huge weakness and last longer in a fight.

That was why Jake had turned the fight into a push-and-pull, where Jake would be a hundred percent defensive whenever the Lightning Monarch attacked. The Lightning Monarch would naturally notice this and attempt to pace himself to not burn out too fast, which was when Jake went on the offensive, forcing the Lightning Monarch to push himself in order to keep up.

While the Lightning Monarch was undoubtedly powerful, that was only when he was boosting himself. His entire Path relied on the boosting skill, and when it was down, Jake had the advantage in speed, even if he still lost by a little in the power department.

Jake was sure the Lightning Monarch could win simply by overwhelming his opponents most of the time due to the sheer power of his boosting skill, but sadly for him, if there was anyone who was good at dragging out fights, it was Jake. As long as he stayed on the defensive, it was doubtful anyone could take him down, not unless they had some huge area of effect attack like Gudrun.

In conclusion... as long as Jake didn't fuck up, the winner of this fight was already a foregone conclusion. Of course, Jake wasn't just there to win but to crush his opponent's spirit.

"Are you frustrated?" Jake asked as he dodged several attacks by a hair's margin.

Looking at the man's face, he already knew the answer.

"You are as slippery as a rat!" the Lightning Monarch cursed as he made a wide swing, releasing a lot of lightning energy.

Jake had already stepped back to dodge and didn't even need to raise his katars to block.

"So you are losing to a rat?" Jake smiled as he attacked, not giving the man any chance to rest. "That's pretty embarrassing, isn't it?"

The Lightning Monarch was a bit too slow as Jake landed a low kick, making the man speed up more than usual as he tried to pull off one of his many combos. Jake barely moved his body as he swayed and weaved in between the hits before once more dodging the last strike by retreating.

"Fight me!" the Lightning Monarch hissed.

"I am waiting for you to fight me seriously first," Jake smirked. "Or do you call that mindless flailing of your sword a fighting style? Do you truly think that is all it takes to be a Grand Champion? You may be fast, you may be strong... but you are still lacking."

Avoiding another swing, Jake once more tried to counterattack but found himself pushed back immediately. The lighting around the Monarch intensified even more than

before as he charged forward. Jake knew he was pushing himself, and without hesitation, he used Fear Gaze to make the man lose some of his momentum, giving Jake time to reach one of the pillars spread throughout the arena.

Jake began kiting around the pillar – a tried and tested arena strategy – making the Lightning Monarch never able to truly close in. Due to the sand making the man constantly run in circles, he never got a chance to build up speed, meaning Jake easily got away while throwing out the occasional taunt.

“YOU!” the Lightning Monarch roared as Jake’s danger sense reacted. Without any hesitation, he ducked as a wave of pure lightning energy swept over his head – having cut straight through the several meters-thick stone pillar.

*Yeah, that was dumb*, Jake thought. Was it impressive for a level 0 to cut through a damn stone pillar with a sword? Hell yeah, but it was also a massive waste of energy. Jake did not hesitate as he jumped up, avoided the falling pillar, and attacked the temporarily weakened Lightning Monarch, who was suffering from the backlash from unleashing an attack more powerful than his body could handle.

“Don’t you get it?” Jake said as he dodged the weak attempt from the man to defend himself easily before kicking the Monarch in the stomach, making him tumble back. “You’ve stagnated. Reached the end of your potential.”

“Your words...” the Lightning Monarch said as he stood back up again with a groan, “shall not shake my will.”

“I don’t need them to,” Jake shook his head. “Your willingness to acknowledge your own weakness is irrelevant to me... all it can do is extend your loss.” Original content can be found at *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

The Lightning Monarch did not answer but attacked again, having partly recovered from that wide slash he made to cut through the pillar. He kept trying to lock down Jake and made many valiant attempts to somehow land a blow on Jake, but against his overpowered Bloodline, the man just didn’t stand a chance. It didn’t help that, honestly, he wasn’t even *that* skilled with his sword.

“How long have you been a Champion? Actually, don’t even answer that; the true answer will be far more embarrassing than what I guess in my head,” Jake said, teasing the man who was really running out of steam by now.

Nevertheless, he didn’t stop his barrage of attacks, even when his lightning began to visibly weaken. Jake saw the desperation in the Lightning Monarch’s eyes and knew it was about time to land the “killing blow.”

If not, the fight would turn into a duel to the death... because Jake got the vibes from the Lightning Monarch that he would rather burn himself to death with lightning energy than lose. Luckily, Jake did have one final strategy to use:

"Despite being a Champion for so long, your swordsmanship is still at such a low level... your own son is nearly better with a spear than you are, and he has only used it for a year," Jake shook his head after dodging another attack and landing a solid punch in the Lightning Monarch's stomach after dismissing his katars, sending him temporarily airborne, before landing on the sand with a thud.

Jake's words had been an insult... yet he saw a spark of something in the Monarch's eyes as he hurriedly began to stand.

"You should honestly be embarrassed at your progress... I had expected all the Champions to be truly powerful opponents, yet you, someone who has been a Champion for years, seems to barely have made any progress since you became one," Jake sighed. "And you are preparing to try the Gauntlet again? For how long will you prepare? Another few years? By that point, your son will have surpassed you and become a Champion himself."

For the first time, the Monarch didn't attack immediately after standing up, but instead, he looked at Jake directly. "Do you truly believe Owen can become a Champion?"

Jake, barely hiding his smile, shrugged. "Probably, though I will admit you at least have him beaten out when it comes to controlling your special lightning affinity. Then again, you only guided him in using it for what, three or four years?"

"It was... barely one year..." Owen's dad muttered.

"Only a year? Huh, guess we are both lucky you didn't teach him for longer, or he may have been the one standing here today, trying to do the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion," Jake said, trying to sound surprised yet casual as if Owen being able to do that was only natural.

By now, the fight was already over; at least, Jake hoped it was. While the man opposite Jake still stood tall, Jake saw the slight quivering in his legs. Unless he fully reactivated his boosting lightning, he wouldn't be able to move any faster than a slow stroll, and by the way his arms hung down his sides, the sword slightly slumping, Jake doubted he could even lift his weapon without boosting.

Something Jake really didn't want to happen, and not just because he was pretty damn sure that another boost would kill the Monarch, but because Jake knew it would also be a problem for him. If the Lightning Monarch decided to go for mutual destruction, it could get dangerous. Jake knew just how dangerous someone who was good at using a boosting skill and willing to die truly was, the Fallen King no doubt sharing this sentiment.

So, while not making it a fight to the death was a great outcome for Owen, it was also best for Jake, and he got the feeling this was the “best” way to win while even minimizing risk.

“You... are powerful,” the Lightning Monarch said as he looked at Jake. “And you are telling me that my son is more talented than you? That with just a few years of training, he will become more powerful than you?”

... Okay, maybe Jake had overhyped poor Owen a bit too much, but at this point, there was no backing out as Jake once more shrugged. “I will say that I would rather fight you than Owen in a few years.”

Hey, he wasn’t even lying. Jake would indeed prefer to fight someone he didn’t really know over his buddy of a year.

The Lightning Monarch looked up toward the stands, staring straight at Owen. Jake followed his gaze and saw Owen look confused. Nobody in the stands could hear what Jake and the Monarch were talking about, so what came next was definitely a surprise to many.

“Perhaps... perhaps it’s time to pass on the mantle,” the man muttered to Jake before he looked upward and yelled: “I surrender!”

Jake was hiding his grin while trying really hard to look surprised as the man yelled once more. “And with my loss today, so shall I retire from the Colosseum of Mortals, stepping down as Champion. But worry not, for my son shall pick up the title of Lightning Monarch, and within not that long, a new Monarch shall join the rank! Mark my words!”

Not bothering to hide his grin anymore, Jake threw the confused Owen a look and gave him a thumbs up. What? Owen had never told Jake how he had to convince his father to give up fighting, just to make him give up. Besides, what was a more classic dad move from an already neglectful absentee father than putting all your personal hopes and dreams in the hands of your kid, trying to make them achieve what you couldn’t?

From the beginning, Jake had doubted he could make the Lightning Monarch simply lose faith in himself and surrender. He was too damn stubborn and determined for something like that to ever work, so instead, Jake had aimed to redirect his attention.

In a slightly anti-climactic way, Jake’s first bout as a Champion had ended, and to the roars of the crowd, who seemed totally fine with this ending, Jake raised a single fist as he turned to leave.

Jake, walking out of the arena, did turn his head to see Owen giving him quite the glare, but Jake just smiled and waved as he shifted his attention to someone else in the



stands. A man who stood on a small personal platform, overlooking the arena and focusing intently on Jake with some kind of magical orb in his hand.

Observing this man, Jake saw an old elf with a long, thin beard going all the way down to his stomach and old sunken features. He wore an extremely expensive-feeling robe, and leaning against the railing right beside him was a rather majestic staff. It wasn't difficult for Jake to ascertain who he was looking at through his sphere... because, damn, did he look like a classic old mage. Even if all the other details weren't a massive hint, the classic pointy hat gave him away.

It was naturally the Archmage, Jake's next planned opponent. And in that fight, there would be no need to hold back.

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## Chapter 767: Nevermore: Archmage

"You know, I am not even sure if I should be angry or happy with this outcome," Owen muttered while Jake scarfed down his lunch. "I know that I said I wanted you to convince my father to no longer attempt to become a Grand Champion... but did you really have to convince him to try and make me one?"

Jake finished chewing as he answered seriously. "In all honesty? Yes. You kind of said it yourself, but for the last many years, your dad had made his quest to become the Grand Champion his entire personality. To him, it was all that truly mattered, and me trying to convince him to be a good father and husband wasn't going to change his mind... unless those things are required to achieve his goal."

"If he is just faking being a non-shitty person to convince me to train and become the Grand Champion, what is that even worth? Also, how did you even know that would work? Even if I some-fucking-how manage to become the Grand Champion at some point in the future, how will that allow him to fulfill his goal?" Owen questioned.

"I have been thinking, and I asked myself... why did your father spend his time recovering training you, and teaching you how to use your family's affinity?" Polly chimed in. "Maybe it was because he wasn't sure if he would ever recover and wanted you to pick up where he left off even back then."

"I... am not sure that makes any of this better," Owen sighed.

"Think of it like this," Jake said, trying to be positive. "A dad who wants you to train to be the Grand Champion while faking being a good dad is better than a dead dad. Because at least the first option has the possibility to turn into something non-shitty, while the latter can never turn non-dead. Also, finally, is it really that bad to train to become the Grand Champion? Even if you fail, you will get a lot stronger in the process, and I have the feeling that as long as you get stronger than him, he will let off you."

"I guess you're right," Owen said, still sighing. "Now, how confident are you in facing this Archmage?"

Jake was happy with the change of subject as he considered the question for a while. "Well... hopefully it will be a good fight. I did catch a glimpse of him in the stands, and he did have a respectable aura, but I also know that he is supposedly a slippery bastard with lots of resources at his disposal, so I probably don't want it to be a drawn-out affair."

"Yeah..." Polly muttered. "He is really old and has a lot of artifacts he has created throughout the years, especially the many Sealing Orbs he carries around. They are super dangerous, so remember to watch out for those, alright?"

They had already had this conversation before, as Jake had learned plenty from Polly about her so-called Master. She knew far more than any information broker could relay, as she had been his assistant for a while, and even if he hadn't taught her much about combat, he had taught her plenty of general magic mumbo jumbo, and due to his innate need to brag, had gladly shown off a whole legion of valuable items he had either purchased or created himself.

Jake cared about what he had made himself, as those were what he could bring into the arena. The most dangerous items were the Sealing Orbs, which were small crystal balls where he had trapped intense mana within of a specific affinity. Then, through a bunch of rituals and more magic stuff, elementals would appear, already sealed within. These elementals could then be absorbed by the Archmage, giving him a far greater affinity to a particular school of magic for a period of time while also burning their mana instead of his own... so yeah, that was his gimmick.

Only two days after Jake had beaten his first opponent as a Champion, he issued his second challenge to the Archmage. Jake had almost expected another instant duel to happen, but...

"You wanted a fast fight, right?" the Battlemaster asked. The source of this content is [novel•fire•net](#)

"Yeah?" Jake asked with hope.

"Well, the Archmage doesn't. The match is scheduled to take place in twenty-nine days and twenty-two hours," the Battlemaster said with a deadpan expression.

"That fucking sucks," Jake grumbled. "Can I just change opponent or fight someone else in between?"

"Nope, the rules are rules," the Battlemaster shrugged. "And based on what I know about that old crook, he would have scheduled for the last minute no matter when you chose to issue the challenge, so you may as well have the waiting period now. Either way, you should go prepare, yeah?"

Jake just nodded. "Yeah, I guess I should."

So, Jake spent the next month training and making preparations for the Necromancer and Lord of the Hunt. Okay, he did also do a little bit to prepare for the Archmage, but honestly, he had already done all the preparations he needed. No, the only true preparation he did was to prepare a special little surprise.

Owen also stayed with Jake throughout this time, and what's more, he even had his father actively give advice. The man formerly known as the Lightning Monarch gladly shared all he could about other Champions he had either fought with or researched before. In the end, he ended up handing everything he had to Polly before he headed home to Owen's mother and siblings.

His father insisted Owen should stay with Jake, especially after Jake acted like he was helping Owen train.

Pretty quickly, an entire month passed, and Jake once more found himself entering the arena, this time to face off against the Archmage. This month was the longest period he had gone since arriving in the Challenge Dungeon without a fight, so he was feeling a bit jittery.

After a final "good luck" from Owen and a hopeful look from Polly, Jake walked into the tunnel leading to the arena.

The announcer once more introduced the two fighters in a very general fashion, once more not giving any real information about either of them. This pretty much confirmed to Jake that this lack of information-sharing was intentional and just not coincidental.

When the gates lowered, the two combatants once more walked toward the center of the arena, however, with more distance than he had with prior opponents. Both of them knew this would be a ranged fight, so there was no need to go in melee from the get-go. Jake also knew that his opponent preferred to have some time to wind up his magic, which Jake was a-okay with.

The first of them to speak ended up being the old Archmage.

"Ho ho ho, so you are the little human my dear Pollaystrasirial has been following around these days, huh?" the Archmage chuckled as he stroked his beard. "I do hope

the little girl has learned enough from you to make it worth the punishment she is due once she returns for embarrassing me in the arena with her pathetic performance.”

Jake didn't say anything as he pulled out his bow. The only thing he mentally noted was that he had totally forgotten Polly's full name.

“How uncivilized... would you not at least wish to utter some words before your potential demise?” the Archmage smiled, confident in himself.

“Surrender now, or you'll die,” Jake simply said in a casual tone. “No second chances.”

“Uncivilized was perhaps too flattering of a word; you are simply delusional and rude,” the Archmage said, disappointed. “Too bad; I had hoped you would have been willing to accompany me back to my mage tower once I had beaten you so I could study your peculiar magic. Alas, it appears you wish to die too badly for that to happen in any reasonable fashion.”

With those words, the Archmage took out his staff.

Immediately, Jake jumped back as he reached inside his Ring of Deft Hands. Within, it had four slots. Two were used by katars, one for when he needed to store the bow, but the final one was something special he had prepared just for the old Archmage.

Out came a giant arrow more than one and a half meters long with a complex design. Jake had spent three full days crafting it, and now was the time to show the Archmage just how stupid he had been to give Jake that long of a preparation period.

Nocking it, Jake's body exploded in arcane energy as he began to charge a skillless Arcane Powershot.

On the other side of the arena, the Archmage didn't sit still as he floated back and took out three orbs at once.

**“Spirits of the North, Winds of the East, become one as a blizzard is born!”** he yelled as he smashed two gems together.

Two powerful streams of energy were released and began merging as what looked like a small localized blizzard appeared around the Archmage, obscuring his form. This blizzard gathered itself quickly, clearly having some level of autonomous control. Even if it wasn't a fully born elemental, it was close, and Jake felt like he was facing two beings rather than one.

**“Soil of the Deep, embrace my form and grant me strength!”** the Archmage yelled before he crushed the other orb in his hand, as brown energy began to emanate from his body.

Right as the Archmage's preparations were complete, Jake made his move.

With a deep exhale and an explosion of arcane energy, he loosed the arrow. The icy winds were parted in an instant as the Archmage reacted by smashing his staff into the ground, making a wall of sand shoot up before instantly turning it solid.

The massive arrow flying straight for the wall exploded the very next moment, sending two dozen arrows flying around the stone barrier, attacking the Archmage from all sides like they were heat-seeking missiles. With a yell, the man erected a barrier all around himself as every single arrow hit at once, exploding upon impact.

A massive explosion, far beyond what any level 0 should be capable of causing, rocked the arena and sent sand flying everywhere. The icy wind elemental had completely scattered in an attempt to protect its master. And from the looks of it, it had succeeded. From the center of this explosion, a weak, haggard voice began to sound out.

"I sur-"

No more sound came out as an arrow hit him in the side of the throat, drowning the word. Through his sphere, Jake saw the mage feebly reach for it right as a second arrow flew in and struck him in the eye, penetrating into his skull and ending the fight for good.

The crowd and announcer were both silent as Jake put away his bow and fell onto his ass. Blood was dripping from his eyes and ears, and his right shoulder was nearly entirely blue, with several visible blood vessels ruptured within, giving birth to plenty of internal bleeding. Shooting those two follow-up arrows definitely hadn't helped.

As the dust cleared, the body of the Archmage was revealed. His lower body was covered in an earthy shell as he had tried to cover his entire body with stone. Sadly for him, his upper body did not have time to be affected, and whatever emergency barriers he had put up and the protection from his elemental had been far from enough, resulting in his entire body dripping with blood. Most of it was from wounds caused by all the explosions, but a good portion of the blood also came from the hole in his neck.

After a few more seconds of silence, the cheers began, along with the announcer excitedly declaring his victory. Jake just stayed sitting for a bit as he looked at the mage's body before sighing. "I did tell you to surrender when you had the chance."

Jake got up after a bit of struggle and walked out of the arena, once more raising a fist to the cheers of the crowd. They were eerily cheery despite the corpse with an arrow in his throat and eye lying there in the center of the arena, but by now, Jake was honestly used to it.

Right as he got outside of the tunnel leading into the arena, he went straight to the Battlemaster to report his win and get a pat on the back that hurt like hell. A few minutes later, Owen and Polly arrived to escort him back to his little townhouse so he could rest.

In this fight, Jake had once more gone in with a plan. Polly had repeatedly said how the Archmage was never in a rush when fighting but gladly took his time to use his spells to buff himself up. Jake had taken advantage of that by creating an attack far more powerful than any other he was capable of.

The quasi-Protean Arrow had been made up of a faint layer of arcane energy on the surface, with weak destructive energy right beneath. In this weak destructive energy, Jake had put twenty-four stable arrows that he had painstakingly created, and during the creation process, he tried to push in as much Willpower energy as he could to make sure they would curve upon exploding the weak destructive energy. Ultimately, he still had to control all the arrows when the big arrow exploded, hence the bleeding from nearly every orifice.

It had worked out as he wanted, and Jake was more excited than ever to get out of the Colosseum and upgrade some skills. He had gained a lot of inspiration, and he was more sure than ever that the true purpose of this entire Challenge Dungeon was to help people upgrade skills and train concepts... which often led to upgrading skills.

Walking back to his small townhouse, Jake checked his status.

**Bonus objective gained: Defeat the other Champion to become the Grand Champion.**

**Current rank: Champion (2/7)**

**Colosseum Points: 1,882,910 (2,882,910).**

**Lives remaining: 10**

Jake hadn't been entirely sure before, but now he was. Each win as a Champion rewarded 500,000 Colosseum Points... which made all the points he got in lower ranks feel so damn meaningless, especially considering how "easy" his first two Champions fights had been. As the Battlemaster had said, he didn't actually have these points yet, but would only get them after all the Champion fights were done, but at least it told him how many he would get.

He did know that the Lighting Monarch and Archmage were the easiest. Not just because he had seen and felt the auras of all the other Champions but because that just made sense from a design perspective. These two both had Challenge Dungeon natives related to them and storylines associated with them.

No, he was sure that the next five had to be the truly challenging ones. At least strong or not dumb enough to let Jake charge his quasi-Arcane Powershot together with his quasi-Protean Arrow, right? Not that he wasn't going to prepare some anyway.

Jake even went to the shops to see if he could buy a better spatial storage, but sadly found that none of the ones on offer would allow him to store his arcane constructs. At least not any of the non-legendary items, and Jake really didn't want to spend nearly a million Colosseum Points on a ring. Not before he lost a few of his ten lives, at least.

By now, he was beginning to wonder if he would even lose any lives at all during the Colosseum of Mortals...

Well, that was entirely dependent on his opponents, right? And if anyone could grant him death, it had to be the Necromancer who literally dealt with it.

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## Chapter 768: Nevermore: Necromancer

Polly cheerfully wanted to cook for their group that night to celebrate the death of her teacher. It was a bit odd to have her tell stories of how her teacher had taught her and how much he had sucked in between happy humming because he was now dead and buried.

Speaking of death, Jake issued his challenge to the Necromancer two days after he had beaten the Archmage... and once more was told the guy wanted an entire month of preparations... so yeah, another thirty days for Jake to prepare tools to increase his chances to win. Of course, he also needed to gather a lot more information on this guy compared to his two prior opponents, as he didn't have anyone related to him to spill the beans.

Even before the Archmage fight, he had already gathered a lot, and with another waiting period, there was no reason not to get more. Jake also began to feel like one of the reasons Show Matches weren't a thing in the Champion rank was to remove the potential plot hole of none of the Champions ever doing Show Matches. Sure, it would make sense if some of them weren't, but wouldn't someone like the Lightning Monarch have welcomed the training?

Anyway... the Necromancer was pretty much a warrior with some poison and death magic. There was also a bit of dark magic in there, but he usually won through



prolonged battles where he wore down his opponent, and from Jake's research, he did admit the guy could be a problem.

He usually played defensive the entire time while creating a field of miasma all around him. This miasma would slowly spread and begin to inhabit the entire arena, putting anyone who fought him on a timer. Jake did question how the hell the guy had mana to pull off something like that, but he assumed it was just more equipment-powered bullshit.

So, the best strategy would be to take him down fast. That is where him pretty much just being a warrior became an issue. He wore heavy armor, wielded a warhammer, and had several spells to defend himself and buy time for the poison to spread. Shit, he even often won without having to spread his field of death just with his normal spells and a good smack with his hammer.

In preparation for this fight, Jake prepared another powerful quasi-Protean Arrow and worked on covering his body in a small layer of stable arcane energy to keep the miasma out. He also went to the shop to see if he could buy anything to help with breathing it in, but the best he could get there was a bandana or something to cover his mouth. Gas masks were sadly not on offer.

To counter it, Jake began working on a better method of eliminating this miasma before it had a chance to reach his lungs. Ultimately, he settled on just circulating destructive arcane energy through his body to try and eliminate the miasma, covered his mouth with some torn-off cloth, and hoped he could win before it got too bad. Jake was confident in his offensive prowess, after all.

Moreover, the Necromancer was many things, but fast was not one of them. Jake should have a good window where there was no miasma around him, and he could bombard his foe with arrows. Besides that, he spent the month working on more general stuff and even had a few spars with Owen, who was still quite a bit away from Champion material, but he was fine for a sparring partner.

Soon enough, another month had passed, and without further ado or delays, Jake found himself back in the small opening area of the arena, facing a tall man across from him.

"Welcome to yet another Champion's Match in the Colosseum of Mortals! Today, the Doombringer will attempt to continue his march on the Gauntlet of the Grand Champion and take home his third win! The Lightning Monarch and Archmage have already fallen to him... but will the Necromancer meet the same fate? Or shall he be the Deathbringer to the Doombringer? Well, I guess we should find out! Lower the gates!"

Jake watched the gates lower, but he didn't walk too much forward in order to still keep a good distance. He observed his opponent from afar, and he had to admit... the guy looked pretty damn strong.

His heavy armor was ivory white with black patterns all across it, with bone adornments here and there. On his head, he wore a helmet with antlers on it, both of which gave off eerie auras of death. The hammer he wielded was entirely black and had a long handle and a medium-sized head, where one side was blunt, and the other had a sharp pick. By the way he wielded it, Jake also didn't doubt the Risen before him was strong enough to swing that bastard around fast.

His opponent walked into the arena with heavy and steady steps, a slightly dark footprint left wherever he walked. Jake felt and studied his aura closely, and the conclusion was clear:

This man was the strongest being he had faced in the Colosseum yet. Jake was excited to face him as he stayed at a good distance, yet still walked a bit closer to meet his foe and have the customary first-meeting talk. The Necromancer was the first to speak as a deep voice, slightly distorted by his helmet, sounded out.

"I apologize for the wait before I could accept your challenge. I have been absent from the arena for too long, and I had to refamiliarize myself with the place before I felt ready to face you with the respect and honor any who dare attempt the Gauntlet deserves," the Necromancer said, his words having an odd sense of calmness to them. He sounded old. Like, really old.

"No worries," Jake answered. "I cannot criticize anyone for using their allotted preparation time when it is perfectly in line with the rules. Especially if you were not active in the arena."

"Your understanding is admirable," the old Necromancer nodded.

"I am curious about something, though. What is a Risen doing here? You are the only Risen I have seen in the entire Colosseum, even counting the audience," Jake asked. The Necromancer had not made any moves or begun to release his miasma yet, and Jake saw no reason not to try and probe out a bit of information. Who knows, maybe he would even say something useful?

"Oh?" the Risen said, surprise clear in his voice. "I had not expected someone to recognize my kind around here, much less when I keep myself covered. But if you are curious, then I did not end up here by choice. I was exploring an ancient ruin in my homeland, and in ways I do not recognize, I ended up in these lands. Alas, all I could do from there was make the best out of my situation, and as a Death Knight of my home, I welcomed the familiarity of the Colosseum. It is a glorious place, filled with battle and death."

*A Death Knight, eh?* Jake mentally noted. That was pretty much the only semi-actionable piece of information he gave out. The rest was just a throw-away explanation by a lazy writer to justify why a Risen was in the Colosseum as the only one.

Anyway... Death Knights were pretty much the paladins of the undead race, and Jake did know a bit about them. Ultimately, his biggest question after learning he was a Death Knight wasn't anything related to his abilities, though.

"If you are a Death Knight... why is your title in the Arena of Mortals Necromancer?" Jake asked very pointedly.

"That is... due to my own hubris. In the early parts of the Colosseum, I found this place far too easy, so I never bothered to battle myself but only raised weak bone constructs and unleashed basic magic to win my fights, and before I knew it, everyone called me the Necromancer. By the time I showed my true prowess, the name was already stuck in the consciousness of all," the Necromancer, who should really be called the Death Knight, answered.

Jake felt immense sympathy as he nodded in understanding. He knew the pain...

"Now, while exchanging words with you has been a delight, we are not here to speak, are we?" the Necromancer said after a few moments of silence, wanting to get the action started.

Jake nodded as he pulled out his bow. "True, true. Let's have a good one."

"May the best combatant win," the Necromancer said with a nod as his aura grew in power.

Without any hesitation, Jake made his move. He nocked an arrow and loosed it immediately as the Necromancer slowly began to leak out black smoke from between the seams in his armor. Jake had shot hit him in the chest before he had a chance to block, the arrow exploding on impact and making the Necromancer slide backward on the sand for over a meter.

Jake cursed internally as he saw it had only left a small mark and a few cracks in the metal. He had wanted to test the durability of the thing, and it exceeded his expectations. His only real choice was to hit the weak spots of the armor, such as the seams, or where the explosion would still do a lot of damage.

The problem was the Necromancer also knew he had to do that. Jake's second arrow was aimed at the Necromancer's head, but he was quick and blocked it with his hammer as he began running forward with heavy steps.

Outpacing him was easy, but the problem was that Jake couldn't just shoot arrows haphazardly. He had jam-packed his quiver, getting thirty-eight arrows in there, and while that seemed like a lot, Jake knew they could quickly vanish if he shot them without thinking.

With every footstep, the Necromancer left a trail of miasma in his wake, and it showed no signs of dissipating. In fact, it seemed to multiply by itself, infecting the very air itself. Jake, inspecting the armor of the Necromancer more closely, soon became certain it was the cause of this miasma. At least he used it as a catalyst to both power and release it.

*Legendary... if not higher*, Jake concluded. What's more, the small crack he had made in the armor with his first arrow had already been mended by the miasma. Seeing this, Jake slowly began to formulate a plan as the Necromancer attacked. His planned strategy was simple but incredibly effective.

Wielding his hammer with both hands, he smashed it into the ground, but Jake had already jumped away before a bone spike shot up from the ground where he had just been standing. Jake took the opportunity to counterattack as he shot an arrow aimed at the knee-joint of the armor.

It struck true and penetrated straight through. Jake purposefully did not detonate this one as, with an arrow in the knee, the Necromancer would not only have his dreams of being an adventurer squashed but have his movement speed slowed.

At least that was the plan, but the Necromancer stomped down, breaking the arrow, and kept walking like nothing had happened, leaving a fragment of stable arcane energy embedded within his flesh. Jake felt the energy of the Necromancer slowly attack it, but his arcane energy was not that easily gotten rid of, and he was in no rush to detonate it quite yet.

Having confirmed that his arrows could penetrate the armor in some places, Jake began to carefully attack as the miasma also continued to spread. He shot arrow after arrow, and while eight out of fifteen hits were blocked or missed, he soon had seven arrows sticking out of the shoulders, elbow, and knees of the Necromancer.

Jake had to admit that seeing the tall Risen continue to walk unbothered despite his injuries was very intimidating, but he also knew his attacks were working. The Necromancer's speed had gotten slower, and while the miasma seemed to be spreading even faster as the Risen got injured, Jake still had plenty of space to make use of as he purposefully sought out the areas where the miasma didn't have time to spread to yet.

With his opponent slowed down enough, Jake initiated the final part of his plan to take down the huge Risen. He began to shoot a barrage of arrows in rapid succession, all of them seemingly doing nothing as they exploded upon impact with the armor covering his opponent's chest, forcing the Necromancer backward a few steps with each impact. Even if this seemingly did nothing, as with the first arrow, all of them left small cracks. Cracks that would take time to be repaired by the miasma... time Jake didn't plan on giving the Necromancer.

Releasing a final arrow toward the head of the Necromancer, he managed to make the man's head reel back as one of the horns was blown off. Seeing his chance, Jake unleashed his finishing attack.

Taking out a massive arrow from his ring, Jake quickly jumped back as far as he could without entering the miasma that now covered the entire perimeter of the arena. The second he landed, he rapidly began charging a quasi-Arcane Powershot. His opponent was clearly aware of this move, but right as he wanted to move away, Jake detonated the arrows stuck in his body. The ones embedded in his knees made the Necromancer groan and fall to his knees, giving Jake the time he needed to land the killing blow.

Jake's special arrow this time around was what Jake would call a bunker buster. He knew the Necromancer was tanky as hell, so he wanted an arrow that could penetrate a tank. Which is exactly what he made. The arrowhead was filled with destructive energy that exploded directionally forward, with a sharp bullet-like stable tip right behind it. Based on his tests, this arrow should more than do the job.

The Necromancer didn't even make any moves to defend as he saw Jake charge his shot. Clearly, he was aware he wouldn't be able to, so he counterattacked as he roared and dropped his hammer hard, sending a large bone spike flying toward Jake right before he shot the arrow.

Having the choice of either abandoning his attack or taking the bone spike, Jake chose the latter. As he released the arrow and used a quick Fear Gaze to make sure it would hit where he wanted it to, Jake swayed to the side at the very last moment, taking the bone spike to the shoulder. The impact lifted him off his feet and threw him backward as he spun in the air, yet despite the pain, his true focus was on the arrow he had just shot.

On the other end of Jake's arrow, the Necromancer did not fare well either. As expected, he was forced to take it head-on as the arrow smashed into his chest. Metal and bone were sent flying as the chest of the Necromancer exploded, and he was shot backward over a dozen meters before he impacted the wall of the arena, resulting in an explosion of arcane energy.

The entire wall also cracked, as the arrow had not only managed to pierce the armor but had gone all the way through to hit the wall behind the Necromancer, with the final explosion destroying almost every vital organ that even a Risen still relied on.

Jake, having been thrown into the midst of the miasma, coughed as he saw the defeated Necromancer through his sphere. He was embedded in the wall, with blood everywhere. He had been a good opponent, but Jake's offensive prowess was just too-

**"Undying."**

A ghostly voice echoed throughout the arena as an eerie presence descended upon it. Follow current novels on [novel●fire●net](#)

Jake could only stare as the Risen tore himself from the wall, and his feet landed on the sand once more. With steady steps, he began walking forward with a huge gaping hole in his chest, every single internal organ, including his heart and lungs, destroyed. At the same time, he felt the change in the Necromancer's presence... and it reminded him of a certain old swordsman when he went all-out.

As Jake was still trying to comprehend what the hell was happening, he coughed again. This time, blood came out as he felt his lungs burn from the miasma, but far worse than that was the bone spike in his shoulder. A hefty dose of toxins seeped from the bone even now, and even after Jake pulled it out and quickly got out of the miasma, the situation still wasn't looking good as his arcane energy was hard at work, trying to eliminate the toxins that had invaded his body.

Nevertheless, Jake still had his bow and a few arrows to fight with. Even if he ran out of arrows, he had his katars, and with the Necromancer already looking half-dead, he shouldn't last much longer despite the skill he had just used, right? Jake simply refused to surrender before the seemingly immortal monster walking with steady steps toward him.

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## Chapter 769: Nevermore: Undying

Everything had honestly worked out as Jake had planned. He had slowly weakened the Necromancer with several arrows and limited his mobility enough for him to confidently land a blow that, by all accounts, should have been lethal. There was nothing wrong with anything he had done... the problem was the opponent he had done it to.

From an outsider's perspective, the fight definitely looked over. Jake was poisoned and had a nasty hole in his shoulder, but was otherwise able to keep fighting, while the Necromancer had a hole that allowed Jake to look straight through his body and out the other side. Yet Jake was the one who found himself pressured as he bombarded the Necromancer with several more arrows, trying to somehow make his opponent fall over.

One of the arrows hit the open hole in the Necromancer and curved upwards as it penetrated his body and exploded. More blood and flesh were sent flying, but it didn't seem to affect the man much, and Jake soon noticed the main problem.

He apparently didn't need his flesh and muscles for shit. Every shred of power was embedded within his skeleton, and as long as that remained, he would be able to move



around. These bones would naturally be far more difficult to break than flesh, and just a few arcane explosions would not get the job done.

What's more, the miasma was spreading far, far faster than before. Every drop of blood the Risen had spilled evaporated and turned into even more miasma, filling the arena way more quickly than Jake was comfortable with. He knew something had to change, so he tried all he could.

*He isn't healing... so it should be possible to make him unable to continue fighting?* Jake theorized. Fresh chapters posted on *novel♦fire♦net*

The Necromancer's steps were still heavy and slow due to his heavily injured legs. However, Jake had an issue if he wanted to end the fight quick... he was down to five arrows. Moreover, with his shoulder badly injured and poison spreading out from it, Jake couldn't shoot powerful arrows anymore, and quasi-Powershots were not an option.

With his remaining arrows, Jake tried to make the Necromancer entirely incapacitated. His knees were already in horrible condition, and Jake wanted to at least take a leg off. If he did that, then he should be able to close in safely and somehow finish the Necromancer off with his katars.

Was it a good plan? No, but it was everything he could come up with immediately, and quite frankly, he didn't have the time to think up anything more elaborate as the miasma was growing in intensity and density. Despite how much he tried, he couldn't fully eliminate the toxins in his body either, as he was repeatedly forced to breathe in miasmic fumes.

Using his still far superior speed, Jake got around the Necromancer and, through much struggle, managed to land an arrow on the knee of the Risen. Sadly, his second shot was blocked by a hammer, and even when Jake tried to shoot from an awkward angle, the Necromancer also blocked the third.

With only two arrows remaining, Jake gave it his all. Despite his growing headache, he unleashed a Fear Gaze and, due to that, landed a second arrow in the same knee as the first. The Necromancer was brought to his knee, and right as he wanted to remove it, Jake landed the final one as he rapidly closed in.

Mentally, he commanded the arrows to explode. The resulting explosion heavily damaged the kneecap and left an opening for Jake. Using his bow, he swung it down with one of the sharp ends straight into the knee and, using it almost as a crowbar, tore the entire leg of the Necromancer off.

The strain snapped the sharp tip of the bow, but Jake didn't have time to even consider it as he had to dodge a swing from the hammer of the now one-legged Necromancer, who was mid-fall.



Jake stumbled back as he coughed up more blood, getting a bit of distance to try and stabilize himself. That is when he realized he had made another mistake.

His opponent pushed himself to stand using his hammer as an odd ethereal chain appeared in his other hand. His movements were oddly calm as he swung it down and wrapped it around the leg that Jake had just severed as he let go of the chain. Before Jake could even react, the falling chain moved by itself in mid-air and wrapped around the thigh of the Necromancer as it yanked the leg and reattached it.

Shifting his weight, the Risen stepped down on the leg that had been severed just moments before as he took a step forward. It was obvious that the leg was stiff as hell, and he seemed unable to bend the knee more than a few degrees... but he could still walk.

*Fuck me,* Jake cursed.

Out of arrows, Jake did the final thing he could. Running forward with all the strength he had, he had a katar in one hand and his bow in the other. Still being faster, he dodged the first hammer swing as he jammed the bow into the leg with chains keeping it in place. The bow penetrated through the already broken armor from Jake's relentless attacks and pinned the Necromancer to the ground for a second.

At the same time, a katar stabbed the Necromancer in the shoulder of the arm wielding the hammer. He penetrated through the seams and was bombarded with miasma from the wound as it spewed out as if he had punctured a gas canister.

Jake barely managed to avoid another hammer swing, but his footsteps were uneven due to the miasma as the Necromancer punched him hard in the chest. Groaning, Jake still refused to back down as he stabbed the Risen once more, and this time, he managed to avoid both follow-up attacks.

His objective to literally disarm the Necromancer was close as the Risen forced himself to fully stand once more after getting pinned. Jake cautiously waited for an opening as he dodged several hammer swings before he finally saw it. Using his katars, Jake redirected the hammer into the sand, and as it smashed into it, Jake used the momentum to slide one of his katars up the handle of the hammer. A trail of arcane energy was left behind as Jake swept his weapon upward, four fingers flying up with it. With a swift, arcane-empowered kick, Jake followed up and made the Necromancer stumble back, his hammer still embedded in the ground as his mostly fingerless right hand could no longer hold it.

Despite his minor victory in their exchange, Jake didn't feel even the slightest sense of relief. He was on a tight timer, and even breathing hurt like hell, and his body was beginning to feel sloppy.

*I need to end this...*

Charging forward again, Jake unleashed a flurry of attacks as he tore apart much of the Necromancer's armor. His opponent struggled as he tried to land attacks, but Jake did all he could to not take more damage than he already had.

Sadly, he was far from in an optimal state. In a crucial moment, a coughing fit overtook him, making Jake slightly too slow, dodging as a hand wrapped around his forearm and pulled him closer.

Jake had been caught as the Necromancer wrapped his arms around Jake and squeezed him against his body. His sense of danger was going haywire, and he tried the only thing he could think of. Jake barely managed to get his arms free as he stabbed both katars into the Risen's neck. His opponent barely reacted as Jake roared, and he tore his arms apart with as much power as he had, even releasing a small arcane explosion.

A head wearing a helmet with a single antler on it flew into the air as blood splurged all over Jake. It landed with a heavy thud on the sand... but the relief did not come to Jake.

The arms trapping him squeezed harder as Jake had all the air in his lungs pushed out. The blood covering his body from the severed head began to evaporate as the miasma formed all around him. Jake struggled with every shred of strength he had, even making his body explode with arcane energy to try and get free, but he found his pathways clogged up by the poison.

Soon, the miasma closed in. Jake kept trying to get free as his body weakened... his resources emptied, and his internal organs began to decompose. His vision went dark as time seemed to slow down, and he pulled on the final thing he had. A deep thumping sound echoed a single time, but instantly, Jake stopped it as he got an odd sense of wrongness... a second later, a message echoed in his mind, and his consciousness ceased to exist.

**You have died.**

Vilastromoz sighed as he looked at the fight reach its conclusion. Jake's strategy had been all fine and good, assuming he faced a normal opponent. However, the one named the Necromancer was far from normal and not someone who would die merely from having his chest blown apart.

He was a general working directly under his fellow Primordial, after all. The highest-ranking general in the entire Risen faction, in fact, and a man that not even Primordials had any confidence in killing. Not necessarily because he was as powerful as them, but because the mere act of killing him wasn't exactly an easy ordeal.

So... yeah, there really wasn't any shame in it, was there? If one did have to lose a life during the Challenge Dungeon, doing so to the Transcendent known as the Undying General wasn't the worst.

Even if it was a significantly weakened version. The true Undying General was not a duelist, after all, but a general who led armies into battle. He commanded legions of gods in the war against the Holy Church and had, throughout the eras, slain thousands of gods belonging to them. He was a true menace on the battlefield, and even during the times the Holy Mother herself made an appearance, she failed to slay him for good.

Outside of his ability to be borderline impossible to kill, his powers revolved very much around leading these armies and making them more powerful while also borrowing their power as his own. He was a fearsome being that the Blightfather sent to any conflict he wanted to ensure victory in, striking fear into the hearts of any who stood in opposition to the march of the Undying Army.

So, yeah. Jake had picked the first opponent to kill him pretty well.

Besides, there was an upside.

"To bet against your own Chosen... how shameless," Minaga muttered, shaking his head.

"Are you going to renege on a bet again?" the Viper raised an eyebrow, not displaying the slightest sense of shame from betting on Jake dying. "In the presence of your great friend and fellow colleague? If that is so, Jake will also be super disappointed that you could display such shamelessness."

Through grumbles, Minaga muttered that, of course, he wouldn't as he practically threw the Viper an ingot of metal that Vilastromoz gladly accepted. He also reminded himself to thank Jake for dying once he got the chance. Dying like that was definitely a great friend move.

Of course, if Minaga wanted to bet again, the Viper would put his money on Jake winning the rematch.

Jake appeared in an entirely white room the very next moment as a system menu popped up in front of his eyes.

### **Three Resurrection Points Available:**

- 1. The day the challenge to the Necromancer was issued.**
- 2. Fifteen days after the challenge to the Necromancer was issued.**
- 3. The same day that the fight with the Necromancer took place.**

**Choose one Resurrection point.**

Reading the options, Jake had to admit that he had kind of wondered exactly how this entire "multiple lives" thing would work, and it turned out it was pretty much a save system with different checkpoints. Well, at least that was better than blacking out and waking up in a hospital bed while being told he "barely made it" or something else dumb like that.

Considering his choices only for a moment, he decided on the second one.

Jake made his choice, and in the blink of an eye, he found himself lying in a bed back at the townhouse. An odd sense of Deja-vu hit him, which shouldn't be that surprising considering he had just returned to a prior point in time, but he still felt the need to check his system menu to confirm it wasn't just his own mind fucking with him.

### **Lives remaining: 9**

He had really died. It was an odd feeling indeed. Well, okay, it wasn't true death, but just a Challenge Dungeon death, and he had a feeling being put in a similar situation outside of a scenario with multiple lives would have ended differently. The fight certainly would have, as Jake would have bailed out the second the Necromancer yelled Undying and became seemingly immortal.

Also... it was quite the way to die.

"For my first fucking death to be to poison is oddly... is ironic even the word? No matter what, it's pretty damn funny for the Chosen of the Malefic Viper to be poisoned to death," Jake muttered as he grinned stupidly to himself.

Not having Palate of the Malefic Viper seriously sucked. It was the kind of skill Jake just took for granted, but it really was utterly broken, wasn't it? How in the hell did a skill even give such insane resistance and even immunity to poison? Jake had the feeling that if he had Palate, the fight would have been easy despite the Necromancer being some freak semi-immortal Transcendent.

Anyway... Jake had lost, but his spirit hadn't diminished in the slightest. His opponent had been an incredibly powerful monster in the form of a Risen, and Jake had gone in with a lack of information and a bad plan. At least it was a bad plan for the type of foe he was fighting.

That is why Jake had chosen to resurrect fifteen days before the fight. He wanted to make new preparations, but he didn't need to go back an entire month or even choose another opponent. No, even if he had lost once, he was confident in winning the rematch.

He also mentally addressed what had happened in those final moments before he died. Jake had felt a sense of desperation and tried to reach for something that he now wasn't quite sure of what was... but he knew that the moment he did, he felt it was a

bad idea to do. It was a "there is a time and place for everything" moment, and a Challenge Dungeon like this was obviously neither. Exactly what Jake had tried to do... Jake had a feeling he didn't necessarily ever want to find out.

Sighing, Jake got off the bed and stretched. He had preparations to make, and as he walked out of the bedroom, he saw Owen and Polly approach through his sphere... which was when he realized something.

For the next fifteen days, he would be forced to rehash the same conversations while potentially even having to explain why he knew things he clearly shouldn't be able to.

So, it appeared there was still a major punishment from dying in the Colosseum, at least on the mental front.

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## Chapter 770: Nevermore: Death & Flames

*Exactly how long is this gonna take?* Jake wondered as he balanced atop the pole of stable arcane mana, holding his bow ready. *It has to have a time limit or something, right?*

Staring down, he observed the arena below, mainly using his sphere as the dense miasma covered pretty much everything. Inside this cloud of thick miasma, right smack-center of the arena, lay a torso with only a head attached. Fifteen meters away to one side was a leg, an arm was nailed to the wall in another direction, the second leg was thrown all the way to Jake's starting area, and the final arm was nailed into another wall directly opposite the first. Well, alright, the limbs weren't all in complete condition, but the majority of them were spread out like that, with a few fingers and plenty of minor parts just lying about below.

Jake had entered his rematch with the Necromancer, now knowing what kind of foe he would be dealing with. He spent his fifteen days preparing everything he could while replaying the same damn social interactions again with Polly and Owen. Only through sheer struggle did he overcome the urge to bring up future knowledge and attempt to convince them he was actually a time god.

As for the fight itself... there was not much to say. Jake had learned all he needed about the Necromancer's fighting style during their first fight, and for the second time around, he didn't bother with some big finishers.

Instead, he quickly moved to get the upper hand by using his special arrow to take off one of the Necromancer's legs. After that, he promptly separated it from the Necromancer and, one by one, severed his limbs primarily using ranged attacks. With one leg, the Necromancer couldn't really dodge anything, and using mana strings, Jake was quicker at yanking away limbs than the Necromancer.

Of course, that still meant he had a cloud of miasma to deal with, but Jake also had a way to handle that.

When Jake had entered the fight initially, he had not only brought what he could store in his Ring of Deft Hands but also several poles of stable arcane energy with one end sharpened, making them look almost like spears. Two of these were now used to hold limbs in place; two had gotten destroyed, and Jake was standing on top of one that had been embedded into the top of one of the pillars. There were still a few left in the miasma below, but he didn't need those anymore.

Once the Necromancer was well and truly cut up, the miasma nearly covered the entire arena, at which point Jake penetrated the pole into the top of one of the pillars and stood on it. The miasma was heavier than air, it seemed, and it never went higher than a little above the pillars, so when Jake stood on a two-meter pole, he was entirely in the clear. It was also a nice way to practice his archery while balancing.

Because even if the Necromancer had lost all his limbs, he still tried to get them back. Jake hadn't seen it the first time around, even if the Necromancer did mention during their short conversation before the fight he was capable of it, but the dude could summon skeletons. Weak-ass skeletons, but skeletons, nevertheless. He didn't try to fight Jake with them but used them to retrieve his limbs, so Jake still had to keep an eye out and shoot a skeleton once in a while as the minutes passed.

Standing there, waiting for the Necromancer to just die already, he had plenty of time to fully reflect on his prior loss. It had been his first "death" ever since the system arrived, even if it wasn't a true death. Jake would have thought the feeling would have been more upsetting, but he felt oddly fine with it... because he knew that if this had not been a Challenge Dungeon but the real world, he would have just upped and left the second the Necromancer became seemingly immortal.

Jake wasn't averse to retreating if the situation wasn't salvageable. He just treated the Challenge Dungeon differently, as he knew dying was just part of the experience. If he treated the real world like the dungeon by just staying moronically in a fight he couldn't win, Jake would have died quite a few times already, such as when he nearly fell to that damn mushroom below Haven when he was still in E-grade or versus the Termite King.

Comparing a true death to one inside a Challenge Dungeon was just idiotic. Besides, many Challenge Dungeons were designed to only end when one died. Maybe the Colosseum of Mortals even worked like that. One also had to remember that these were

fights taking place in an unfavorable setting where Jake would avoid fighting if it was a true fight to the death.

The arena was just ridiculously advantageous for someone like the Necromancer. Seriously, it was a small, enclosed arena versus a semi-immortal guy who was all about outlasting his opponent who created a cloud of miasma. A cloud that, under any normal circumstances, Jake could have just stayed away from for the entire duration of the fight, making it a total non-issue.

Finally... if this had been a fight in the real world, Jake would have been willing to risk far more. For if true death was on the table, he would be willing to pull on anything to survive and, at the very least, try to ensure mutual destruction.

Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as he suddenly felt the miasma below start to thin out, signifying something had changed with the Necromancer. For a second, Jake considered if there was a second phase or some shit like that, but when he focused... he felt that the soul of the Necromancer had left his body as his final words echoed out.

**"Your victory... well-earned..."**

With those words, the miasma seemed to evaporate instantly, and even the small insignificant smidgens in Jake's body were eliminated.

"And we have a winner! The Doombringer has brought doom upon the Necromancer! It was a grueling and hard-fought battle, but the Gauntlet of Champions continues for the challenger! Now go! Rest, and return to continue your conquest!"

Cheers, and all that sounded out... and Jake's suspension of disbelief was seriously beginning to wane. Did nobody in the audience care that the fight had effectively been Jake bisecting his opponent and then waiting on a pole for a good ten minutes for him to die? If Jake had been an audience member, he would have demanded his money back, especially considering you couldn't even see the arena for the majority of the fight due to the miasma.

Anyway, Jake had to remember why he was there and once more reminded himself that trying to understand the dungeon was a fool's game. So, rather than waste his time and mental energy, he walked out of the arena, his next objective already in mind.

Three Champions down, four to go. And Jake, after doing some research, had already decided on who he wanted to fight next. Originally, the plan had been the Lord of the Hunt, but during these fifteen days, he happened to encounter a certain Phoenix Queen, which had made him quite curious about her. Get full chapters from

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She had a Bloodline, after all.



Jake couldn't wait to find out what it was all about... and she seemingly couldn't either. While the Archmage and Necromancer had both wanted a full month, the Phoenix Queen made the wait just three days. This did put Jake on a bit of an unexpected timer, but he just had to make a special arrow, as he already had a game plan for everything else she could throw at him. Besides the Bloodline stuff, of course.

"Not that interesting of a rematch," Vilastromoz shrugged.

"Hey man, we had to make him a one-trick pony, or the fight would have been impossible," Minaga said, leaning back. "And Jake dealt with his one trick and won. Pretty simple, really. Or are you saying we should have given him the Undying Banner?"

The Viper nodded, smiling at the notion of him having that monstrous artifact. Naturally, the real Undying General would not die to something that simple, and he had plenty of methods to control his miasmic cloud and keep his opponents and allies inside of it, but for the Challenge Dungeon, they had to make him way weaker or he would indeed have been impossible. It was very much the same reason why Jake didn't meet a single opponent that could fly. While Jake could still handle a flying opponent, to some, it would just mean a default loss, as they, at level 0, simply would have no means of fighting back.

Of course, that didn't mean there weren't more unfair opponents. In fact, of the final four Champions, Vilastromoz would rate two of them as straight-up unfair, with the first of which being Jake's next opponent.

It was a fight he was genuinely curious... for it would be a clash of opposing Bloodlines. A Bloodline rooted in the power of illusions that sought to fool your opponent's senses and fool reality itself and one that was purely Perception-based. It was a rare opportunity indeed.

Though, perhaps, knowing Jake... Vilastromoz should not have been surprised by the outcome.

The entire arena was a bloody hellscape. Everything was on fire as an inferno roared, brought on by a single beastkin floating around with labored breathing as she unleashed her magic. Transparent flaming wings sprung from her back, spewing out fire like there was no tomorrow. All in an attempt to burn a singular archer within this sea of flames.

Jake, standing toward the middle of the arena, was entirely covered in flames, yet they seemed to not bother him. At times, he would still dodge seemingly nothing as he loosed the occasional arrow, forcing the Phoenix Queen to try and dodge or block. She had about a seventy-percent chance to avoid getting hit, but with time, the damage was accumulating.

What's more, was the mental damage she was taking as nothing she did seemed to work. Jake was pretty burnt in many places, but the more time passed, the less he got hit.

Jake had taken a bit to figure out what the Bloodline of the Phoenix Queen was all about, and it had taken a bit longer than he would have liked. In the end, he concluded that her Bloodline was linked to illusions, more accurately, fire illusions.

The Phoenix Queen was capable of creating flames that were both real and unreal at the same time. Illusory flames that were obvious illusions to Jake's Bloodline-powered senses, yet at any moment, they could become real and burn you, with the opposite also being true: very obvious real flames suddenly turning illusory, doing nothing.

Nothing mundane could truly distinguish them, and the most dangerous was when she mixed the two, creating flames that were real but that you couldn't feel. These flames could even be "real" to the body but only illusions to your clothes, making you burn without your equipment getting affected. It was like they bypassed the Perception stat and even armor entirely, and she could set someone on fire without them feeling an iota of pain. If they watched their Health Points, they could probably see it going down, but there really was no other way...

Well, there was no other way for anyone normal. Jake was far from normal.

See, the reason why Jake had taken so long to understand the Bloodline – and even now, he wasn't entirely sure on most things – was that... well, it didn't really work properly on him? At least it didn't seem to work correctly based on the reactions of the poor Phoenix Lady.

Jake could still easily distinguish the real from fake flames, and while she could change their states, it wasn't instant, so he had a pretty easy time dodging the fires that actually hurt while they were still transitioning from fake to real. And with the vast majority of the flames being illusory at all times, Jake had plenty of space to judge with, even if the arena looked fully on fire.

Needless to say, a level 0 could not fill the entire arena in a sea of flames by themselves, especially not for a prolonged period, but when ninety-five percent or more of the flames didn't actually exist? Yeah, that definitely saved a lot of mana.

Not that it helped the Phoenix Queen much that she saved this mana... as chances are she would run out of health before mana.

Ultimately, no two Bloodlines were equal. When the two of them were put on an even playing field by being the same level, the main decider was whose Bloodline was better... and, well, Jake won handily there. If Jake had been level 250 and faced the Phoenix Queen as a level 280 or something, chances are, she could have fooled even

Jake's Bloodline because, at that point, two Bloodlines clashing was akin to two normal skills clashing, as they were both equally outside the rules of the system.

So, with a level and power advantage, her flames should have been able to fool Jake... maybe. In all honesty, Jake wasn't sure if it could totally fool something like his Danger Sense and Intuition as they didn't "interact" with the magic directly but were more something based entirely on himself. His Sphere, though? Yeah, even the level 0 Phoenix Queen's illusory flames took Jake a moment to see through, even now that he kind of understood how they worked.

By this point, the fight itself had already been going on for nearly five minutes. Jake, despite being at a disadvantage at the beginning as he tried to understand his opponent, now firmly had the upper hand as the Phoenix Queen focused on dodging, relying on her high speed brought on by her summoned fire wings.

Using her illusory flames, she tried to hide her form and even made fire clones of herself, but Jake easily distinguished them and focused on the only real beastkin floating around. She did try to hide using all means possible, even making sure to pull out any arrows Jake struck her with so he couldn't use his own mana to track her.

Not that it helped her when he could see the entire arena using his sphere. Again, it was quite a bit more difficult than normal, as most of the illusory flames did look real to his sphere at first glance, but with focus, he would tell the difference between more complex illusions like her clones and the real thing pretty easily.

With her illusion not working and Jake capable of dodging most of her attacks, she didn't have much more to show for herself. Jake, deciding to finish the fight, set up a trap as he cast a net of arcane strings that managed to entangle the Phoenix Queen's foot, and before she could burn it off and get free, Jake landed his special quasi-Protean Arrow. The design of this one was pretty simple as Jake wasn't sure exactly what he would need, but he did know that she wasn't heavily armored, so he went with one to maximize damage.

That turned out to be a good choice, as the Phoenix Queen was blasted back. Jake had hit her square in the chest, sending blood flying everywhere. She crashed into the back wall of the arena, her entire middle section crushed, and when the arrow exploded, her entire body was practically obliterated. In the end, she had been a caster, making her quite squishy, and to ensure his victory, Jake had no real choice but to just go for the kill.

At least, he thought he had gone for the kill.

The scattered blood and guts suddenly turned into deep red flames and flew toward the corpse of the Phoenix Queen, gathering as it formed a new body. The faint cry of a phoenix echoed throughout the arena as the beastkin's body was entirely remade with seemingly not a single injury.

Jake was momentarily taken by surprise at her resurrection – which he really shouldn't have been as she was called a bloody phoenix – and quickly nocked an arrow. However, before he could shoot, she opened her mouth.

"I... I surrender!" she yelled with labored breathing as she leaned against the wall. At the same time as she declared her loss, all of the flames disappeared like dew in the morning sun. Taking a second look at the Phoenix Queen, Jake understood why she had surrendered. Whatever resurrection move she had made had also turned her into a sitting duck, and based on how weak she felt, she was in no condition to fight. Probably wouldn't be for a long time.

"We have a winner! Once more, the Doombringer..."

Jake didn't listen much more as he just smiled and raised a hand as the support staff of the Colosseum rushed in to help the Phoenix Queen stand. With confident steps, he walked out of the arena headed straight for the Quartermaster to get his armor replaced, as while he had avoided most of the flames, he was still pretty much half-naked after the fight.

Having such an easy opponent after the Necromancer was a nice feeling... and a nice example of how these level 0 fights were very much a rock-paper-scissor kind of situation, much like the Battlemaster had explained. Someone like the Phoenix Queen could have probably beaten the Necromancer by burning away his miasma, while Jake would assume someone like Umbra could just kill the Phoenix Queen before she truly had the ability to display all her skills.

And... in all honesty, Jake could have probably beaten the Phoenix Queen way earlier, too, if he hadn't wanted to understand her Bloodline first. He was a counter to her, after all, so if he didn't have an easy time, how was anyone else supposed to even beat her?

Of course, if one wanted to become the Grand Champion, one had to beat people they were weak against. They had to become the infamous gun in the game of rock-paper-scissor. In other words, become a complete cheat that could beat anyone. Even if it did take an extra life here and there.

Either way, this was four Champions down, with three to go. As for who the next target was?

Well, it was high time to prove that Jake was the true Lord of the Hunt.

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## Chapter 771: Nevermore: Lord of the Hunt

The Lord of the Hunt was an opponent Jake had been interested in for a long time. Well, alright, not that long, but ever since he heard of the title, he had been interested in fighting the one who held it. He already knew a bit about her, as she had shown up for every single one of his fights so far to scout him out, which had also given Jake the chance to check her out in turn.

She was an elf who really gave off those traditional wood elf fantasy vibes. She wore a hooded dark green cloak, wielded two swords and a bow, and had a distinct smell of nature around her at all times. It reminded Jake a bit of Dina, confirming the research that she possessed powerful nature magic to support her archery.

When Jake chose to issue the challenge, he had assumed her to accept pretty fast, as she had clearly already been researching him for months, yet she chose to wait an entire month, just like the Necromancer and Archmage. Jake really wasn't sure why but ended up concluding she needed more prep time... which could only mean she was getting something big ready. That, or she was just not in a rush to get her ass beaten.

One also had to remember that elves lived several times longer than humans, even if they were only G or F-grade level 0's. Jake was very abruptly reminded of this when Polly shared she was fifty-seven years old, and Jake had to resist with every fiber of his body to not call her an old hag. Okay, he had not tried that hard as he had failed to resist only ten minutes after she told him, which had earned him a few angry slaps on his arm, but hey, at least Owen already seemed to know, so her age was no obstacle to Jake's matchmaking ventures.

Anyway, this difference in lifespan meant that waiting a month probably didn't feel as long to her as it did to Jake. At least, that was one theory he had.

The month quickly passed as Jake made all of his preparations based on the research he had done. He once more jam-packed his quiver with arrows, hoping it would be enough for the upcoming duel. One he really, *really* hoped would be an archery duel. Jake would very much like an archery duel, and for it not to turn out that the Lord of the Hunt was just a damn druid who carried around a bow.

Meeting up with the Battlemaster just before the fight, Jake got a few good pieces of advice.

"When you fight the Lord of the Hunt, don't just believe you are battling an archer. While that is certainly her main power, she has integrated nature magic with it near-flawlessly. Do not under any circumstances disregard any of her arrows, even if they miss, for they may never have meant to hit you in the first place. What's more, watch your feet and don't get yourself caught in her tempo, as if you do, you may just find yourself entangled

in something you would very much prefer to not engage with," the middle-aged man advised.

"Man, you are incredibly forthcoming with information today," Jake smiled as he watched the timer till the fight would start count down. "Couldn't you have warned me about the Necromancer or the Phoenix Queen too? Especially that Necromancer guy."

"I could have, sure," the Battlemaster nodded as he smirked. "But I didn't. No, the reason I am giving you this advice is because she came and asked me yesterday about you. Now, normally, I would have said no and not said anything, but she said that if I gave some information on you, I could give you some information on her, too."

"Wait, so what would have happened if I hadn't decided to check in with you before the fight?" Jake questioned. Technically, he didn't have to talk to the Battlemaster after the fight was scheduled, but he just had to show up for the starting time.

"Well, then you would have missed out due to your own lack of manners," the middle-aged man stated curtly.

"You know what? That's kind of fair," Jake smiled. "Just one more thing. I really want a pure archery duel. Will I get an archer duel?"

The Battlemaster broke out in a massive grin as he chuckled. "Funny you should ask... because she asked the same thing."

Jake stood behind the bars as he observed his opponent through the gaps. Using his eyes and his sphere, he saw that she was indeed an elf, and even before the battle had begun, she already had a quiver full of arrows and a bow in her hand. Good start there. The most update novels are published on **novel**♦*fire*♦**net**

A armor-wise, she wore stuff very similar to Jake, except she also had her big cloak. Currently, she had the hood down, revealing her long hair and face with odd tribal markings on it. As Jake observed her, so did she observe him, and based on the intensity of her gaze, he was facing a true genius. A person of unquestionable smartness.

For she was no doubt a Perception-focused fighter.

Using Identify almost on instinct, Jake was a bit taken aback at the result.

### **[Wood Elf]**

It turned out that wood elf was an actual race. Jake hadn't known that but just assumed people who were called wood elves were just regular elves who lived in the woods... which was honestly a pretty bad assumption considering dark elves were their own

race. Wait, did this mean there were high dark elves, the same as there were regular high elves?

So many questions, so little time, as the announcer was done with his empty speech introducing the fighters

"Without further ado, let's see these two archers face off! Lower the gates!"

As the gates lowered, Jake walked forward with calm steps as his opponent did the same. She also pulled the hood over her head, obscuring most of her features, but it also served another feature. Her cloak seemed to flow oddly, creating something akin to an optical illusion whenever she moved, with the effect reminding Jake a bit of the old Prismatic Cloak he used to wear.

Not that it would affect Jake much, but he could see how it could throw off other opponents, especially those morons with lesser Perception.

Jake stopped walking a good fifty meters from his opponent, strategically right next to a pillar. Funnily enough, his opponent did the same as they looked at each other. As he was about to speak, she broke the silence first.

"Tell me, he who is called Doombringer... are you truly an archer as they all seem to say?"

Her voice was so obviously hinting at something that Jake could only shake his head in response. "Why? Because a mere archer would never have the chance to beat you?"

"That is not the case. I merely wish to know if my instincts are correct. Archers are but warriors who use bows... it is their weapon, much like any other. It could be a bow, a sword, or a spear. So I ask once more... are you just an archer?" she said as her sharp green eyes were momentarily revealed beneath her hood.

Jake met them and grinned. "Meaningless semantics, but no, I don't call myself "just" an archer, and I am quite sure you already knew that. Which is why I have quite a pertinent question."

She smiled as she crouched down, successfully reading the mood.

"How dare you call yourself the Lord of the Hunt before a superior hunter?"

Right as he finished his words, his opponent had nocked an arrow and released it. Jake instantly dodged behind the pillar he had purposefully stood next to. In his sphere, he saw her nock another arrow. Thinking quick, Jake faked her out by not going all the way around the pillar as she expected but fired his arrow while never leaving the safety of the pillar.



It curved around, straight for the wood elf. Jake hadn't expected it to hit, and it naturally didn't as she quickly shot her second arrow into the pillar Jake was hiding behind, joining the first one. Then, she moved behind her own pillar, making Jake's arrow miss. With a thought, he made it explode, but the pillar absorbed the impact without even leaving a mark on her cloak.

Jake smiled as he nocked another arrow, but his smile soon faded. *Good one.*

Quickly moving, he got away from the pillar he had been behind before it turned into a problem for him. The Battlemaster's warning had been quite warranted as Jake saw that the two arrows she had shot earlier were more than just attempts to hit him. Each of them had sprouted after hitting the pillar, sending what looked like tendrils of grass into it to rapidly tear it apart from within. Like weeds ripping through concrete, she had planned to take away Jake's defenses.

Seeing Jake react faster than she had expected, the wood elf came out from behind her pillar and tried to land an arrow on Jake, but he easily dodged it as he shot his own after the elf, once more curving it around. The wood elf only narrowly managed to avoid it as it came from a tricky angle. After dodging, she also chose to abandon her pillar and moved out into the open.

A good choice. All the pillar had done for his opponent was obscure her view, while she had quickly identified that Jake seemingly didn't need visual contact to locate his opponent. So, despite how counterproductive it seemed, having the pillar as cover would harm her more than it would help.

One would think that an archery duel right out in the open would lead to a quick resolution, but it proved not to be the case. Jake and the elf both rapidly fired over a dozen arrows after one another, as both dodged flawlessly while keeping up their own assaults. The more time passed, the more sure Jake became.

*Her instincts... are like mine.*

Bestial Survival instincts. It was a skill Jake had been offered that had instantly been transformed into Moment of , but seeing the elf dodge as she did, he became sure she had something similar, but naturally far superior to the rare skill he had been offered back then.

Was it an innate talent? A special skill? A passive Transcendent? Jake didn't know, but he knew that he was facing another beast in human form as she erratically moved to dodge every single arrow he released with a huge toothy grin on her face. Smiling to himself, Jake faced her head-on for a few more seconds as the arrows kept flying for a few more seconds, but this couldn't last.

Through his sphere, he saw that the wood elf was also quickly running out of arrows, the same as him. She also seemed to realize this, and at nearly the exact same time,

both of them switched strategies. Jake summoned a barrier of arcane mana to deflect a few arrows with the intent of winning the arrow trade duel, but the second arrow never arrived after he deflected the first one to strike the sand right between his feet.

Instead, it was shot into the air. Jake glanced up as the arrow seemed to bloom in mid-air before exploding. Tilting his barrier upwards, Jake blocked the small rice-sized projectiles with ease, but he quickly realized the goal had never been to hit him with them.

Instead, all the small projectiles turned out to be seeds, and from the lifeless sand, plants began to sprout. Jake had at first been worried and ready to blow up the area around him, but he quickly realized none of them were attacking. No vines sprouted to try and entangle him, and no wooden branches were shot up and tried to impale his foot. Instead, they were just shrubs, weeds, and grass... all of it harmless.

However, the relief was short-lived.

The many arrows the elf had shot during the fight were embedded in different places in the sand all around him, with a few also in the wall far behind him. As one, all of these arrows suddenly began to react with the intense nature energy from the newly formed undergrowth of the arena, with each doing something dependent on how far away they were from Jake.

If an arrow was close, it exploded into several grasping vines, while those at a medium distance sent out just one thin, sharp vine. Finally, those at a long distance – primarily those embedded in the arena wall far behind him – shot out small thorns like were they blowpipes.

Jake's eyes opened wide as he tried to dodge the dozens of attacks arriving at once. Releasing a blast of arcane mana to blow away some vines bought him a second of time, but when one entangled his leg – the one he had just deflected to be between his legs a few seconds earlier - he became unable as the wood elf naturally didn't just sit still while Jake was dealing with her trap.

Hardening his skin with a barrier of arcane mana allowed him to block most of the thorns that he now felt had poison on them, but the arrow from the elf wasn't something a quick barrier on his skin could block. An arrow struck Jake in the thigh, and as he also struggled to get free, he instantly grasped it with his free hand and sent a powerful wave of destructive arcane mana into it. This proved to be a good choice as he made it disintegrate right as it began to bloom within his leg... Jake really didn't want to know what would happen if an arrow bloomed within his leg.

The second arrow that the elf shot, Jake managed to deflect using his bow, though he still got a nasty cut on his shoulder. When she loosed the third one, Jake had already gotten free and stomped down to clear much of the shrubbery in his immediate area as he fled away from anywhere she had embedded any arrows.

Like him, her arrows were pre-prepared and meticulously made. Each of them had intense magic infused into them, making them all incredibly dangerous, even more so than Jake's own arcane arrows. Her shooting speed was also equal to Jake's own, despite his recent improvements and constant application of arcane energy to push his body further. Jake's only real advantage was that he could make his arrows curve, but she made up for that by being slightly faster movement-wise compared to Jake.

All-in-all, they were incredibly equally matched, and Jake didn't want to see himself be outdone. It wasn't fair he was the only one injured, right?

Moving quickly, Jake dodged an arrow as he shot one of his own into the air before quickly shooting another toward the elf who was standing out in the open. She dodged the arrow flawlessly as Jake shot another one that seemed like it would entirely miss, plus it was far slower than any of those prior.

He saw a moment of confusion on her face as Jake grinned right as he shot his fourth one, this one straight for her at full speed. She naturally dodged it, still keeping an eye on the third arrow... right as the first one he had shot into the air descended. Clearly, she had been aware of this one, too, but she had not expected what happened next.

The arrow Jake had shot into the air exploded before it reached the ground, hitting the third arrow that was still in mid-air. The shockwave sped it up and changed its trajectory far too quickly and in a far too unpredictable manner for the elf to be able to react in time as she, too, was struck in her thigh.

Jake tried to make it explode, but like him, she instantly grasped it and infused her own nature energy right as he tried to, stopping the activation as she snapped it off, still leaving the tip embedded to stop the bleeding.

Both archers stared at each other for a second. Jake had only five arrows left in his quiver, while the wood elf had two. Yet right at that moment, the wood elf gave a teasing wink as she lifted her cloak, revealing a second bundle of tied-up arrows at her hip with more than twenty additional ones.

*Well, I'll be damned*, Jake thought as he couldn't hold back a smile himself. When he had dodged around before, he and the wood elf had switched position, meaning Jake was now standing where she had been when they exchanged their barrage of arrows... meaning he was surrounded by his own stable arrows of arcane mana.

Arrows that were far too durable to break just from being shot into a wall or the sand, so when Jake sent out dozens of strings of arcane mana, he quickly yanked eighteen out of the sand and back into his quiver; the elf gladly giving him the time to do so as she also put her additional arrows into her quiver.

Their eyes met, both slightly wounded with nearly full quivers once more as round two began, yet also both unable to hold back a smile. Jake had to admit he was having fun, and clearly, so was the wood elf.

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## Chapter 772: Nevermore: Tending To Wounds

A question had been gnawing in the back of Jake's mind for a while. One that had been further amplified by Sim-Jake whenever he first met him and made even worse as he rose through the grades and went through the many opponents in the Colosseum of Mortals:

Did archers suck in the multiverse?

As in, was it just a worse way to fight than most others? Jake did have to admit that the number of archers he had seen or knew of that were at the pinnacle was limited at best, and not a single one of the Primordials used a bow. In fact, the strongest entity Jake knew of that used a bow was Gwyndyr, and he was apparently viewed as much as a fire mage as an archer.

Meanwhile, there were mages using all the schools of magic everywhere, and weapons like swords and spears were hugely popular. Even the Court of Shadows, an organization of assassins that Jake assumed would use bows instead, used fucking guns to shoot stuff. Sure, he knew it was because guns – which were just fancy wands – had better synergy with all their shadow magic stuff... but still.

Even Minaga, a being who had no skills and thus no Path he was better suited for than others, chose to make magic the thing he practiced the most. While he had learned all weapons based on what he said, including the bow, he had ultimately stuck with magic as his most powerful tool. Jake knew it was not as simple as him deciding that magic was best, but that magic had way more diversity and even the ability to do rituals and formation magic using several clones at once, but when he was fighting one-on-one, he could at least use a bow here and there, right?

But, despite this lack of bow users, Jake had never doubted using it. It was entirely possible that Jake would have been more powerful if he had dedicated all his time to practicing magic and improving his melee fighting, yet he had never seriously considered dropping the bow, even when his other self from a different reality proposed it.

Ultimately, Jake just liked using the bow. He had fun fighting with the bow more than with any other weapon, and he firmly believed that he could reach the pinnacle no matter what weapon or method of combat he chose, so why not go with the one he enjoyed the most?

Due to the way Records worked, Paths were passed down, so if more gods used swords, they would naturally pass down Records and classes related to using swords. So, the problem in Jake's mind wasn't that bows sucked, just that there weren't enough powerful people around to pass down Legacies.

Also... not once had Villy advised Jake against using the bow. Not that Jake would have stopped using it even if the Primordial told him he should, but it at least meant that the Viper didn't think it was a hopeless Path. Jake just believed that there had never been anyone to truly display the brilliance of the bow, not even amongst the gods... and if that was the case, Jake just had to be the first, right?

Anyway, the point is that powerful people who were also archers were rare. So, to finally have a chance to face someone else who used a bow was an experience Jake reveled in.

The fact she was even a hunter only made it better, and meeting her eyes, it was clear she was enjoying the situation, too.

With both of them having arrows once more, their duel continued, but with the circumstances slightly different. Both of them were injured slightly and thus had limited mobility, making dodging harder. Could they have sought behind pillars to take cover? Yes... but they weren't only fighting to win but to prove who was better.

To take cover would be to recognize that you were inferior in an open duel, something both of them refused to do. For a predator to flee before another predator like that would be to willingly choose the role of prey, and both of them would rather risk losing than do that.

Jake was the first to land a hit as an arrow penetrated the lower leg of the elven archer. Right after, Jake found himself entrapped as an arrow that had been embedded in a pillar suddenly exploded, releasing a rain of thorns in his direction, forcing him to jump back and take an arrow in his forearm.

Gritting his teeth, Jake began focusing on shooting more tricky arrows. He made them bend at more unpredictable angles, taking her by surprise several times as several cuts began to mar her body, but Jake also took plenty in return, especially when she released a "shotgun arrow" that exploded into several bullet seeds that hit Jake hard, sending him reeling back as he hadn't identified it as a special arrow fast enough.

Soon enough, they approached the same impasse they had before: lack of arrows. Despite their wounds, both had avoided taking any lethal attacks and even when they were hit, they quickly minimized the damage. The elf, through her nature magic's slight

healing properties, and Jake by plugging up any holes with what were effectively corks of stable arcane mana. Alright, admittedly, Jake's method was not as elegant, but it got the job done.

Jake's arrows in his quiver quickly fell to three, then two, before only a single one remained. He tried to make the final one count as he took aim. His opponent did the exact same, and there was a slight pause before they shot. Both knew that the first to shoot would have a disadvantage when it came to dodging the other's arrow, but waiting too long could also be a mistake.

*Fine*, Jake thought as he decided to shoot first... at the same moment she did. The two arrows flew straight for each other, hitting each other in mid-air as they both deflected one another. Jake didn't even get ready to dodge a follow-up shot because he knew he wasn't the only one out of arrows.

"We're both out, eh?" Jake asked loudly in a teasing voice after a second's pause.

"Not entirely now, are we? I know of your big finisher arrows," the elven hunter yelled as she smiled. "Interestingly enough... I have one of those, too. Shall we see whose is superior?"

Jake grinned at the proposal, having fully expected it to be the case. "Don't regret those words."

Right as he agreed, the elf raised her hand. Energy began to gather instantly as all the nature mana in their surroundings were dragged toward her. The arrows she had shot around the arena and hadn't activated withered; the remaining shrubbery or vines she had summoned turned gray and died as all of their energy was gathered into a singular point above her: within a single arrow.

At the same time, Jake took out his very own special arrow. The design was once more simple, as Jake hadn't been sure what would be good, so he just went with pure aerodynamic power. It was just long and sharp, with nothing special about it outside of the massive charge of destructive arcane energy within.

Jake nocked this arrow as he began charging his skillless Arcane Powershot. Across from him, the gathering of nature mana had also formed what looked like an avatar of the elven archer herself, and as she grasped her arrow that looked more like a big two-pronged spear with vines worming across its body, this avatar merged with her as her body also burned with power.

Seeing and feeling her arrow, Jake was certain. The arrow she had summoned was definitely an offshoot of Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, much like his Protean Arrow. This only made him smile more as he was curious: who had the better version of the skill?



His eyes met the elf's as he charged his arrow in concert with her. After a few seconds, her gaze told him everything he had to know as she grinned and released her arrow. Jake did the same as their two supercharged attacks clashed in the center of the arena. One of nature magic and one of destructive arcane mana.

The two very much opposing energies clashed as a large explosion shook the arena, sending out waves of multi-colored energy as the green and pink-purple mixed as they fought for superiority. None of their attacks had come out superior... but it seemed like none of them had expected their special arrows to work either.

Jake nearly failed to hold back a laugh as an arrow struck him in the shoulder, making him stumble back. She had clearly hidden another arrow within her clothes to take Jake by surprise. As for why he hadn't dodged? Well, you see, the elf wasn't the only one who had hidden just one final arrow.

Right after he had released his quasi-Protean arrow, he had rapidly shot a regular arcane arrow toward an inconspicuous pillar to the side of the elf. Right as the arrow got close to this pillar, Jake's infused Willpower activated to make it bend and made it change direction for the elf. Right as it began to bend as it passed the pillar where a stable arcane arrow was embedded, Jake made the embedded arrow explode to speed up his shot further.

The elf had a look of surprise on her face when she heard the explosion but didn't react in time. Usually, she would have been able to, but Jake knew how her skills worked. The reason she had failed was that her danger sense hadn't reacted... because Jake hadn't aimed for her. The arrow had instead struck her bow and severed the string, making it nothing more than a good whacking stick. New novel chapters are published on *novel•fire•net*

He didn't know if she had any more arrows, and Jake had judged this was his best course of action to win, as he wanted to force her into a melee now that they were both out of arrows.

Looking at her useless bow, the elf shifted her gaze to Jake, who was about to charge forward despite his injuries.

"I surrender," she said with a sigh just as Jake pulled out his katars, fully prepared for her to enter melee with him. She did have two swords, which he assumed she was capable of using, after all. Yet she seemed content as she raised her hands and smiled.

Jake was confused and hesitated. "Wait, just like that?"

"I've seen you use those katars of yours, and I know my limits. I see no reason to throw my life away when I have already been defeated," she shook her head. "So I repeat: I surrender."



Lowering his katars, Jake muttered mostly to himself. "A little anti-climactic of an ending, isn't it?"

Chuckling, she nudged her head toward the center of the arena, where a four-meter wide crater of destructive arcane mana was still burning away at the sand, with several thorned roots sticking up, yet to surrender to the destructive energies.

"I think we gave the audience a good enough show already, wouldn't you agree?" she asked.

"I guess?" Jake scratched his head after dismissing his katars, wincing a bit from the pain of moving his shoulder like that. The announcer also began to do his thing as he announced Jake's victory with all of the usual grandeur, with the crowd naturally going wild.

The elf looked at him and smiled as she tilted her head and waited for the announcer to be done with his entire spiel. "You know, I never got your real name. Unless Doombringer or Doomfoot is your real name?"

"Very funny," Jake scoffed. "Name's Jake. And I am going to assume your name isn't the Former Lord of the Hunt either?"

"Artemis," she simply said, taking Jake's verbal jab. "Now, I don't know if it is just me, but I am feeling a little too battered to just stand and chat here any longer."

Jake had to concur. While both of them had managed to avoid any lethal wounds, both of them were pretty damn banged up. Jake was borderline wearing shorts at this point due to the many thorned roots that had ripped away at him, while the elf had a few arrow holes here and there and over a dozen cuts ranging from minor scratches to pretty severe.

"Yeah, I guess we should get out of here. Either way, it was a good fight, Artemis," Jake said as he gave her a final nod before turning to leave through the hallway he had entered from.

She followed him.

Jake threw her a glance as she walked next to him, as she leaned in.

"You know, I have a Healing Pool at my residence, great for recovering from both injuries and fatigue," she commented. "Would save you the points required to buy a potion and likely be a faster way to recover... plus, I can promise it will be a much more enjoyable method than just chugging down a potion and lying in bed for a day."

"No reason to reject free healing when offered," Jake shrugged, regretting the shrug instantly. Why did she have to shoot him in the shoulder again?

The two of them walked out of the arena, and after Jake gave a wave to the Battlemaster, the man just gave him a thumbs-up in return. Owen and Polly also made their way over, but when Owen saw Jake walk with the elf, he just threw Jake a knowing look before leading Polly away with him.

"Follow me; I know a way out where the crowd never is," Artemis said as Jake went after her into a hallway with a few rooms lined up for people to rest inside. One of them had a large window that she led him through as they went up a hill and through a small forested area.

On the way there, Jake couldn't help but ask some questions. Particularly questions related to the current Champions. The Lightning Monarch had given some good information, but Jake was still curious to hear what the former Lord of the Hunt had to say.

Especially considering how similar their fighting style was... which was why the first thing he asked was who she thought she could defeat.

"Of the current Champions, at least the Champions who were there when you became one, I was confident in beating everyone except for the Warmaster and Phoenix Queen, with the Shadow Mistress a big uncertainty," Artemis explained.

"Huh, so you had confidence in beating the Necromancer?" Jake asked, surprised.

Artemis just smiled. "The powers of death are intrinsically linked to nature, as it always finds a path to survival. While the battle would have been difficult, I believe I would have won, given enough time. On that note, I found your method to win very... exhilarating. Like a predator tearing the neck of large prey before disengaging to let your prey bleed out on its own. The image of you simply standing there on your pole, staring at him as he slowly met his eternal end was simply... beautiful."

*A bit creepy but okay*, Jake thought, as he quickly moved on. "How about the Dark Mistress? As our fighting styles are pretty similar, and you rate her easier than the Warmaster, I plan on facing her next. Well, I already planned on facing her next anyway, as I can't find jack-shit on the Warmaster information-wise."

"The Dark Mistress is a master assassin, and in all honesty, my victory will depend entirely on whether my own instincts can overpower her ability to circumvent them. On that note, I believe your victory is all but a foregone conclusion," Artemis smiled.

They finally arrived at her residence, which was a large mansion located on the outskirts of the city near the forest. Jake just followed her as they jumped the fence and headed for the house itself.

"When it comes to the Warmaster, I also cannot share much about him that will assist you. He is a weapon master, and his fighting style will depend on you. My advice would

just be to go in with confidence and face him head-on,” she said, leading Jake toward a room placed right in the center of the building.

There, Jake saw what looked like a natural pond formed in the middle of the house. In fact, it looked like the entire building had been constructed around it. To call it a room wasn’t even accurate, as there was no ceiling, and sunlight came down, making the water glisten. Plants covered the ground, as there were even a few small trees still in their infancy, still growing, likely with the help of the pool.

“Beautiful, is it not?” Artemis said as she stood facing Jake in front of the water, with the greenery in the background.

Jake looked at her and nodded. “Beautiful indeed.”

Artemis smiled as she went close to Jake and leaned against him.

“Now... let me tend to your wounds as you tend to mine,” she whispered into his ear as she licked a cut on his chin.

Jake responded by turning his head and leaning in, using his tongue to thoroughly examine if she had any internal injuries in her mouth.

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## Chapter 773: Nevermore: Artemis

“You really gotta be like that?” Minaga complained. “We were just about to get to the good stuff!”

“I question why we had to cut the feed too,” the Wyrmgod chimed in, as he had nevertheless done as Vilastromoz asked. “Not that I see any value in observing it either, but there is no purpose in not simply continuing like normal.”

“Because if you kept recording, I would be the one who would get shit for it from Jake later on,” the Viper grumbled. “Plus, wouldn’t that hunter god also complain if you choose to make an unauthorized recording of her?”

“Hm, perhaps. I had not considered that to be an option,” the Wyrmgod said, deep in thought. “This is the first time it has happened, at least when I was actively monitoring the situation. Despite the images being created to mimic a level 0, they are still gods,

making this rather unprecedented. Usually, the Nevermore attendees only get with the dungeon-created characters if they desire an outlet.”

Vilastromoz nodded slowly with the explanation. While one could make a level 0 clone, they were still at least partly linked to the Records of their true selves, which was one of the reasons gods were willing to put their images in Nevermore to begin with. It would intrinsically form a connection with powerful rising stars of the multiverse through karma.

Umbra was a prime example of this. A faint karmic connection would be formed with all she faced in the arena, and through her powers, she would, at the very least, become aware of them. Anyone who could beat her image was someone she would thus investigate or even purchase recordings of the Wyrmgod to see more of.

While Vilastromoz did not know much of Artemis as she had risen as a god after the seventh era, he at least knew she was a pretty powerful hunter goddess from the Pantheon of Life and worked directly with Yggdrasil and Nature’s Attendant. However, this told him nothing of her personality.

“Say, would this Artemis happen to be the more “open” sort of person when it comes to this kind of thing?” Vilastromoz asked. If that was the case, it would make sense. Some gods would get in bed with anyone they found even remotely attractive, with some going through several partners on a daily basis, sometimes even with multiple avatars. Of course, in the vast majority of cases, they didn’t reveal they were gods at all but disguised themselves and went to random taverns and whatnot.

Minaga grinned. “Oh, quite the opposite, which is why I find this oh-so-interesting. There have been many who have shown interest in Artemis, even amongst the gods, but she doesn’t even bat an eye at them. It even got to the point where some swear she is sworn to celibacy or maidenhood or something to make themselves feel better about being rejected. Needless to say, I don’t believe she is that closed off to having partners... her standards are just rather abnormal and through the roof.”

The Viper already felt a headache coming on.

“See, I have a theory... I think Artemis is the kind of gal who only likes those who are stronger than herself. She wants someone who is even more of a predator incarnate than herself, someone who can dominate her, and Jake, that little monster, definitely fits that bill,” Minaga shared his thoughts proudly.

“And what do you base this theory on?” Vilastromoz asked the Unique Lifeform, who possessed no reproductive organs and was ostensibly asexual by nature.

“Well, I met her a few times,” Minaga scratched his chin. “Though I can admit the majority of my theory was formed based on recent happenings.”

“Right, so pure guesswork, more or less,” the Viper sighed. There probably was some credence to Minaga’s theory. Vilastromoz just hoped this wouldn’t turn into an annoying situation.

“I do remain curious. The images have the same personalities as their true selves, and besides their level, they are the same person... especially after they lose,” the Wyrmgod muttered.

“Wait... you actually implemented that?” Vilastromoz asked, recalling a conversation from many eras ago.

“He sure did, and I helped make it happen with my awesome magic!” Minaga grinned. Newest update provided by *novel•fire•net*

As for what they were talking about? Memory restoration.

Upon losing but not dying, the image would become fully aware of its identity as a god and regain its full memories. This was in part done so the god’s image could attempt to form a connection with someone who walked a similar Path to them and thus recruit them, but also because the gods just thought it would be more interesting that way. However, that being the case did just further complicate the situation.

“So, you are telling me that the image that dragged Jake back to her residence was aware that she is actually only an image of a god?”

“Yes,” the Wyrmgod nodded. “Interesting, is it not?”

“I am going with the “not”...” Vilastromoz sighed. Yep, this could definitely turn into an entire “thing.”

“At least tell me Artemis does not have any request to see anything outside of the battles she loses, so she won’t be informed of this?” the Viper continued. What she didn’t know couldn’t cause any problems, and if she didn’t, it would be entirely up to Jake if anything had to be shared.

“Hm?” the Wyrmgod grunted. “Oh no, she doesn’t have anything like that. That is not standard at all, and I am sure she never expected her image to act as it did.”

“Well, that’s good at-“

“So I naturally informed her of her image’s irregular behavior as a courtesy.”

The Viper looked at his fellow Primordial as the dragon smiled, clearly amused.

“So, you’re from the Pantheon of Life?” Jake muttered as he leaned back in the pool, which was pretty much just a hot tub of healing. “How exactly does that fit with your Path as a hunter, which is about taking lives?”

Artemis, sitting in the water across from him, smiled. “The mere fact you gloss over my revelation that I am a god belonging to one of the most powerful Pantheons in the multiverse to question my Path... you continue to intrigue me.”

“I’m trying my best,” Jake chuckled as Artemis continued.

“To answer your question, the Pantheon of Life is about more than simply healing and preservation of life. It is also about the transformation of life, the natural cycle, and the glory of nature itself, and predators are as natural to the ecosystem as a tree or a herbivore. We hunters are also part of the natural cycle, but not as mere cogs. We are the ones who can control it. Bend it. We are the regulators who decide its direction, as we can hunt down anything we deem unnecessary or unwanted,” Artemis said with conviction. “Of course, we cannot overdo it. If we hunt down every living being in the ecosystem, there is no ecosystem anymore. No new life... nothing to hunt. And is a hunter with no prey truly a hunter at all?”

Jake listened intently. This was his first time meeting not just another powerful hunter but a being who had walked her Path all the way to divinity. He didn’t necessarily agree with her – in his opinion – somewhat limited definition of what a hunter was, but he still respected it.

“I see you are not entirely in agreement,” the elven goddess said, clearly amused. “Good. What kind of hunter would simply follow another’s Path blindly?”

“Someone with not enough Perception,” Jake joked, surprisingly enough getting a giggle out of the god.

After a brief pause, the god spoke again.

“Say, you are a C-grade outside of Nevermore, right? Based on the fact you are a G-grade human, one of the people from the newly integrated universe?”

“Yep,” Jake confirmed.

“What would you say to becoming my Chosen out there? To join the Pantheon of Life? I fully expect you to be with some other god already, but I doubt there are many as qualified to have a hunter as their Chosen as I, and I will handle any compensation required to the one who has currently blessed you,” Artemis offered as she looked at him seductively. “I will be sure to give you plenty of private tutoring, and if you happen to become a god...”

“Tempting offer, not gonna lie, but I already have a Blessing,” Jake said, shaking his head. “Quite a good one at that. The True Blessing of the Malefic Viper.”

“Wait, the Malefic Viper? As in the Primordial? Wasn’t he sealed away in his divine realm or something?” she questioned with interest.

“Well, he was. Now he’s not,” Jake shrugged casually. “He reappeared just around the integration.”

“And you are his Chosen? Disregarding everything else, It’s odd for a snake to have a hunter as his Chosen... but perhaps even more odd for you to submit to one, even if it is a god. How does that conform to your Path as the ultimate hunter?” she asked pointedly.

Jake smiled, knowing that even if he and Artemis were clearly friendly, he shouldn’t just share every secret he had. “Let’s just say we have an arrangement quite unlike what most Patrons and Chosen have. One rather unique to the two of us.”

“Fine, I won’t probe,” Artemis shook her head, reading his intentions quite clearly. “I will also retract my prior offer to not embarrass myself further. While I do believe I have quite a lot to offer, it is not to the level of a Primordial.”

“He does have a lot of shiny stuff,” Jake said, enjoying the warm, healing waters.

Artemis looked in thought for a while before she spoke. “Are you aware how these images that we gods have left in Nevermore work?”

“I thought I did until you clearly proved you are fully aware you are a god,” Jake said. “But I will assume that as an image, you are pretty much entirely separate from your true self, and your self on the outside won’t be aware of your memories.”

“Right,” she said. “In fact, the second you leave this Challenge Dungeon, I will cease to exist as I am erased alongside it. Ah, but don’t feel bad; that’s just how things work and what this image was created for in the first place.”

Jake nodded, already knowing that part well. “What are you getting at?”

“Impatient, are we?” she smiled, tilting her head. “What I am getting at is that my true self will not be aware unless someone informs it. I shall leave the ultimate choice of what you will do from here on to you. Out of the two of us, you are the only “real” being, are you not? You can choose to seek me out as a god, which I will admit may prove difficult, as I will be less than receptive to some random C-grade approaching me – even if he is the Chosen of a Primordial - but if you ever do want to meet, just show me or one of my followers this sigil.”



She raised her hand as she summoned an intricate seal that didn't really depict anything in particular. She held it there for a few seconds before she dismissed it, Jake having already committed it to memory.

"Is it some kind of identification seal?" Jake asked.

"Something like that," she nodded.

"Of course, you also have the choice of never bringing up what happened in this Challenge Dungeon with my true self. Assuming the Wyrmgod hasn't already informed me, that is," Artemis continued. "If he has informed me... well, I may send someone to fetch you, but seeing as you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, it may instead turn into a subtle political exchange that I will sneak into. Do you currently have any connections to the Pantheon of Life?"

"One of my party members in Nevermore is the granddaughter of Nature's Attendant," Jake shared. "In all honesty, I got enough going on that pretty much every Pantheon wanting meetings with me these days wouldn't be overly surprising or out of the ordinary if you sent someone."

Many were thirsty for some of that Jake Juice to make some banger variants, after all.

"Due to your Bloodline?" she asked, making Jake raise an eyebrow.

"What? You thought it wasn't obvious you have one? The pure suppression of instinct and domineering aura I felt was not something a mere level 0 G-grade could have, but something of a far higher concept. While I was still in the arena, perhaps it could be argued you had an equally powerful instinct, but that you still surpassed me even after I regained my memories... A Bloodline or Transcendent is the only reason, and I wage it's the prior," Artemis laid out her thoughts while licking her lips.

Jake nodded, feeling like the hunter in front of him was too damn good at seeing through stuff. It wouldn't surprise him if she also had some improved intuition or something to make such accurate deductions all the time. Then again... she was a god.

"Say, seeing as you are a goddess of the hunt and all, how about offering a lowly mortal hunter some hunting advice? Perhaps a few archery tips here and there?" Jake had to shoot his shot.

"Sure, we can exchange some pointers, but not more than that. My power and ability to display my power is still restricted to the same level as when we fought," Artemis shrugged, actually surprising Jake a bit. He had expected her to outright reject the notion, especially seeing as he was the Chosen of another god. It was pretty nice of her to do tha-

“Mind you, I am not just doing it to be nice but to sow a seed of karma with you, which will make it far easier to track you down if the Wyrmgod does inform me in the outside world,” she smirked. “Does that disappoint you? Ultimately, you are still only a mortal, and if I get no benefit, why would I selflessly help you?”

“Only a mortal, huh?” Jake said as he stood up and walked toward her through the shallow pool.

“But one who brings plenty of benefits,” Artemis smiled, leaning back as Jake approached.

The next few days were spent with Jake taking advantage of having a god with experience in archery give him some pointers, primarily by just fighting with him in the forest outside of her residence. With her healing pool, recovery was also swift, and Jake had to admit that the company while healing up made the experience quite a bit more enjoyable.

Alas, Jake would not delay for too long. About a week after his fight with Artemis, he returned to the Colosseum to sign up for his sixth Champions fight against the Mistress of Shadows, or Umbra as she was actually called.

Jake had gotten used to fights either happening really fast or only after a month, so he was a bit surprised when Umbra scheduled it for eighteen days after he issued the challenge. It struck him as a bit of a random time until he returned to Artemis’ residence, and she shared that day would have a crescent moon, and considering Umbra had scheduled the fight to be as late in the day as possible... yeah, it was definitely not random.

Not that Jake complained about having a bit more prep time. He didn’t really need it, but he wouldn’t say no to having more time to duke it out with Artemis in the forest. They even did some archery training in between.

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## **Chapter 774: Nevermore: Umbra**

Out of all the beings in the Colosseum that Jake was aware of, Umbra was the most powerful, at least on the outside. She was a true pinnacle being who stood side-by-side with the Primordials. Yet, despite knowing this, Jake never really felt any trepidations when he was about to face her.

Artemis also seemed very unconcerned with the fight itself but was more interested in how Umbra would address the fight. She couldn't say anything directly, though, as she was still under the influence of Nevermore's rules to not share information. She couldn't even give any tips on the fights themselves, outside of very vague statements that didn't really help.

On the night of the match, it was already way past sundown as the crescent moon hung far up in the air. The arena had artificial magic lighting, so it wasn't like the arena was dark when Jake walked up the steps and stood behind the bars. The stands were also filled despite the less-than-optimal lighting conditions.

Also, due to the magic lighting, one thing that benefitted her greatly was abundant. The many pillars, the audience stands, and every piece of clutter spread around led to shadows everywhere. What's more, multiple light sources resulted in several more shadows than normal, meaning something like the pillars were surrounded by shadows in all directions. Even Jake threw several shadows due to the lamps hanging around the entrance area.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a near-perfect battleground for Umbra. Looking at her at the other end of the arena, Jake saw a hooded dark elf who seemed to almost meld into the shadows simply by existing. Due to her cloak, Jake couldn't see what kind of armor she wore, but he assumed it to be light leather armor due to her identity as an assassin.

She observed him back as the bars began to lower. With a sigh, she walked into the arena, Jake and her meeting in the middle like he had done with every other opponent. Seriously, it wasn't a rule that you had to have a little introductory chat before fighting, but he had one with every single opponent anyway.

"So, here we finally are," Umbra said, speaking first. "Not that surprising, now is it? I have kept an eye on you for a while, which I am sure you already knew."

"I have noticed that I had a stalker a few times, yeah," Jake nodded. "Seemed a bit overkill to watch what I ate for dinner if you were just researching me. Heck, if you wanted to know something, you could have just walked up and asked, and I would have probably answered truthfully."

"Usually, I would scoff at such a statement, but based on my observations, that is entirely possible," Umbra sighed. "Alas, I deemed it best to not approach. Oh, I also hope you do not think negatively of me for having us fight at a time advantageous to me."

"Hey, it's less bullshit than the number of earth mages who were clearly just strong in the arena because the floor is made of sand," Jake shrugged with a smile.

Umbra sighed again. "Your casual demeanor doesn't exactly help my confidence, but seeing as you are of the truthful sort, let me ask you something. Do you believe I stand any chance of winning this bout?"

"In all honesty? No, not unless you can pull some serious bullshit out of your ass," Jake said, being as truthful as she wanted him to be.

"Would it surprise you to hear me concur with that conclusion?" Umbra said as she summoned a black dagger into her hand. "Nevertheless, I shall try my best. I will show you all that I have and truly determine the limits of your powers... and simply hope that is enough."

With those words, her entire body swayed as the dark elf disappeared into a nearby shadow. Umbra's presence was entirely erased, and even using his sphere, Jake couldn't locate her. He also knew why. While it was honestly a bit bullshit a level 0 could do it, she had entered the shadow realm. An odd realm that Jake didn't fully understand but that Umbra was known as the master of. One where space no longer operated as it usually did, allowing her to do something similar to what she did next.

Despite disappearing in front of him, a figure exploded out from a shadow right behind him less than half a second later, her dagger aimed straight at his guts. Jake reacted instantly, dodging to the side as he pulled out his bow in one hand and a katar in the other.

Umbra tried to strike him again, but he deflected several blows using his weapons before the dark elf disengaged, merging into another shadow. Jake instantly nocked an arrow as he waited for her to appear again, something she did only a second later. Before she had even fully emerged, Jake shot an arrow at her, forcing Umbra to block with her daggers. Jake made it explode at that very moment, making the dark elf slide backward, stumbling a bit from the blast. He hadn't done any real damage, though, as the shadows that lingered on her had entirely blocked his destructive arcane energy.

Jake felt her gaze on him as she leaned to the side, merging into a pillar right beside her. Waiting with another arrow ready, Jake was taken a bit by surprise, as rather than an entire elf, only an arm throwing a dagger emerged from a shadow. He still shot his arrow, but the hand merged back into the darkness before it hit, resulting in him only blowing up some sand.

Several more daggers were thrown at him within the next few seconds, as in the middle of the barrage, his opponent fully emerged once more, this time charging right for him as she threw four small daggers she had tugged between her fingers.

Side-stepping the daggers, Jake prepared to face the dark elf as his danger sense warned him. Rather than engage, he jumped back right as the four small daggers she had thrown flew into a pillar, merged with its shadows, and flew out of another nearby pillar aimed for right where Jake would have been.

Umbra clicked her tongue in annoyance as she stepped back and spread out her hands. Jake stood there, having switched to his two katars, as he wondered what she was doing. Right then, Jake saw movement within two shadows to her side. Out of them emerged two figures entirely cloaked in dark mana. Umbra's body also changed as the same shadowy aura fully embraced her body, making her appear identical to her shadow clones, and all three of them disappeared into a single shadow in unison.

Then, three shadows walked out of the pillars surrounding him, brandishing black daggers.

*Heh, that's a pretty good one*, he thought as all three shadow clones charged at him from all directions. Jake remained standing entirely still as six daggers total plunged into his body, harmlessly phasing through it. It was only a fraction of a second after he was struck by the daggers that he swayed to the side as a black bullet swished by, hitting the wall in the distance and causing a small explosion of dark mana.

Jake looked at the origin of the bullet and saw Umbra had emerged holding what looked like a sniper rifle on the opposite side of the arena. Making a show out of summoning two clones to actually summon three and try to snipe him from a distance was a pretty good strategy that would probably work against most people. Sadly for her, Jake was not like most people.

Looking at Umbra appearing a bit miffed in the distance, he couldn't help but yell out to her. "That was a nice attempt!"

She didn't seem to appreciate his comment as she fired another bullet that Jake easily dodged. He could admit that had any of those bullets hit him, it would probably have been game over, or at least he would have been significantly injured. Enough so that she could easily finish him off.

Likely realizing she wouldn't get anything done with her gun, Umbra put it away as she merged back into the shadows. Instantly, she appeared nearly right beside Jake, swinging her dagger as Jake raised a katar to block. She continued her barrage of attacks, Jake slowly backing away as he dodged and parried.

Umbra was faster than Jake by quite a bit, signifying she had more Agility, but Jake had a slight edge in Strength. However, her speed didn't translate into any successful hits, as Jake could easily keep up with her despite his lower speed due to the overpoweredness of his Bloodline.

It also didn't help that Umbra's fighting style was very skewed toward feints and exploiting her unique magic. Having her arm swinging a dagger suddenly turn into two mid-swing would probably take most by surprise and make it hard to dodge, but to Jake, this was just Umbra wasting resources as he could easily tell the true arm and the shadow arm apart.

She kept trying new things over and over again, switching up her strategy slightly on the fly, but Jake stayed one step ahead at every turn. Jake could feel her frustrations mounting, but Umbra didn't let it affect her combat prowess in the slightest.

Also, while it was true his opponent failed to land any hits, Jake wasn't doing that much better himself. But... he did know he was winning in the resource department. As a fast assassin, Umbra was not built for long jeopardy but to end the fight as fast as possible through, well, assassination. Swift, deadly hits that would quickly either injure your opponent and significantly weaken them or outright kill them.

Umbra knew this, too, and knew she couldn't let things go on as they were. She still continued fighting head-on for a bit longer while still trying to take him by surprise with her thrown daggers and shadow trickery. But, as she slowed down to try and preserve her stamina and mana, Jake took advantage and landed a deep scratch on her shoulder, making her retreat promptly.

"I see that there is no victory if I continue like this... so let us not delay needlessly," Umbra said. She made it sound like she was surrendering, but Jake felt the energy begin to gather as the dark elf's form began to sway. The shadows all around the arena seemed to deepen, and he felt the magic begin to take hold as a domain descended.

### **"Abyssal Shadow."**

In an instant, the world turned black. There was no light, no warmth, nothing for one's Perception to grasp onto. It was a world of pure shadows, where all senses died. Sight, hearing, touch, taste, balance, smell, direction... it was as if nothing existed but the thoughts in your own mind and a feeling of dread from what may be lurking within the darkness.

Jake moved his arm but didn't even feel it. He only knew it had even moved due to the feedback from his sphere. His movement was also slower, reminiscent of someone underwater.

Within this darkness, a single figure appeared only a few steps behind him. Her movements were slow as Umbra was clearly also affected by the Abyssal Shadow domain. Getting closer, she brandished her dagger, ready to plunge it into the back of Jake's head as he turned around at the very last moment and punched.

Umbra had clearly expected this as she stepped back to avoid getting hit. What she had not expected was Jake expecting she would have expected his punch, so when his fist revealed itself to be holding five arrows of arcane energy, she was taken by surprise.

Jake let go of the arrows as they all exploded. For a brief moment, the domain of shadows was dissolved where the explosion had been. Jake dove forward through the destructive arcane energy that was rapidly being suppressed as he, for but a moment, laid his eyes on Umbra's form.



Fear Gaze activated as he stabbed forward. Right before she was hit, Umbra unfroze and managed to sway to the side, resulting in her only getting hit in the shoulder. A second explosion of destructive arcane mana sent her floating back through the water-like Abyssal Shadow, yet before she even landed, the domain began to dissolve.

Color returned to the world as Jake's senses rapidly returned. For a moment, the faint light in the arena was almost blinding, but he quickly adjusted and looked at Umbra kneeling five or so meters away while down on one knee.

Just as he prepared to potentially engage, Umbra sighed loudly. "I surrender."

Jake could say he was surprised, but he honestly wasn't. From start to end, it felt more like Umbra was testing the limits of his abilities rather than actually fighting him to win.

Not that he could really blame her... for an assassin; Jake was the worst matchup imaginable.

"Thanks for the fight anyway," Jake smiled.

Umbra just nodded. "Alas, it was not one I was meant to win. I wish you luck facing the final Champion, but let me just give one piece of advice... reconsider facing the Grand Champion."

Jake raised an eyebrow and wanted to ask more as the dark elf merged into a nearby shadow and reemerged back at her exit to the arena, clearly not interested in talking any longer. Jake just looked after her as the announcer began doing his announcing, with Jake just shrugging to himself.

*You telling me to not face the Grand Champion just makes me want to do it even more...*

Vilastromoz put all thoughts of Artemis and that entire mess to the back of his mind as he nodded at the outcome of the battle between Umbra and Jake. It had gone as expected, and nobody was surprised by the outcome, so much so that none had even wanted to bet on him losing, no matter how good the odds were. If Jake couldn't defeat Umbra easily, then what normal challenger would ever stand a chance?

Umbra had also clearly known this, and her image had used the opportunity to test Jake's limits rather than simply fight to win.

If Vilastromoz had to describe Umbra with just one word, it would be careful. Two words? Calculatingly careful. She was the very first god, outside of Karroch – the Tutorial designer - who truly took note of Jake. Vilastromoz knew this was because he got an item related to her early on, and she used that connection to scout him out, but her actions had still been decisive. She wanted to recruit him from the get-go, but he had stumbled upon the Challenge Dungeon, leading him to Vilastromoz before she ever



got the chance. There was no doubt in his mind that had Jake never found that dungeon, he would have been blessed by Umbra now... potentially even her Chosen, if not at the very least, a candidate to be her Chosen.

Yet even when she had failed to get Jake, she had made moves to forge a positive relationship.

She had gone as far as to make Jake's brother into a Judge, one of the highest-leveled titles mortals could get within the Court of Shadows. While his brother did have some talent of his own, and his presence-resistance was through the roof due to his familial connection to Jake, he was clearly not worthy of all he had been given by his own merits. Especially not the Legacy of Tenlucis.

Vilastromoz also knew that many had found her actions odd.

The Court of Shadows was not a faction that had trouble recruiting members. They were in a similar position to a faction like the Order of the Malefic Viper or Valhal in that it was viewed as a privilege to join. Sure, they did give benefits to members, but all factions did that, and what they gave was only what could be expected.

Umbra's personal Blessing and attention were not something any mortal could expect. The mere fact she had given it to Jake's brother proved how much she valued Jake... at least, that is how most people saw it. In truth, Vilastromoz knew Umbra better than that. He knew of Jake's powers, and he knew that Umbra was also aware.

See, the reason Umbra was so keen on having a good relationship with Jake wasn't just because she valued him. It was because of the danger he posed.

She was afraid of him... of what he could become. Even if it was a trillion to one chance he would ascend to godhood and become able to match her, that was a risk Umbra couldn't take. A Jake close to her power level would be devastating, as he effectively hard-counteracted her.

It was similar to if someone with a Bloodline that made them entirely immune to poisons appeared. Vilastromoz would observe them with a lot of interest... but he wouldn't want to kill them. This was for the same reason Umbra had never even considered killing Jake.

Because his status as a potential danger also meant he was a possible opportunity. Gods at the pinnacle had very few things that could push them to their limits, especially in the area they were best in. No one currently alive in the multiverse could detect Umbra if she decided to observe them and they hadn't made prior preparations, such as formations.

Yet Jake could... he could pressure her where she was strongest. Force her to improve. Force her to find a way to even hide from a Bloodline, something there was only one way to do:

To make a Transcendent skill... or improve the one you already had.

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But at the same time, she couldn't risk him becoming an enemy, for should he reach the stage where he could help her improve, he would also be at a stage where he could potentially slay her. It was an odd balance one had to strike, weighing risk and opportunity. It was truly a paradox. She had to want someone to become powerful enough to kill her in order to find out how not to get killed by him.

A risk she was clearly willing to take, especially after her performance in the match against Jake.

"Let me guess-" Vilastromoz said to the Wyrmgod, but he didn't get further as his fellow Primordial answered.

"Umbra had already requested the recording of her match with your Chosen before he ever entered Nevermore. Pre-paid, too."

The Viper just nodded, having fully expected that to be the case. He just hoped Umbra would continue her strategy of mostly casual observing while only trying to make moves through Jake's brother... because his poor Chosen certainly didn't need more direct attention from gods than he already had.

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## Chapter 775: Nevermore: Warmaster

"I told you it would be easy, didn't I?" Artemis grinned as Jake entered her mansion. Without even thinking about it, he had just headed there by default when he thought about "going home."

Jake did feel a bit bad about bailing on Owen and Polly, but after his match, he saw the two of them walking around hand in hand. They looked like they were in their own little world, so, in reality, wasn't Jake just being a good friend by not following them like a third wheel? Yep, definitely.

"You did, you did," Jake nodded. "But I also expected it to be on the easier side from the moment I learned Umbra was an opponent in the Colosseum. Assassins just don't have a good time against me."

A statement that was true even before the system based on the life of Sim-Jake.

"I reckon that for most people, she will be considered the hardest. She is a nasty opponent that you need proper preparations to win against when you can't rely on your usual senses," Artemis nodded as she looked to be in thought. "But... you did destroy here more thoroughly than I had expected. It wasn't even a fight. It was just pure domination from start to end, with her unable to do anything but try and learn the limits of your abilities, and from the looks of it, she wasn't even able to do that."

"I am indeed awesome; thanks for noticing," Jake smiled teasingly.

"Your awesomeness may cause you issues, though. The recording of your fight with Umbra will definitely make its way back to her, and when it does, she will have a keen interest in you. Your Bloodline is a threat to her Path, and she definitely won't risk you running loose without at least keeping track of you. So watch out for if she entices people close to you to join the Court, and-"

"A bit late for that," Jake shook his head. "She discovered me during my Tutorial. Pretty damn fast, too, as I got an item related to her. After that, she likely wanted to recruit me, but I joined up with the Malefic Viper, so she missed her shot. A shot that then ended up hitting my little brother from the looks of it, giving him a Blessing from Umbra, the Legacy of some dead god called Tenlucis, and even made him a Judge." Chapters first released on [novel♦fire♦net](#)

Artemis stared at him with wide eyes for a while before she smiled and tilted her head. "Either you two siblings are both utter monsters... or she values you that highly..."

Jake already knew it was the latter. While Caleb was good and pretty damn talented, he wasn't a pinnacle genius on his own. He could become close, but he just wasn't on the same level as someone like Eron, the Sword Saint, Carmen, or Arnold. All of these people would have reached greatness no matter who backed them or who they knew.

"Which one do you think it is?" Jake asked.

"First off, you are a Bloodline Patriarch, right?"

"Yeah," Jake nodded. There really was no reason to hide it, as anyone who checked out his parents and brother would easily confirm it.

"Then, seeing as he doesn't have your Bloodline and going by pure statistics, I will say it's the latter," Artemis said, sighing. "You are really a complete monster for her to want positive relations with you so much."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Jake smiled.

Artemis walked up to him and grasped his clothes as she dragged him toward the healing pool. "Oh, it was."

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Jake, after a long and arduous journey to recovery using the healing pool with Artemis, soon found himself back in the arena. It had only been four days since his fight with Umbra, and he had only really needed to regenerate all his resources and make new arrows for the upcoming fight.

Usually, he would also spend his time between matches preparing, but that wasn't really possible with the Warmaster. Polly had tried and found nothing of substance, Artemis couldn't really share anything either, and what information packets Jake could buy with Colosseum Points were all stupidly expensive and severely outdated. As in, most of them were created decades ago. The Warmaster was apparently someone who became a Champion a long time ago, and he wasn't around due to some unknown circumstances when the last Grand Champion rose.

Ah, on a side note, Umbra did not pop up at all during these few days. Jake had fully expected her to appear as she would also get her memories back like Artemis, but that didn't happen. Then again, that Phoenix Queen lady had also survived their battle and hadn't appeared again. He didn't know for sure she was a god before, but Artemis had confirmed she was.

So, it was probably just Artemis who was the odd one for hanging out with Jake after their fight.

Anyway. Back in the arena, Jake naturally went up to the one in charge of scheduling all his fights. As usual, the middle-aged man stood in his usual spot, seemingly waiting for Jake as he walked in.

"You only got one fight left before you're the Grand Champion, huh?" the Battlemaster smiled the moment he saw Jake. "It's damn impressive if I say so myself. You are the first in quite a few years, and your run has been quite a sight, with the audience definitely fans of the Doombringer. You are the strongest we've seen since the only current Grand Champion did his Gauntlet, of that I am sure."

"That's high praise," Jake joked. "I guess you can already guess what I am here for? As you said, I have six down and only one Champion to go. There is no reason to delay the fight, so I would like to officially issue the challenge."

The Battlemaster smiled and shook his head. "Let me check in with him real quick when he is available..."

Jake waited patiently as he wondered who the last opponent would be. Warmaster sounded like it could be someone from Valhal like Gudrun, but then again, every single faction had people who could be described as Warmasters. Shit, the Necromancer looked like he could have been called Warmaster.

“Alright, I got an answer. He is ready to go immediately.”

“Huh?” Jake said. “That was fast. So it begins in two hours like with the Lightning Monarch?”

“No... it begins whenever both fighters are ready,” the Battlemaster said with a slightly mischievous grin. “Now, shall we get going?”

“Wait...” Jake said as he finally put two and two together. “You’re the Warmaster?”

In retrospect, he should have probably seen it coming.

“I used to be called that, yes, but I retired quite a few years ago. I only ever show myself for these Champion fights,” the Battlemaster said with a smile. “So you must excuse me if I am a little rusty in the arena.”

Jake just smiled. “Do your best, old man.”

“I will, I will. Now let’s get going,” the Battlemaster... no, Warmaster said as he began to talk toward one of the tunnels leading to the arena. “See you on the battlefield.”

Looking at him enter the tunnel, Jake shook his head as he headed for his own tunnel. What a plot twist for the Battlemaster to actually be a Champion himself! Though it definitely wasn’t as shocking as the revelation that Minaga was actually a god.

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“Six battles... six victories. Six Champions, brought to their doom by the Doombringer himself! Now, only one man stands in his way. A master of war and our very own Battlemaster here at the Colosseum of Mortals. For years, he has guided fighters toward the arena, but today, he stands here himself as the final obstacle before a new Grand Champion ascends! Will his fate be like the others... or will he show us all how he earned the title of Warmaster!? Let’s find out! Lower the gates!

Jake looked at the familiar man entering the arena across from him. The Battlemaster, or Warmaster, who usually wore practical clothes and simple garments, had switched them for a set of full plate armor while he wielded a sword and a shield. He walked into the arena with heavy steps, and Jake had to admit his aura had spiked quite a bit.

Despite their conversation only minutes before, they once more met in the middle of the smack-filled arena. Because, yes, even if they had scheduled their fight and started...

nine minutes after it had been scheduled, the stands had still been filled to the brim. It made no sense at all, and Jake was honestly getting tired of constantly questioning it. The feeling of annoyance just lived rent-free in his head.

“Looking good there, nice equipment,” Jake complimented the Warmaster. It wasn’t an empty compliment, either... Jake was utterly certain not a single piece of equipment or weapon was anything less than legendary.

“Thank you, there are plenty more where they came from,” the Warmaster smiled. “Now, let us fight with our best and hold nothing back. I have seen your fights already, and I know I cannot slack off... so I’ll go all out from the beginning.”

“Just as I like it,” Jake smiled as he jumped back while he pulled out his bow, signifying the battle had begun.

The Warmaster responded by charging after him with impressive speed as his boots lit up with mana, signifying he used some enchantment on them. Jake wasn’t taken by surprise as he quickly shot an arrow that the man deflected with ease using his shield as he closed in on Jake, who couldn’t move backward as fast as someone running forward.

Jake was prepared to dodge as the man swung his blade, but what happened next wasn’t something he had expected. The sword he presumed to be of legendary rarity began to crack all over mid-swing with red fractures as it suddenly exploded without warning, releasing a blast of molten metal and fire.

Cursing internally, Jake instantly pulled out his katars and tried to block whatever he could, but a few wayward fragments still hit him. Meanwhile, the Warmaster had been hidden behind his own shield, avoiding any damage.

Stumbling back to recover, Jake quickly tried to attack as the Warmaster had lost his weapon... only for him to pull out a scimitar that also radiated the feeling of a legendary item. Jake was on guard this time as he engaged but found the Warmaster fighting like a normal person for a few moments as they exchanged blows. He was very defensive, though, and hid behind his shield at all times, never truly giving Jake the chance to land a blow. Despite his heavy armor, he remained incredibly flexible and quickly moved his weapon and shield like a true expert. The man clearly knew how to use his weapons.

Right as Jake began to think nothing tricky was going on, the scimitar suddenly started to frost over. Cursing again, Jake reacted in time as an explosion of frozen metal fragments pelted him. Luckily, he had gotten some distance and could block all the hits that mattered... as he saw the Warmaster pull out a spear that he pointed toward Jake. That one legendary rarity, too.

A flash of lightning wormed across the body of the spear as it shot out a lightning bolt, striking Jake head-on before he had a chance to react and sending him flying back.

Another bolt came a second later, but this one Jake managed to block with both katars as the lightning was effectively grounded by the dense, stable arcane energy within them.

Several more bolts followed up as Jake welcomed the change to a range battle. He pulled out his bow and retaliated as he used his near-precognitive ability to dodge the lightning bolts. Knowing that just shooting head-on wouldn't work, Jake began to shoot far more tricky arrows.

The Warmaster blocked two arrows with his shield before a third one struck him in the shoulder. Despite the powerful armor, the stable arcane arrow proved sharp enough as it penetrated through, but before he could explode it, odd energy from the armor itself invaded the arrow and made it crack and shatter.

Right as that happened, the spear also ran out of juice, and the Warmaster discarded it on the ground as he took out a second shield, making it borderline impossible for Jake to land any more arrows.

*He is like Gudrun... he has a shitload of different tools*, Jake was now sure. One had to remember that all items in the arena were ones that the person himself had crafted or bought using Colosseum Points, and seeing as Champions couldn't do Show Matches... it meant that the Warmaster was exploding weapons he had likely spent months, if not years, making.

There was also the fact to consider that the Battlemaster had seen every single one of Jake's matches from start to end. Even the Show Matches. He knew exactly what Jake was capable of and had seen all the tricks he had shown this far.

"Say, how many of those weapons do you have?" Jake asked as he had just stopped shooting any arrows toward the man holding two large tower shields. If the man wanted to be a turtle, Jake saw no reason to waste arrows on his shell.

"I guess you'll find out," the Warmaster said as he smiled while he slowly moved toward Jake.

Jake backed away but soon realized he was closing in on the back wall of the Colosseum. Right as he noticed this, the Warmaster put away his shields as an axe appeared in one hand and a sword in the other. The man stepped down as he charged, his boots exploding with power as he was propelled straight toward Jake.

Two katars appeared to block the man as Jake barely had time to react properly. What's more, he was incredibly careful when it came to engaging the Warmaster directly, as he didn't know when one of his weapons would suddenly explode or show some other innate ability.

For a good reason, too.



After exchanging a dozen moves, the Warmaster swung his axe downward for Jake's shoulder, and mid-swing, it suddenly sped up to become several times faster. Jake's danger sense had warned him something was up as he swayed, narrowly avoiding the sharp edge as the weapon hit the ground.

An explosion of sand sent Jake temporarily airborne as he flew back, having blocked the shockwave successfully. The Warmaster came out of the sand cloud even before Jake landed on the ground, the axe replaced with a second sword as dense air mana collected around the man.

Tens of swift whirlwind slashes struck Jake right as he landed on the ground, making him back away immediately as he dodged and blocked every hit. The swords of the Warmaster only seemed to be speeding up as he rapidly cut, every hit sending out cutting winds that slowly ripped away at Jake's leather armor.

Jake kept blocking for several more seconds before he finally saw his chance. He saw that the next two attacks would be aimed high, so he quickly twisted his body and ducked as he performed a leg sweep. The Warmaster was taken by surprise as his legs were swept out under him, and he could only try to block when Jake punched forward with his katar, launching him backward as he rolled in the sand several times upon landing.

Without missing a beat, Jake charged forward to follow up, going on the offensive.

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## **- Chapter 776: Nevermore: To Be A Grand Champion**

### **Chapter 776: Nevermore: To Be A Grand Champion**

The Warmaster, still on the ground, raised one of his swords toward Jake as it began to shine with mana. Jake temporarily abandoned his attack and dodged to the side as the entire blade was shot out like an arrow, as the man kept holding onto the hilt.

Jake thought he would have a chance to attack, but the Warmaster twisted his wrist as Jake's danger sense warned him and made him duck right as a whip-like blade flew in from behind. The blade he had shot out had segmented itself into several sharp metal pieces with strings holding them together, and with a mere movement of his wrists, he had made it twist and whip around.

After dodging a few more slashes, the Warmaster pressed a button on the hilt of his sword, and the entire blade was dragged back and reformed the whole sword. Jake, who had been forced to make some distance, stared for a while as he spoke.

"Not gonna lie... I always thought those segmented snake swords or whatever they are called were hugely impractical and not useful weapons," Jake said as the Warmaster had managed to fully stand up.

"Oh, but they are a questionable weapon, and as a general rule, I would not recommend them," the Warmaster smiled. "At least in any prolonged combat. However, they do tend to be useful for surprise attacks. The thing is that the skill required to control one is so high that it is rarely worth the practice. Of course, there are masters out there who still made it their primary weapon, none of which are to be underestimated."

"And yet, despite it apparently being so hard, you, a blacksmith, have chosen to learn the weapon?" Jake questioned.

"The best smith is one who truly knows the weapons he makes," the Warmaster nodded. "In my eyes, to be a Weapon's Master Blacksmith is to be a Warmaster."

Jake smiled. It was a good philosophy in his eyes and one he knew many similar to the Warmaster shared. However, it often came about the other way around. That an archer would become a fletcher to make their own bows, a mage learning to craft magic tools to assist them in combat... or a hunter would become an alchemist to poison his arrows and help him recover during fights. Okay, Jake was a horrible example as his becoming an alchemist wasn't planned but had happened entirely by happenstance, and he just made the best out of what he got.

"Then, by all means, show me the weapons you have mastered," Jake said semi-jokingly as he pulled out his bow again.

The Warmaster didn't hesitate as he charged forward once more, trying to close the distance and not fight Jake in a ranged battle. His speed was still impressive when he charged, but Jake had found quite a weakness as he did a wide dodge to the side as the man charged past him.

He took a while to stop as he skit across the sand, failing to block an arrow Jake had shot right as he dodged. Trying his charge again, the result for the Warmaster turned out identical as Jake once more made distance, taking advantage of how the charge of the Warmaster worked.

Jake had identified it as coming from his boots and had at first believed it just made him faster. This turned out to not be entirely accurate. Instead, it was a charge-like skill that propelled him straight forward at an impressive speed, which naturally resulted in significantly reduced maneuverability, making it much easier to dodge than Jake had first assumed.

After Jake had dodged two times in a row, the Warmaster also seemed to realize the jig was up as he switched approach. Rather than use the enchantment, he ran normally and chased the faster Jake around the arena for a few moments, Jake landing several shots on the man, though he sadly was still unable to explode the arrows due to the peculiar armor. The Warmaster continued until Jake suddenly stopped running as he noticed what the man was doing.

As he ran, the Warmaster slowly set up a net with a thin wire barely visible even with Jake's high Perception. He strung it up between the pillars, limiting the space Jake could dodge inside unless he found time to destroy the wire.

Something Jake chose to promptly attempt as he purposefully missed an arrow right as he stopped, aimed toward one of the wires. Yet right as he did, the Warmaster seemed to slightly relax how taut it was, making it slack just enough for the arrow to miss.

He didn't stop his charge either as he closed in on Jake, still wielding his two swords. Getting close enough, he swung with both as they split into segments and fell like whips. Jake dodged as best he could, but the movements of the odd snake swords were just too unpredictable, resulting in a few cuts landing here and there.

Jake instantly put away his bow once more and charged toward the Warmaster, who was also still going toward Jake. He had done so with the expectations of taking advantage of the snake swords effectively being whips, but the Warmaster had been prepared as he simply let go of both weapons as two machetes appeared in his hands.

*Fucking hell*, Jake thought as he dodged a machete swing. He was not too deterred, though, as he pushed forward, unleashing a barrage upon the Warmaster. The man tried to fight back, but with time, one thing had been obvious... Jake out-specced the Warmaster in Agility by quite a bit, while they were roughly equal in Strength.

Forced to switch one of his weapons to a shield, the Warmaster could defend again, but it wasn't enough for him to get the upper hand. He also had to drop the second machete, as while it was fast, it did take longer to dismiss it and summon a shield than just abandon the weapon outright.

At least Jake thought that was why he dropped it as he kept fighting the Warmaster until suddenly he saw the dropped machete lift off the ground behind him through his sphere. Jake kept acting as if he didn't know as the Warmaster positioned his remaining machete between Jake and the dropped one as they both seemed to attract one another.

*Magnetism*, Jake quickly concluded.

Jake made a feint where he acted like he would commit to a big attack. Right then, the second machete flew for him from behind, but Jake abandoned his attack mid-way

through and dodged to the side. The Warmaster let out a soft chuckle as he threw the machete he wielded after Jake and used his boots to charge backward.

This one, Jake had also been ready for as he also kept retreating as both machetes clashed mid-air and exploded, sending out fragments of metal flying everywhere. Jake summoned a barrier of stable arcane mana to block all the fragments as the Warmaster naturally just used his shield.

"Should have guessed that one wouldn't work," the Warmaster muttered as he once more charged Jake, who was still maintaining his stable arcane barrier.

For what felt like the umpteenth time, he had replaced his weapons as he now had two hatchets in his hands... or, well, he had them for a few moments as both began to burn right as he threw them, forcing Jake to turn his body and place the barrier in front of the hatchets as both exploded, sending him skirting back.

The blast had broken his barrier and left him with a few burns, but those two hatchets had not been as potent as the earlier weapons... which indicated he was either trying to bait Jake or was genuinely running out of high-rarity weapons.

Even so, the man refused to back down as he closed the distance with two longswords now in hand. Jake took a moment to fully stabilize as he dodged the longsword swings and backed away a few steps. Right as he did, one longsword that he thought was stabbing toward him was dropped as, mid-thrust, it was replaced with a spear.

Jake barely blocked with his bracers as he was still left with a nasty cut and skirted back as he quickly swayed to the side a moment too late. The spear in the Warmaster's hand had instantly been dropped and replaced with something else the moment he had finished his thrust. What had appeared instead was a cursed object that Jake felt truly disappointed in seeing in the hands of someone who dared call himself a master of weapons.

It was a pathetic crossbow.

Had this pathetic crossbow hit him in the shoulder, meaning it had been a good move from the Warmaster to use it, the weapon doing the exact job it was made to? Yeah, sure, but it was the principle of even using one to begin with Jake was against. All for purely logical reasons, of course.

He just really didn't like crossbows.

With a groan, Jake pulled out the bolt as the Warmaster didn't miss a beat and went in again, the dropped longsword replaced with a shortsword. He engaged with the expectation that Jake was weakened from the bolt... unaware of the mistake he had just made.

Jake didn't even consider being defensive, as he was done playing around after the insult of being hit by a crossbow bolt. He dodged the first swing as he stabbed forward, and after finding himself parried once, he skirted to the side as he made it to the right side of the Warmaster.

The man turned to face him as Jake attacked again with ferocious intent. He didn't hold anything back as both katars began glowing with arcane light, and both started to give off small shockwaves of destructive arcane energy with each blow. These shockwaves didn't really do any damage, but they did mean that the usual impact the Warmaster expected from every clash had changed, throwing off his tempo.

It was only a matter of time before Jake managed to land a nasty stab on the Warmaster's arm. Before he could get it free from the katar, Jake twisted the weapon and forcefully moved his arm away as he blocked the man's other weapon and kicked him on the side of his leg, making him fall slightly off balance.

He stumbled for a few steps as Jake kept attacking. Jake made a move to stab the Warmaster in the chest, but his foot suddenly slipped when he stepped on the dropped longsword from earlier. Opening his eyes wide, Jake was thrown entirely off balance as the Warmaster took the presented opportunity and lifted his uninjured arm high as he swung down with his full might.

Jake smiled to himself as he allowed himself to slide fully along the length of the blade as he went nearly entirely prone. The weapon descending toward him didn't arrive. Instead, a spray of blood hit Jake from above.

Not missing the chance he had created for himself, Jake lunged forward and stabbed into the knee of the Warmaster right as the man summoned a mace and slammed it into the ground, forcing Jake back.

When the dust settled, one could see a faint red line floating in the air and the Warmaster down on one knee as he cradled his arm that looked halfway cut through. Jake didn't want to assume anything and pulled out his bow along with a massive pre-prepared quasi-Protean Arrow and-

"I surrender!" the Warmaster yelled in a pained voice as he looked at Jake. "To use my own wire against me like that... heh, I guess I really am getting too old for this damn arena fighting business. I should just stick to working as the Battlemaster."

Jake smiled as he went over and offered the Warmaster – or Battlemaster – a hand. "Eh, I wouldn't say that. You are definitely better than a few of the other Champions."

"A minor consolation to someone who met his downfall to his own weapon... what an ironic end," the Battlemaster sighed. Right then, the announcer did his announcer things.

"We have a winner! No... we have a Grand Champion! The Gauntlet of the Grand Champion has been completed once more as seven Champions have fallen before the Doombringer as he now stands at the apex of the arena of Mortals, a true master! Glory and honor await... unless he still finds himself unsated. Unless he wants to face one more person... one more challenge. Will he face the current Grand Champion? Will he dare face... the Warrior?"

For the first time in a while, Jake actually listened intently to this speech as he was taken aback by the title of the Grand Champion. Content originally comes from  
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"Warrior?" Jake questioned the Battlemaster, who he had helped stand as the medics began running in. "Seems like a pretty damn basic title for a Grand Champion."

"Yet one that symbolizes him perfectly," the Battlemaster said while the medics checked he wasn't going to die before simply standing back, waiting for Jake to be done talking.

"I guess I'll see for myself," Jake smiled. "You're gonna be fine, right? Can you stand."

The Battlemaster scoffed and pushed Jake's hand off as he stood pretty stably. "I didn't surrender because I was on my deathbed but due to that large arrow of yours. I knew I didn't have the tools to handle that one, which is also why I kept up the offensive to never give you a chance to use it, so when you got your chance, I knew the fight was over."

"That's pretty fair," Jake said. "I guess I'll see you at the usual spot?"

The man just nodded as Jake said his goodbyes and made his way out of the arena as a system message appeared before him.

**Congratulations! You are now a Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, standing at the very pinnacle!**

**All objectives but one have now been completed within the Colosseum of Mortals. There is only one thing to do:**

**To become the sole Grand Champion.**

**As the Grand Champion, you are allowed to participate in weekly Show Matches, each rewarding 25,000 Colosseum Points. These Show Matches will be of ever-increasing difficulty, with the Colosseum Rewards remaining stable.**

**You are no longer allowed to buy equipment using your Colosseum Points.**

**At any point, you can choose to leave the Colosseum of Mortals. Any excess lives will be converted into 100,000 Colosseum Points for the final point tally.**

**As a reward for becoming the Grand Champion, you are given the chance to face the Grand Champion, who is simply known as the Warrior.**

Jake read the message as he walked out of the arena and hadn't really expected anything new, which is why he was surprised when he saw that Show Matches were back and even more surprised when he was told that buying new stuff using his Colosseum Points was also off limits now.

Luckily for him... he didn't plan on doing either. He didn't want to spend more points than he already had on equipment. He already gained all the stats he could, and his weapons were pretty good. Plus, if he did go all the way, it would feel wrong if he did so in large part due to just having good equipment.

Show Matches were also not appealing. 25,000 points just wasn't enough, and he would rather focus on beating the Grand Champion. Even if he chose to stay and do Show Matches for another full year – assuming he could even do that with an ever-increasing difficulty - it would only amount to around 1,300,000 points, and while that was a lot... Jake also had a lot of points already.

**Bonus objective gained: Defeat the only other Grand Champion and fully conquer the Colosseum of Mortals.**

**Current rank: Grand Champion.**

**Colosseum Points: 6,382,110**

**Lives remaining: 9**

Jake had more than six million points now, the Champion rank alone more than doubling his total points. There had been no final big reward from reaching the Grand Champion rank, and he didn't know if this was because he had lost one life or not... but based on the prior message of losing lives no longer being penalized, he doubted it.

He also had 9 more lives available. 9 chances to win the final fight against the Grand Champion. But... in his gut, he had doubt if it was enough if he was right about who he would face in the final fight.

Looking at the name of the Grand Champion, there was only really one name that sprung to mind. One man who Jake believed was indeed fully described with just the title of Warrior. The only being Jake had ever seen kicking the living shit out of the Malefic Viper and the strongest human – if not being - alive in the multiverse:

Valdemar.

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## Chapter 777: Nevermore: Warrior (1)

"Valdemar is a fucking monster in human form, plain and simple," Artemis said in between her bites of food. "Mind you, I am not saying that he is the Grand Champion, but if that is the case, you have quite the battle ahead of you, and, well... be happy you have multiple lives."

Jake nodded, fully knowing that was the case as he chilled in the healing pool a bit away. "Say, if you fought this theoretical Grand Champion version of Valdemar... how would you rate your chances?"

"Well, if we fought a hundred times..." Artemis said, pausing for dramatic effect. "I would probably be able to not die within a minute in at least some of them."

"That strong?" Jake muttered to himself.

"I just told you he is a fucking monster. Valdemar is a being no one dares mess with in the entire multiverse. Other Primordials steer clear for the most part, and no faction wants to risk pissing him off. You must understand that even among those deemed his equals, he stands out. Most Primordials are diverse fighters. They have other essential pursuits. Their Paths include nurturing their factions, crafting, alchemy, research into magical concepts, dungeon engineering, or even making freaking pocket watches... but Valdemar only does a bit of casual brewing. He is the only Primordial that is just a pure warrior, through and through," Artemis explained.

Jake remembered having gotten a similar explanation from Villy at some point, but Artemis just hammered it home. He remembered the thoughts he had of Valdemar that had made Carmen kind of angry... but they still rang true.

"He is really just a guy with an axe," Jake said, mostly to himself.

"Calling a Primordial just 'a guy with an axe' doesn't sound like something even the Chosen of another Primordial should do," Artemis said as she threw Jake a sharp gaze as she had stopped eating.

"Doesn't make it any less true," Jake shrugged as he looked at Artemis. "Nothing's wrong with being simple. Simplicity is good. There is power in removing all complications and just having the core of a concept left."

"Your phrasing still sounded borderline heretical," Artemis said, with a slight tinge of concern in her voice.

"Only borderline?" Jake smirked. "Isn't it downright heretical to have a Challenge Dungeon where the objective is to beat up gods as a mortal?"

"That is different. All images are here with consent from the one who placed them here, with the express intent of having them used as opponents. And despite being a god on the outside, I am not a god in here. If I were a god, you wouldn't be able to even talk to me like this or stand straight in my presence, something I am sure you are quite aware of. No, the only reason you can even have this conversation and treat me as an equal being is because we are both made to be level 0," Artemis sighed. "That's just how the multiverse works."

Jake smiled a bit to himself. Yeah... that was how it worked for everyone besides him. "Eh, it's how it works until someone comes along where it doesn't work like that anymore. There is a first for everything, right?"

Artemis looked at him suspiciously for a moment as she smiled. "I kind of hope that's the case so you don't become a disappointing mess when my true self inevitably seeks you out. I would find that very unappealing."

"Time will tell, time will tell," Jake waved her off. "For now... this simple hunter has to focus on preparing to fight a simple warrior."

Jake made sure he was fully ready to face Valdemar before he sought out the Battlemaster. He created his regular arrows, made his special arrow, and recovered his resources. There really wasn't more than that he could do, seeing as gathering information was not really a thing.

Not due to a lack of information, mind you.

He had met up with Polly and Owen, who were now definitely officially dating, as they went out and celebrated him reaching the Grand Champion rank. Artemis had come along too and found it amusing how Jake interacted with the dungeon-created characters, but he hadn't paid that any mind.

Polly had agreed to help gather some more information and, after a few days, had returned with a lot of eyewitness accounts, written records, and plenty of other snippets of information. What didn't exist was recordings, though Jake had a suspicion that recordings wouldn't help much going by the other intel.

Because they all just talked about how overwhelming he had been, often winning in a few attacks at most. Jake felt that rather than teach him about Valdemar's fighting style, everything he gathered was just hyping Valdemar up as a true final boss who was seemingly borderline unbeatable. Jake was very excited to find out if that was truly the case.

When Jake finally entered the Colosseum, the Battlemaster was back in his usual spot, wearing the same clothes and without a single mark on his body from their fight.

"You've recovered well, huh?" Jake said first thing.

"I've had worse," he waved him off. "It was an enjoyable fight, though I doubt I will enter the arena again... it was way too expensive."

Jake chuckled a bit and shook his head. Maybe the guy shouldn't have a fighting style that revolved around blowing up your own weapons, then?

"So... I can already guess why you are here. To issue your challenge to the Warrior," the Battlemaster said.

"Right on," Jake nodded. "How does it work?"

The system message he had gained upon becoming Grand Champion didn't outline the procedures for challenging the Grand Champion but just said he could do it now. He really hoped he wouldn't be told there were several months of wait or something.

"From the moment you issue the challenge, the match will be scheduled for fifteen days later. No ifs or buts from either party. A Grand Champion match is simply so monumental that the Colosseum needs this time to hype up the match and sell tickets," the Battlemaster explained.

Jake was happy to hear it would only be fifteen days and seriously had to strain himself to not call out the horrible excuse for the set schedule. Oh, they needed time to sell tickets? Utter bullshit.

"Well then, I would like to issue the challenge here and now," Jake said with confidence.

The Battlemaster smiled as a few seconds passed before he spoke. "It has been done."

"Say, you got any advice you want to volunteer? Any tips or tricks for the fight?" Jake asked the Battlemaster.

"You know that I like you quite a bit, right?" the Battlemaster said with a sigh. "So I only really have one piece of advice... know when to surrender. Even if you do not win, you are still a Grand Champion, and no one can take that away from you."

*Well, that's a bleak outlook,* Jake thought to himself. Not that surrender was ever an option. Jake had nine lives to spend, after all. Of course, he really hoped he wouldn't have to use all of them... but doing it on the first try did seem like a tall order.

"I'll keep that in mind," Jake nodded as he went back to the forest close to Artemis' mansion for some more archery practice with a literal hunter goddess as he mentally prepared himself for the fight.

Fifteen days quickly passed as the entire city close to the Colosseum was buzzing. The bars held special promotions, a small festival of sorts was held in the center square, and advertisements of "The Doombringer vs. The Warrior" were placed everywhere.

Jake didn't partake in many of the festivities as he focused on training until the fateful day arrived, when he found himself back in the Colosseum, standing before the large hallway leading into the arena. Owen, Polly, and even the Battlemaster had joined him as he waited for the counter to reach zero, signaling it was time for him to enter.

"Good luck, Jake. Show that Warrior what you got," Owen said encouragingly.

"Go in with a careful approach and feel him out before you try to commit to any major attacks!" Polly advised.

"Try not to die," the Battlemaster just shrugged... which wasn't much better than Artemis, who had told him to try to not die too quickly before he left her place that morning.

"I can only do my best," Jake smiled as the timer reached zero, and it was time for him to go. The tunnel felt longer than usual for some reason as Jake walked down it, and he had an odd feeling in his stomach. *Am I nervous?*

The answer was yes... but he was equally excited. Memories of the vision he had seen during Path of the Heretic-Chosen flashed in his mind. The absolute power of Valdemar, his overwhelming fighting spirit... a power that Jake could only suspect was a Transcendent skill.

Walking up the steps, he heard the loud cheers of the audience as the large arena soon appeared before his eyes. It was the same as usual, with the large stone pillars spread throughout and sand covering the entire floor.

As he looked across from him, toward the area where the other Grand Champion was supposed to stand, he saw... nothing.

*Wait, he hasn't shown up?"*

"Welcome! To the arena! Today, two titans clash before our eyes as Grand Champions meet. Two absolute pinnacles of mortal existence, fighting it out till there is only one man standing. One, a Warrior who has never lost a fight, and the other, a man who has brought doom to anyone unlucky enough to face him during his rapid ascend through the ranks. A true Doombringer... who today shall meet someone who does not know

doom. Who will come out on top? Who will be the ultimate Grand Champion? Let's find out! Lower the gates!"

Jake was incredibly confused as he nevertheless pulled out his bow and walked forward as the bars also lowered on the other end of the arena to show the empty entrance. He walked a few steps forward as he suddenly heard it. Heavy footsteps echoed from the hallway ahead of him, and soon enough, a familiar figure appeared.

As his opponent walked up the steps, the first thing Jake saw was the glinting edge of an axe. The second thing he saw was the bearded man he recognized immediately from the vision with the Malefic Viper, and as his entire body was revealed, Jake could only stare.

He was bare-chested; the only clothing he wore was a pair of linen shorts, sandals, and metal bracers on his arms. He only had a single weapon in the axe swung over his shoulder as he slowly entered the arena, and as Jake looked at him, he got an odd feeling.

Many monsters throughout the multiverse were known as beings built solely for combat. Their evolutions had only taken them further and further toward the ideal of making them the ultimate killing machines... their bodies perfectly designed for the task.

But looking at Valdemar... Jake got the feeling that the being before him transcended any other ideal. His body was perfectly designed to fight, every powerful muscle hiding explosive power. Jake knew that the human body had some innate limitations... but he felt not an iota of weakness from the man before him. He was the most powerful human in the multiverse, after all.

As Jake stared at Valdemar, Valdemar stared back at him as he spoke, not even the Grand Champion fight free from the meet-in-the-middle-and-talk custom.

"A fellow human, eh? Impressive that you made it all the way to Grand Champion... from the looks of it, you are even one of the younglings trying for the Leaderboards, eh?" Valdemar said with a big smile as he looked at Jake. "Ah, but even if you are a human, I won't be biased toward you, alright?"

Turmoil entered Jake's mind as his eyes opened wide. "You... know where this is?"

"In... an arena?" Valdemar said, looking confused for a moment before he seemed to get it. "Ah! You are talking about us being in a Challenge Dungeon in Nevermore? Yeah, I know. Seeing as you asked that question and looked at me with surprise, I am going to guess this is your first attempt? Say, how many lives ya got?"

"Nine," Jake just answered without thinking.

"Damn, did pretty well in those Champion fights, huh? Let me guess: Umbra was the one who got one over ya. She is a real tricky one," Valdemar said with confidence.

"It was the Necromancer..." The latest\_episodes are on\_the *novel•fire•net*

"The Undying General? Ah, that makes sense too I guess," Valdemar shrugged. He just stood there silently for a few moments, looking at Jake as if waiting for him to talk. Jake just looked at him for a bit, unsure what to say before he finally spoke.

"How will this match work? Just like all the others? If you got your full memories as a god, then..." Jake muttered.

"It'll work just like normal, and don't ya worry, I can't do any of my fancy axesmanship in here!" Valdemar assured him.

Jake wasn't sure axesmanship was a real word, but he sure as hell wasn't going to point that out.

Still standing with his bow, Jake tried to let some of the tension in his body go as he knew things were about to start. "And, just to clarify, my win condition is to kill you or make you surrender?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, me dying will definitely make you win! Of course, if I think you are good enough, I might just give ya the win... but you have to prove yourself, aight? Again, I'm not gonna show ya any favor to a fellow human!

*So... I don't necessarily have to kill him or fully beat him, Jake thought with relief. He instantly caught himself as the thought struck him. Wait... I'm relieved... I guess I shouldn't be that surprised...*

Jake... didn't want to admit it, but standing before Valdemar, his instincts were screaming at him. Part of him wanted to fight, to prove his superiority over another human, but an even bigger part of him – primarily the survival instinct part – was telling him to just fucking run.

But, today, Jake let the first instinct win as he smiled at Valdemar. "Then, by all means... let's have a good one."

"Right on," Valdemar laughed loudly as he lifted his axe off his shoulder at the exact same moment Jake knocked an arrow. Making use of the distance, Jake wanted to try and land an arrow or two before Valdemar closed the distance.

Valdemar began walking toward Jake as he released the first arrow. Jake had expected the man to dodge, but he just kept walking as the arrow struck him in the shoulder and penetrated with the entire arrowhead.

"Sharp ones you got there," Valdemar said with a grin as he just kept walking. Jake tried to explode the arrow in his shoulder, but he couldn't connect to it at all... as if whatever trace of Willpower inside was being utterly suppressed.

The second arrow was blocked as Valdemar swiped it away with his axe as he began to pick up speed.

Jake took precautions and dodged back as Valdemar went into a full-on sprint. He closed in rapidly, his axe raised above his head. A golden aura began to envelop his body, making Jake hesitate for a moment as he recognized it from the vision, and he felt a presence spread that made his body feel heavier.

His moment of hesitation proved unwise as the axe came down a moment later.

At the very last moment, Jake had dodged, but it felt like the axe almost dragged him in as it came down. When it hit the arena floor, a pillar of sand nearly ten meters high was kicked up as Jake was thrown across the arena, his left arm bloody from simply enduring the sheer pressure from the swing.

Jake landed as he stumbled a bit, trying to stabilize as he now was completely certain... this first fight was not one to win, but one to figure out how to not die too quickly.

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## Chapter 778: Nevermore: Warrior (2)

Three minutes and fourteen seconds.

That's how long Jake lasted in the first fight against Valdemar before he found his skull crushed. Not even by an axe either, but from a fist smashing his head into the sand so hard his face caved in. Three minutes and change didn't seem like a long time, but when he mentioned it to Artemis, she had been damn impressed he had even survived that long.

At the beginning of their fight, Jake had held on well. He had kited Valdemar around, avoided his blows as best he could and tried to get a read on the man. He tried to read his tempo, his tendencies, and his habits as Jake looked for any minor flaws or openings to exploit.

Jake found many flaws and openings... too many, in fact. Valdemar was left wide open whenever he attacked, and he barely seemed to protect his vital areas while fighting.



Most of Jake's attacks, he just ignored, while he only bothered to block those that either took little effort or could actually prove dangerous. Valdemar did make sure to avoid any attacks to the face and neck, but hitting anywhere else didn't seem to bother him much.

In total, Jake landed eleven arrows during the fight. He could have landed more, but he wasn't fighting to win or even deal damage but to learn from his opponent. He had battled to figure out how he could drag out the fights and not just die immediately... because that was the number one lesson Jake took away from the fight:

Don't get hit.

It seemed like a basic lesson, but Jake usually did take some hits. He would sometimes exchange blows to deal more damage to his opponent in trade for taking a bit himself, or he would block attacks he either couldn't or judged he didn't need to dodge.

Against Valdemar, that was not a thing. The reason he had ultimately lost his first life was because Jake had stupidly thought he could parry Valdemar's axe and direct it into the sand. What had happened instead was that Jake broke his wrist, had his entire body twisted, and was unable to react when a fist slammed into his face.

Blocking or parrying any direct hits was thus entirely out of the question. At least when it came to the axe... Jake still wasn't sure when it came to Valdemar's fists. Because, yes, the guy also liked to punch and even kick... and holy fuck should Valdemar have gotten the title of Doomfoot instead of Jake.

Doomfist, too, considering a punch from Valdemar was more powerful than the hammer blows from the Necromancer. His kicks were even more powerful. But... Jake had discovered that he wasn't entirely powerless. Because while Valdemar was overwhelmingly powerful, Jake could still dodge him, even if he did sometimes get hit with blasts from the sheer power of the Primordial's blows.

In movement speed, he had Valdemar slightly beat if he just sprinted away, the boots that allowed him to run in the sand helping quite a bit. This only really counted for elaborate movements, though. Valdemar's charging speed was insane as he pretty much kicked off the ground whenever he moved, propelling himself forward, not much unlike the Warmaster.

When it came to swinging speed, Valdemar was an utterly ridiculous monster, and it felt like his axe borderline just teleported around as he swung it. This also played into another thing Jake discovered: Valdemar never half-arsed anything.

Usually, fighters did feints, weak blows to land a stronger one, or, you know, had any kind of strategy or complex thought behind their moves. Valdemar didn't do any of that. He fully committed to every single attack, no matter what. He didn't do small jabs; he only threw haymakers. This was what left him full of openings... but also what made him so unbelievably powerful with every single attack.

So... yeah. All direct hits were to be dodged for sure.

All in all, Jake believed his first death had been a good one. Oddly enough, he didn't feel that bad about the death at all, likely because he had "planned" to die. He had accepted that deaths would happen and was ready for it to happen again. His Bloodline was even silent, though he had a good feeling it was just building up and preparing for the one fight Jake decided he was going for the win.

Because Jake was naturally not doing all this just to get killed nine times in a row... he was doing it to eke out a victory in the end. The Challenge Dungeon was made to be beatable, so Jake sure as hell wanted to beat it. He just needed to do the proper groundwork first by dying a few times.

Right after Jake had died, he had once more appeared in an entirely white room as a system menu he had a feeling he would see quite a few times in the coming period popped up in front of his eyes.

### **Three Resurrection Points Available:**

- 1. The day the challenge to the Warrior was issued.**
- 2. A week before the fight with the Warrior begins.**
- 3. The same day that the fight with the Warrior took place.**

### **Choose one Resurrection point.**

Jake had considered for a while before choosing to go back to a week before the fight began, as he did have some preparations he wanted to make. Primarily regarding the arrows he would bring into the fight.

When he theorized Valdemar would be the final boss, he also assumed the man wouldn't wear any heavy armor. But, for some stupid reason, Jake had assumed that a bare-chested Valdemar wouldn't have muscles so stupidly dense that he may as well have worn tough leather armor. With that in mind, he changed the arrow design with only the act of piercing tough flesh in mind. He could already leave nasty flesh wounds, but Jake wanted to do far more than that... he wanted arrows that could pierce straight through some weak areas to hopefully deal meaningful damage while also making the holes bleed way more. He accomplished this by changing the design of the arrows so that they would no longer automatically plug any holes they made.

Because the objective of Jake's eighth life was to test exactly how durable Valdemar was.

"The way you're looking at me makes me think this isn't your first attempt," Valdemar said in a casual tone as he saw Jake stand across from him, ready to retreat and make

some distance, yet not backing down in the slightest as he straightened his back and looked directly at the Primordial.

Jake was back in the arena a week after his first encounter, and the pressure from the man hadn't lessened in the slightest. He had just learned something valuable, though:

Only Jake would have memories of all their former encounters, so he would definitely be able to make use of that. Of course, he couldn't just lay an exact game plan, as the world wasn't deterministic, so each encounter would play out slightly differently, even if Jake did the same things.

"It's my second one, Got eight lives left," Jake answered.

"And yet you still stand straight," Valdemar grinned widely. "Good! No need to keep talking then!"

Valdemar exploded forward without warning as he charged far more aggressively than he had in the prior fight. Jake reacted in a flash as he jumped to the side to avoid the charge while shooting an arrow. Being in full sprint, Valdemar was hit in the thigh by the arrow as it pierced deeply, but the attack didn't impede his movements at all as he kept heading straight for Jake.

Jake didn't even try to bring out his katars as he ducked under the first axe swipe, feeling his hair nearly get ripped out from the rush of air that followed the attack. A fist came straight after, but Jake was ready and jumped right as Valdemar punched the ground, borrowing the momentum of the shockwave as he shot another arrow that curved around and hit the Primordial in the arm.

Before the dust had even the slightest chance to settle, Valdemar ripped his fist out of the sand, sending a spout of sand flying upward, clouding himself within it. For a moment, Jake thought he was trying to hide... but he had literally just ripped his fist out fast, not caring at all if he made a smokescreen. He continued the attack as the glinting axe exited the sand first, swinging toward Jake, who was still a good three meters away while still retreating. A faint golden crescent wave shot out, and Jake raised his durable bow as he infused it with a bit of arcane mana. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [novel.fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

Now, there was one thing Jake could block, and that was these energy waves. They were dangerous if they hit him straight-on, but he was fully capable of blocking them as long as he used his bow or katars along with a bit of arcane mana. More so than him just blocking, they often even ended up helping him.

Riding the wave of energy of the blast after he blocked it, Jake got enough distance to shoot two more arrows, one hitting the chest of Valdemar, with the other one getting blocked by his axe. He shot one final arrow into the air before the monstrous warrior

arrived and cleaved downward with his weapon, kicking up another explosion of sand and sending Jake skirting back.

He didn't have time to shoot any arrows as he quickly switched to his katars. Valdemar had left his axe embedded in the sand to continue his attack faster as he instantly closed the distance, using his explosive speed while he performed a wide kick. Jake didn't even try to block as he managed to barely bend his back and dodge it, a few scratches still on his chin as it was cut by the wind and sand.

The follow-up was a haymaker that Jake once more barely avoided as he landed a single stab on the punching arm, sending a bit of blood flying. The Primordial just grinned in response as he swept his arm sideways, making Jake back away.

Right then, the arrow Jake had shot earlier descended from above, hitting Valdemar in the collarbone, the impact making his knee buckle for a fraction of a moment. A flash of surprise appeared on his face as he looked at the arrow sticking out of his collar before gripping and tearing it out without flinching.

"You're a real fast and tricky one, aren't ya?" Valdemar said as he casually turned his back and walked back to pick up his axe. Jake didn't even hesitate to pull out his bow and shoot two arrows. Valdemar turned his side to Jake and raised his arm, just taking the arrows in his left forearm, where they penetrated all the way to – but failed to damage – the bone. Lifting his axe with his other arm, he fully turned and regarded Jake.

"Using a bow with some weird mana, too..." the Primordial smiled as he turned his arm and looked at Jake's arrows sticking out as he casually swung his axe and deflected another arrow Jake had shot. "And... those punching daggers. What were they called again?"

"Katars," Jake answered, not even bothering to shoot any more arrows.

"That's it! Yeah, katars," Valdemar smiled happily despite the several arrows sticking out of his body and the blood rolling down his chest from the nasty hole in his collarbone and the chest literally sticking out of his one pec. "I tend to make a bit of a game figuring out what god my fighting pals are with... but you, I find pretty darn hard to place. So, ya mind just telling me?"

Jake couldn't help but smirk as he shook his head. "I am the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, though I can see that being pretty hard to see, considering I am not exactly using poisons of any kind."

Valdemar's smile suddenly faded as he looked at Jake seriously. "Are you lying to me?"

"No?" Jake said, slightly confused by the change in the man's aura. "The Malefic Viper is back and out in the open, and I am his Chosen."

"You're telling me that the Vilas has not only left his divine realm but given his big Blessing to a human? One from the new era?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Jake confirmed.

"Heh," Valdemar chuckled to himself as he started full-on laughing as his voice bellowed for several seconds before he finally calmed down and looked at Jake. "Good! Real good! For too long have I been waiting!"

Jake, who had just been casually talking, realized he had made a mistake as Valdemar's aura suddenly began spiking. Golden energy erupted from his body as he made a huge, toothy smile.

"Hey, mate... ya said ya still got eight lives, right!?" Valdemar yelled.

Jake tentatively nodded.

"Hah! Well, losing this life's on you for getting me all fired up!" the Primordial yelled happily as the sand around him began floating into the air, vibrating in his presence.

In the next second, he exploded forward like a golden meteor. Jake reacted as fast as he could when he dodged, releasing arcane energy throughout his body. He boosted his body as much as possible as he barely avoided the first downward axe swing. His chest armor was still cut up, but Jake managed to avoid taking any lethal damage.

There was not a single thought of counterattacking in his mind as Valdemar instantly followed up as he cut upward with his axe, releasing a torrent of sand that Jake tried to borrow the momentum as he blasted arcane mana beneath him to try and get into the air.

He was a moment too slow.

Jake had made a bad judgment call as a hand grasped his foot right before he was out of reach. He was dragged down again and smashed into the sand hard, pushing out all air from his lungs as he stared up at a maniacally grinning Valdemar, who was shining like some golden god, as he promptly brought down his axe to end the fight.

At that final moment, with time seemingly moving a little slower than usual... Jake became absolutely certain. That golden aura originated from a Transcendent, no two ways about it... the problem was just that Jake still had no idea exactly when he activated it or how it worked yet.

All he did know for sure... was that bringing up the Malefic Viper and getting Valdemar all excited was definitely not the play.

So, the eighth life had been a bit of a learning experience, but not the one he had wanted, so during his seventh life, Jake tried to finally test the limits of Valdemar's durability. He managed to land far more hits than during any of the prior fights, but even as Valdemar was left bloody all over... it never seemed to impact his movements much, and eventually, Jake was unable to keep up and lost another life. Toward the end, Valdemar had begun to be more defensive and blocked more hits, so at least it felt like there was some progress.

His sixth life was spent without ever taking out his bow. Jake had gone in to fight entirely in melee to try and better survive close combat, as he began to realize his strategy of just dodging and running away wasn't sustainable if he wanted to win. He would simply run out of energy before Valdemar would fall.

Either way, fighting in melee proved quite the challenge, but Jake did better than he had expected, surviving for even longer than the first fight he had with Valdemar, fighting for over four minutes.

Every fight, no, every moment, felt like he was under constant pressure trying to keep him down, but with time, Jake began to adapt. He began to get a better read on Valdemar, and he began to understand how he fought. Jake himself also got better as his initial apprehension had now been entirely turned into excitement. Valdemar was powerful... far more powerful than Jake himself, and despite knowing that, he wanted to still fight. He wanted to win.

He wanted to see the true limits of Valdemar's Transcendence... and show him the limits of his Bloodline in turn.

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## Chapter 779: Nevermore: Warrior (3)

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To use his own life and death as a mere resource in his preparations did feel odd to Jake, but in truth, he had no other choice. Valdemar was simply too overwhelmingly powerful for Jake to possibly defeat him in a single attempt, and Jake also suspected he was just a straight-up cheat, as while he didn't use any skills... well, it wasn't like the S-grade Valdemar fighting the Malefic Viper in the vision had used many either. The only real thing Jake remembered him using was that Fang of Man skill, along with what Jake assumed to be a self-made brew to help cleanse the toxins.

So, all Jake could do was keep dying as he accumulated knowledge through several deaths.

When he only had five lives remaining, Jake fully confirmed that Valdemar had indeed entirely transcended the limitations of a G-grade human body. For Jake, in his current state, having a kneecap broken or his tendons severed would make him unable to move properly, even if he could force some movement using his internal energy. The action would be stilted and far slower than usual, though.

Valdemar did not have these same limitations. During this life, Jake had managed to fully destroy his one kneecap during a borderline suicidal attack, only to see Valdemar continue running toward him, the entirely crushed knee somehow just holding up due to the golden aura. Ultimately, he concluded the only way to limit Valdemar's range of movement was to cut off a limb entirely... or some-fucking-how kill him outright.

As for how Jake could accomplish that one? Well, he had hoped that his big arrow could be a solution... so when he had four lives remaining, Jake stayed at his own entrance area as he took out his quasi-Protean Arrow and began charging his skillless Arcane Powershot before Valdemar even entered the arena.

It was a bit scummy, but he had to at least give it a go. Valdemar had walked up to the arena as Jake finished charging the attack. Without hesitation, he had let it go, only for Valdemar to laugh loudly as he took it head-on. Axe met arrow as a massive explosion rocked the arena, sending destructive shards of arcane mana flying everywhere as the large arrow fragmented like a grenade.

When the dust settled, Valdemar still walked out of the cloud of dust, small wounds covering his chest, but otherwise completely unharmed, his body burning with golden aura. So, in conclusion, Valdemar swinging his axe really hard was roughly equivalent to Jake's strongest attack...

That life had ended pretty quickly after that, as Jake had caused some self-damage with his quasi-Powershot, making him a tiny bit slower than before, which naturally resulted in a rapid demise. Jake did get a bit more experimentation in during that life, though... because he had noticed one thing already several lives ago.

While Valdemar's stats were through the roof, he was lacking in Perception. The arrow Jake had shot up that hit him in the collarbone hadn't been a one-off... so that was where Jake could focus. He would exploit the one weakness he had found to land meaningful blows and hopefully pull out a victory that way, if possible.

When he had three lives remaining, Jake began to implement some level of proper strategy as he also finally did something he should have done far earlier. While Jake wanted to figure out how the hell Valdemar's Transcendence worked and had done many things to test it, there was one thing he had neglected to try:



Just asking the guy.

After a few clashes, Jake found himself on the backfoot but also managed to land some hits. So far, the fight hadn't gone terribly, and Jake finally questioned the Primordial.

"How does that golden aura of yours even work? It's a Transcendence, right?" Jake asked, in all honesty, not really expecting any answer. It was actually pretty dumb of him to even ask. Why would someone like a Primordial just tell some random mortal something like tha-

"System does sure call it a Transcendence," Valdemar nodded as he looked to really rack his brain for a moment. "As for how it works... well, it just does."

"It.. just works?" Jake questioned the pretty empty statement with a deadpan expression.

"Oh, look at you judging! Then tell me, how does that weird mana of yours work!" Valdemar asked, crossing his arms.

"Well, it's an arcane affinity, so it's pretty normal that I don't know exactly how it works," Jake answered promptly. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY *novel■fire■net*

"So you don't know how it works," Valdemar stated with confidence.

"I do know what it does," Jake mumbled. "I can make it stable and destructive, making it either incredibly durable and practically a physical object, while the destructive variant deals incredible damage."

"That just sounds like normal mana," Valdemar scratched his beard. "Ya sure ya didn't just accidentally color your mana purple or something?"

"Pretty sure I didn't," Jake sighed. "And it's inspired by normal mana, it's just... more."

Valdemar just smiled, his facial expression full of satisfaction as if he had just won some major argument. "As I said... ya don't know."

Jake felt kind of defeated arguing against a guy who didn't rely on logic, as he countered. "Well, I answered you, so at least tell me what your odd golden aura does. To me, it just looks like it somehow makes you stronger."

"It's my fighting aura! It's from my fighting spirit!" Valdemar grinned widely. "At least that's what I call it."

"Fighting spirit?" Jake asked. That just sounded so... vague? Undefined. Jake also had fighting spirit – a lot of it – but that didn't make him glow like some golden god who could display insane levels of power. It couldn't be that simple...

"Yep, my fighting spirit," the Primordial laughed as he raised his axe high. "The spirit of a legend! A hero! A warlord!"

His golden aura erupted again as he was firing himself up as he looked straight at Jake. "A warrior."

Surprisingly enough, he didn't attack but just looked at Jake for a moment, almost waiting for him to do something. When he didn't, Valdemar just shook his head.

"You're still waiting for the right time, aren't ya?" he asked. "Still got some lives left to spare?"

Jake frowned slightly as Valdemar seemed to know something. In the end, Jake only subtly nodded as Valdemar nodded in turn, recognizing the situation. He seemed almost saddened as he looked at Jake.

"Ya know, that's the real problem with these Challenge Dungeons and events where you can't really die. It's all so damn fake," Valdemar shook his head as he looked Jake straight in the eye. "Without putting our lives on the line, how can we feel truly excited!? How can we give it our all if we know we are safe! Only with a blade to their neck can a true warrior show their full power!"

His golden aura fluctuated as he said this, though it didn't seem to weaken in the slightest.

"People tell me I have a good nose for these things... and looking at ya, I can see ya got something in here," Valdemar said as he pounded the left side of his chest. "But why pull it out when your life isn't even on the line? Why fight with desperation when you are not truly desperate!?"

Jake was taken aback by the passionate words of the Primordial, who seemed almost angry at the very existence of the dungeon. But... he could also only agree. Jake had just died several times without really caring. Instinctually, he understood that death in the Challenge Dungeon was not true death. It didn't trigger the depths of his survival instincts, even if it had come close the first time he had died against the Necromancer.

If this was the real world and Jake found himself facing Valdemar at a similar level... he would not have fought as he did in the Colosseum. He would have fought with true desperation and pulled out everything he had... he would have fought with his life on the line, as he had when he faced the King of the Forest. He would, at the very least, have gone for mutual destruction.

"I can see from the look in your eyes you understand," Valdemar said in an elated voice. "Ya still got some lives... but when ya have only one attempt left, properly challenge me. Challenge me to a duel of the ages! Challenge me to create the ultimate Legend of

the Colosseum! If ya do that, I shall face ya with the respect such a challenge requires. Ah, but be careful... I may get a little excited at the prospect.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Jake nodded solemnly. “Now, let’s finish this attempt.”

“I hope ya learn something!” Valdemar laughed. “Should make the true duel far more entertaining!”

With those words, the Primordial charged, and Jake faced him for nearly six minutes before he finally fell.

Two lives remained.

After his talk with Valdemar, he realized that during their final duel, he would have to not hesitate in the slightest but do all he could. While it was possible for Jake to just go back to the save point before he issued the challenge and spend a year practicing, he never considered it. Instead, he turned toward something he had written off as not an option a long time ago:

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Boosting skills.

Jake had already touched on it against the Lightning Monarch, but for a level 0, having a consistently active boosting skill just wasn’t viable. Instead, Jake had switched to using short, controllable bursts of arcane energy while fighting to help himself, but the increase was far from the insane 60% Arcane Awakening could provide at full power.

If Jake did use the full Arcane Awakening... well, he couldn’t. Boosting skills were skills for a very good reason. They were borderline required to be skills, as consciously controlling the extreme flow of energy through your body while fighting was pretty much impossible, and the only reason why boosting skills were widespread was that the system handled everything.

However... even if Jake did call it pretty much impossible, it wasn’t entirely impossible. The Lightning Monarch had an arcane affinity extremely well-fitted to boosting yourself, which also meant that in a situation where he lost control, it wouldn’t damage him too much. For Jake, if he was running arcane energy through his body and lost total control, his entire body would disintegrate or explode.

Learning to safely emulate a boosting skill without the skill part would likely take Jake years. So, he decided not to do that but just accepted the downside of an uncontrollable boosting skill. Accept that death would be the inevitable conclusion after he activated the boost.

His second-to-last death was one Jake committed solely to making sure he didn't kill himself too fast during his last fight with Valdemar.

When he entered the arena, Jake had begun to boost his body early on. He had felt the burning sensation of pure destructive energy coursing through his veins, slowly destroying him from within with the promise of power in return. A power that it delivered as Jake got more powerful in every aspect as he engaged the Primordial.

For the first time, Jake truly kept up and fought back with vigor. He landed several devastating blows, nearly ripping off Valdemar's arm at one point, even if he lost his own in the exchange, and successfully stabbed him a few dozen times. All that coming after he landed quite a few arrows. For a while, it looked like he could truly fight equally with the Primordial - a while being a good fifty seconds, in this case, before he reached his limits. His resources began to run out, and his body could no longer take the forceful circulation of destructive energy as it began to fall apart. He didn't even have the time to die to his own skill, though, as Valdemar's axe finished the job before nature had the chance to take its course.

One life remaining.

Jake chose to return to the day he issued the challenge when he revived. Not because he needed the extra prep time but because he wanted to spend the time getting in the best mental state he could while also enjoying his remaining two weeks with Artemis, Owen, Polly, and even chatting with the Battlemaster. No matter what, the next fight would be the last.

After two weeks of relaxation, Jake was back in the Colosseum. During this period, he had tried not to think too much about the fight... but as he walked down the tunnel toward the arena, he felt his own heartbeat begin to speed up. This time, there was no trace of fear or trepidation but only pure excitement.

Jake was down to his final attempt. A final duel with the most powerful level 0 human alive... or, hopefully, the soon-to-be second-most powerful level 0 human alive.

It was time to find the one true Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals... no, the true Grand Champion of humanity.

The level 0 G-grade version of humanity, anyway.

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"That last match was impressive," the Wyrmgod commented. "Better than I expected... but not quite enough. Not against Valdemar."

“Yeah,” Minaga nodded. “We did kind of overdo it with this Grand Champion, didn’t we? Even if we did try to even the playing field by not necessarily requiring them to kill him and giving him his memories.”

Vilastromoz stayed silent as he just observed. He didn’t really have any questions about why they had done as they had with him retaining his memories and all. There was zero risk of him showing favor to people from his faction or other humans. Valdemar would never surrender just to give someone a free win... his honor simply wouldn’t allow it. In fact, it was potentially the only way to allow anyone to beat him.

“Say, Vilas... do you think Jake can win?” Minaga asked, clearly not that confident himself. “I would have said yes under normal circumstances... but Valdemar’s Transcendence is... yeah.”

The Viper thought for a moment before smiling and waving off the question. “It will be tough no matter what, but wouldn’t I be a horrible Patron if I didn’t even believe in my Chosen?”

He said that, but in truth... Vilastromoz had no idea. It was two people full of unknowns fighting, and based on their talk during Jake’s third-to-last life, he got the feeling anything could happen. Jake had his Bloodline that could do something ridiculous, while Valdemar had his Transcendence. Something that the Viper also had to admit he didn’t comprehend.

Transcendent skills came in many forms. Jake already knew of his swordsman pal, who had an interesting one he could activate to temporarily experience a change. The Undying General was a person who could activate his Transcendence to make himself impossible to kill for a period, while the Transcendence of Eversmile was a skill that could be activated to completely destroy someone, effectively erasing them from the Records of the multiverse. Or, as a final example, Aeon who could activate his to truly stop the very concept of time for a period.

And while these were all incredibly powerful, they all had one keyword attached: activate. They needed to be used. One needed to trigger them, with every use having some associated cost. Often something extremely valuable or even an antithesis to what the skill did. They were all skills no one would use haphazardly but always saved as their final ace.

Even the Holyland created by the Holy Mother had a great cost associated with it. Not only did keeping the skill active cost a lot of the faith energy she absorbed, but Vilastromoz also knew she had to pay an astronomical cost when she first established it, and should the Holyland ever get damaged or be destroyed entirely, remaking it would prove extremely difficulty and costly, to the level of his fellow Primordial potentially considering it impossible.

However... to this date, Vilastromoz had no idea what the hell the cost of Valdemar's Transcendence was. At first, he had thought if maybe the cost was a permanent sacrifice in intelligence and wisdom – and not the stats – but the man had proven uncharacteristically smart and wise at times.

He had come up with many more theories and even tested them. Was his simple fighting style a requirement? Was it some hidden special resource? Vilastromoz had even considered that he had entirely transformed his stamina and mana resource polls into a special new Transcendent resource... but none of them proved accurate.

The worst part was that Valdemar himself also clearly didn't know. He wasn't even sure when he got the Transcendence, making the Viper think it was potentially from before the system had even arrived. He just had it, and he used it all the time. This is where it truly stood out, and the Viper had realized something:

His Transcendence didn't need to be activated. It was a passive skill. Vilastromoz had, in all honesty, not considered that Transcendent skills could even be passive before he met Valdemar, but the man had proven him and everyone else wrong. All while just shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

But... at the same time, the Viper also didn't understand Jake's Bloodline. Nor did he even fully understand his arcane affinity. It was two humans that truly puzzled him fighting, so the Viper couldn't help but look forward to the outcome. To see what Jake could pull out of his ass this time around... or if Valdemar's eternal bullshit once more proved superior.

"Since you said you believe in him, are you willing to bet on your Chosen?" Minaga said, the forever-opportunist. "I like Jake... but I vote on Valdemar winning the duel. I'll even give you good odds."

The Viper considered for a while as he looked at Jake walking down the tunnel. In the recording, he saw him walk with steady steps as the Viper saw the look in Jake's eyes and just smiled.

"You're on."

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## Chapter 780: Nevermore: Hunter vs. Warrior

During the first era, humans had been viewed as a weak race. Even weaker than the other enlightened races. They lived for a short time, especially at lower grades, and the only real thing anyone agreed they had going for them was their higher reproductive speeds. They didn't have any good racial skills, and their stat distribution was spread out to create jacks of all trades but masters of none. Moreover, as enlightened, they leveled slower than beasts or monsters and had to adopt a far more diverse path by focusing on both a profession and a class. Compared to other races, they just didn't have much going for them.

As an example, the elven Altmar Empire began to rise during the first era, and other powerful factions were slowly rising and gaining recognition, with elves, dwarves, scalekin, and beastkin all finding their niches and fighting back against the monsters. Humans were just viewed as among the weakest of the enlightened races and an inferior variant... until Valdemar appeared.

With a single axe in hand, Valdemar showed the power of humanity as he exemplified the notion of a one-man army. He conquered empires, slaughtered armies, and became an unstoppable force none could stand against, with even monsters fearing him. Eventually, after there were already few, if any, that could face him, he rose to godhood as the first enlightened.

Without Valdemar, humanity would be far weaker than they were today. Jake would be far weaker than he was, and not just because of the Fang of Man skill he had gained, but due to the sharing of Records. Every single human was affected by the Records Valdemar sent echoing out into the multiverse through his rise to power, the same as how every snake was affected by the Malefic Viper.

In some ways, one could even call Valdemar the Forefather of humanity. The strongest and most influential human in existence... a human who stood at the peak of existence. It was something Jake recognized as fact, simply due to knowing history, yet, as stupid as it sounded, it wasn't something he could fully accept.

Because to accept that Valdemar was the peak of humanity would be to acknowledge him as his superior. Even if he was stronger right now... Jake couldn't accept losing when the playing ground was at least somewhat evened by the Colosseum of Mortals.

Walking up the steps to the arena with steady steps, everything felt the same as every other fight. The clamoring crowd, the announcer, Owen and Polly in the stands... everything was the same. The only true difference was Jake.

When he saw the large arena he had laid his eyes on so many times before, he only felt a sense of calmness. Yet, at the very same time, he faintly felt his own heart beat with excitement as it wanted him to let loose. But Jake knew patience. When he went all-out, he would be on a pretty short timer, and for this final confrontation, he would do everything in his power to pull out a victory.



For the ninth time, the announcer did his thing, and the gates lowered as Jake's final battle against Valdemar began. He casually walked toward the center of the arena as he waited for his opponent to arrive. A few seconds later, he heard footsteps as the Primordial appeared, looking a little surprised at Jake just standing there, waiting.

"Definitely not ya first attempt, eh?" Valdemar said with a big grin as he also walked toward the middle of the arena. "But the look in those eyes is still good. How many times have we stood here before?"

"This is the ninth... and I am on my final life," Jake answered truthfully.

"Got here with nine lives, eh? Impressive. Gotta make the last one count, then," Valdemar said with a shrug as he slightly shifted his weight, ready to move at a moment's notice.

Jake smiled as he pulled out his bow. "I plan on doing just that. So let's make this fight into an ultimate legend unlike any the Colosseum of Mortals has ever seen before."

His words made Valdemar pause briefly as he laughed. "You're no slouch, eh? A proper challenge! Good! Good! I asked you to say that, right?"

Golden energy began to shimmer around his body as he asked, Jake nodding in response. "It's my last attempt, after all... so I might as well make it legendary."

"Then come! Face me, and let's have a good one, eh!" Valdemar laughed incredibly loudly before looking directly at Jake, his massive grin still marking his face. "Remember... you asked for it!"

Valdemar exploded forward immediately with incredible speed, but even so, Jake had already reacted and gotten on the move himself. The Primordial was many things, and predictable was definitely one of them, making it easy to read when he was about to attack or not. Actually responding to the attack was a whole other story... but Jake would manage. He had to if he wanted to execute the plan he had spent nine lives making.

Making use of this initial opening, Jake loosed two arrows toward Valdemar, the first one hitting him in the arm as the Primordial was turning. The second one was swept away, and Jake knew that releasing a third one wouldn't be worth it as Valdemar would easily block it. He had a limited number of arrows and had to conserve them, after all.

With his heavy but swift steps, Valdemar was soon upon Jake again. The straightforward slash that looked easy to dodge was avoided by only a hair's margin as Jake weaved in between the man's hits as he still took some light damage from the remnant golden aura and sheer wind pressure.

Jake had switched to his katars and managed to land a few light cuts and shallow stabs until he was forced to make distance before Valdemar could land a too-dangerous blow. He still wasn't using his boosting skill and was thus still heavily outclassed in power and attack speed. His only real advantage was his higher movement speed and dodging ability, but that had its limits. However, Jake had a plan.

Even if he was disadvantaged now, he wanted to set a tempo for the fight. A status quo of him running away and avoiding blows until he would unleash his boosting skill to land a hopefully impactful blow to gain him an advantage for the rest of the fight.

So that is exactly what he did. A dozen arrows were expended as Jake and Valdemar both took several minor wounds to their bodies as they exchanged blows. A single mistake from Jake would spell his doom, while Valdemar had plenty of leeway in every clash, the man even taking the fight pretty calmly. Jake knew his opponent could unleash more power than he currently was, but he equally knew that the Primordial had a tendency to rise to a challenge and match his opponent in power. Well, if matching them in power meant still thoroughly overpowering them. The point was he could overpower Jake more than he currently was if Jake powered himself up too early. Once he did go all-out, Jake knew he would have less than a minute to hopefully eke out a victory.

"You're a fast and tricky one, eh!?" Valdemar laughed as he pushed Jake back, forcing him to skirt across the sand for a few meters before coming to a stop. "Imma give it to ya, ya either fought me a lot more than the ten times allowed, or you're a damn dodging prodigy!"

"As I said, I have spent nine lives fighting you already," Jake smiled as he met the Primordial's eyes. "And you say I am only dodging... but the arrows sticking out of you kinda say otherwise."

"Bah! They're just flesh wounds!" Valdemar shrugged unbothered as he stopped talking and continued his assault, Jake once more meeting his tempo. He had done this exact fight several times before and knew that soon Valdemar would change things up as he got bored of the status quo. He would change the tempo by displaying more power than usual and do a hyper-aggressive attack.

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That moment would be Jake's time to strike.

A minute or so more passed as Valdemar slowly picked up the pace as usual. Jake used a few more arrows during this time and tried to keep his distance and be in melee range as little as possible, but he couldn't avoid taking minor injuries here and there.

By now, his armor was pretty shredded in many places, having done its job of blocking Valdemar's energy. In fact, the Primordial was clearly more injured than Jake, even if his movements didn't show at all. This wasn't anything special, and far from the first life it had happened, but it was a good start.

Soon enough, Jake felt the mood shift. Valdemar was done evaluating Jake as he charged once more, giving off an even more ferocious aura than usual. Jake dodged the first swing as the Primordial grinned to himself right as his body exploded with his fighting aura. With a roar, he stomped, releasing a shockwave of pure force, pushing Jake back through the sand as Valdemar used the momentum of his own stomp to lunge forward with a wide downward swing, aiming to take Jake's arm. His explosive power would take most by surprise... but Jake had expected it.

Valdemar's strike left him wide open; his attack performed with the expectation that Jake would avoid as he had done with every other major attack. However, rather than continuing to borrow the energy of the shockwave to dodge backward, Jake did just the opposite.

Bracing himself, Jake stepped down hard as his foot exploded with arcane energy. This energy then spread throughout his entire body within moments, making him even faster as he propelled himself toward the surprised Valdemar at a speed the Primordial couldn't have predicted. Jake went under the head of the axe before it managed to strike down and entered extreme-close range, both katars ready to strike.

His opponent was completely taken by surprise, yet he still reacted well. Jake had wanted to strike the heart or neck of Valdemar, but his free left arm moved into a defensive position instantly, forcing Jake to make the executive decision to strike lower where he couldn't defend. Due to the lunging blow, Valdemar could not easily move his legs, which Jake took full advantage of.

One katar stabbed forward, penetrating deeply into the Primordial's guts, while the other stabbed down into his thigh. The arcane energy coursing through his body empowered the blows further as a sound reminiscent of static electricity sounded out from the clashing arcane energy and Valdemar's transcendent fighting aura.

Not missing a beat, Jake twisted his body around Valdemar, who tried to catch him in a bear hug, using the momentum of his movement to twist the katar in the Primordial's thigh as he sliced the katar in the stomach across his flesh, sending blood spilling out.

Jake wanted to do more, but he was forced to quickly kick off the sand and send himself back to dodge an elbow descending toward his skull, the attack moving far faster than anything Valdemar had done prior. However, even as Jake dodged, he was forced to block a wave of golden aura as it clashed with his own arcane energy, Valdemar having truly risen to the occasion as the golden aura around his body was more intense than ever.

"You were holding out on me!" Valdemar said as he held a hand to his stomach and slightly shifted his weight away from the injured leg. Despite calling Jake out, the man had a huge grin on his face, looking ecstatic that Jake had more to show for himself.

Jake clicked his tongue at seeing his attack not doing as much as he wanted, but he was still kind of on track for the plan.

"Had to make it a little more exciting," Jake smiled while pulling out his bow, trying to take advantage of Valdemar's limited mobility. He knew that the Primordial would not be held back by having most of his thigh muscles torn apart for long, after all. Plus, it wasn't like Jake had the leeway to dally with arcane energy, tearing his body apart from the inside.

With high precision, Jake carefully used some of his remaining arrows as Valdemar blocked what he could with his axe. He was down to less than a dozen only twenty or so seconds later, but in turn, Valdemar had a few more bleeding holes across his body, primarily on his forearms and even one in his left pec.

"My turn!" the man yelled after the twenty-second attack window as the wound on his thigh had been temporarily "fixed" with his fighting aura. The huge wound was almost shining now, and despite not healing, it didn't seem to affect him much at all as he charged, having picked up his speed even more than before.

Something he needed to, as post-boost, Jake was far, far faster than before. He easily dodged a simple combo before landing a light cut on Valdemar's wrist, sadly not hitting any veins. Jake tried to do more, but Valdemar exploded in golden light, pushing Jake back a single step. Barely avoiding a punch, Jake landed a solid stab but was too slow to dodge a fist that rammed into his side, sending him flying into a pillar.

Despite feeling the pain all the way to his bone, Jake only used this opportunity to make some distance and shoot two more arrows. Taking a hit had slightly lowered the time his body would last while boosting, but he should still have enough time. He also still had one more major trick up his sleeve... or, well, in his ring.

The fight continued with Jake dodging swings, landing stabs, and shooting arrows while Valdemar just did as usual, though with far more ferocity and power than before, as both he and Valdemar truly pushed themselves.

Throughout, Jake was looking for an opportunity to land the trump card he was waiting for. An opportunity that soon presented itself as Valdemar made a huge downward swing that embedded itself into the sand. Jake acted like he got baited in by charging as Valdemar grinned while ripping the axe out and turning the handle, performing an upward strike that exploded with golden energy.

The ground erupted with sand, golden aura, and arcane energy as a geiser of these three shot into the air... along with a single person.

Right at the moment Jake dove in, he switched his katars for his bow and blasted himself upward with a blast of arcane energy. At the same time, he had blocked with his extremely durable bow, shooting himself into the air, borrowing the power from Valdemar's blow.

Jake flew more than ten meters into the air, and already on the way up, he pulled out the final big attack he had prepared. A large, two-meter-long quasi-Protean Arrow appeared, and while spinning in mid-air, Jake nocked it as he reached the zenith of his impromptu flight. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [novel#fire#net](#)

Locking eyes with Valdemar, who still stood below, Jake began charging a quick skillless Powershot. The Primordial simply grinned as he shifted his stance to take on whatever attack Jake was preparing, not a shred of hesitation in his eyes.

After only a second of charging and borrowing all the remnant arcane energy from the arcane boost he could, Jake released the Arrow with impressive power, especially considering the added velocity from Jake falling.

Now, could Valdemar dodge this arrow? Easily... but Jake knew he wouldn't. Jake knew that even without any provocation or goading, the Primordial would take the attack head-on. Sadly for him, Jake didn't plan on letting Valdemar block the arrow so easily.

Right as the man swung his axe to destroy the quasi-Protean Arrow, the arrowhead suddenly exploded as a mist of dark mana spread and shot into Valdemar's face like ink from an octopus. Out of the explosion erupted a barrage of stable arcane fragments flying forward like a shotgun right toward the Primordial. Valdemar was quick as his golden aura intensified, and his axe swing annihilated most of the fragments, and his passive aura blocked the rest, nullifying the attack.

Valdemar grinned for a fraction of a moment before the true attack arrived. Out of the dark smoke emerged four sharp spikes that had been part of the arrow's body, having been slightly delayed due to the arrowhead exploding. As he had just finished a swing, Valdemar could not raise his axe fast enough and had to block with his arm at the very last moment to not have a spike hit his eye.

Two other long, sharp arcane spikes hit his stomach and thigh, respectively, as the final one missed and penetrated into the sand. The two spikes had hit the wounds Jake had made earlier and, with the existing damage, had managed to penetrate all the way through and into the sand.

Jake, still in mid-air, quickly released a blast of arcane energy upward to bring him down to the ground quicker as he was in quite a precarious situation while falling, and he would rather take the damage from the fall than leave himself vulnerable. Valdemar also knew this, but he luckily couldn't move with the two-meter-long arcane spikes penetrating through his body, letting him only attack with a ranged crescent wave of golden energy.

The blast struck Jake just before he hit the sand, sending him flying back. The intensity of the golden energy was higher than anything Jake had ever experienced before, confirming one thing for him:

In this fight, out of all of them, he had by far done the most damage to Valdemar.

Hitting the ground hard, Jake tumbled through the sand several times as the quiver that had been strapped to him flew off, having had its strap cut by the golden blast. The few remaining arrows spilled all over, but Jake had no time to think about it now. He quickly stopped his roll and took a knee as he looked at the heavily injured Valdemar standing a good twenty meters away, already ripping out the two arcane spikes pinning him down.

This was definitely Jake's best performance so far. His one problem just was... his time was running out fast. His current body was not made to endure the overflowing arcane energy coursing through it, and the damage he had taken from Valdemar's blows certainly didn't help either. He was already long past the point of return, and there was only one thing left to do:

Land a decisive blow before his body decided to give out.

With that in mind, Jake didn't hesitate as he charged straight for Valdemar to finish this fight once and for all.

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## **Book 8 Out On Kindle/Audible!**

Hello there, people. Today I bring with me news of Book 8's arrival to not only the Kindle but even the Audible store. That's right, we're having a simultaneous release once more after several books where that wasn't possible! Do any of you know what that means? Well, alright, it would be kind of weird if you did, but it means that I have a good shot to get on something known as the Amazon Charts.

The Charts are a list that takes combined sales across all formats into account, so if you sell a certain number and reach a certain combined rank, you get on there. What does this mean in practice? That I have the potential to get on a fancy list that may get a bit more exposure if the release goes well, which will undoubtedly give me a warm and fuzzy feeling inside (along with a cool author achievement).

So go check out the release and make me proud! Remember, if ya got KU, downloading a book is effectively free :D



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Also, personally a big fan of the cover this time around:

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## Chapter 781: Nevermore: One Last Shot

Jake was smart enough to know when he was outmatched, and despite all his boosts and the many injuries he had inflicted on Valdemar, he was still at a major disadvantage. The only reason he even had a shot was because of Valdemar's fighting style being so damn straightforward and Jake having had nine whole lives to learn how to fight him. He could take Valdemar by surprise, a luxury Valdemar did not have.

Not to say there was much to learn about Valdemar's defensive style. Shit, the man only ever blocked and deflected attacks. Never once did he try to dodge or tactically retreat. He was an unstoppable force that just kept barreling at you until you crumbled, and he would rather take a stab in the stomach and hit you in the face than sidestep an attack. He truly was a ridiculous opponent.

Yet, despite being fully aware of this uphill battle, Jake refused to back down as he charged at the Primordial, who was still recovering from the two arcane spikes pinning him down. He had already ripped out the one in his thigh and had just ripped out the one in his stomach when Jake got close enough to use his katars.

He had wanted to explode the arcane mana spikes, but Valdemar's fighting energy had messed with his ability to do so, but at least they seemed to have done some serious damage to the man. In fact, Jake was pretty sure that Valdemar would be dead by now if not for his superhuman physique and fighting aura... but then again, without Jake's superhuman traits, he would also have long died to his injuries.

Jake's first attack on Valdemar was a straightforward stab toward his heart, one his opponent naturally easily blocked. From there, Jake unleashed a flurry of stabs and cuts as Valdemar stood his ground, seemingly recovering slightly with every passing second.



Jake could only hope that wasn't truly the case as he didn't let up his assault, landing wound after wound on the man's body.

Sadly for him, even if Valdemar wasn't technically recovering, he did grow stronger, and his wounds did begin to bother him less and less. The thigh that couldn't turn became more flexible, and the large bleeding hole straight through his guts didn't even bleed anymore but instead looked like a glowing golden sun in the pit of his stomach.

With every second, Valdemar slowly regained the advantage and began to push Jake back. Growing more and more reckless, Jake desperately tried to land something – anything – that could turn the tides, but during this period, Valdemar had been nearly entirely defensive, never allowing Jake to land any potentially lethal hits. To make matters worse, his time was rapidly running out.

Eventually, Jake decided to allow himself to be forced away as he was pushed back. He flew through the air a bit before landing close to where his quiver had dropped before. Picking up an arrow, Jake took out his bow and quickly shot one, only to see it be reflected easily.

He considered picking up another arrow, but he knew it wouldn't work as he looked at the Primordial slowly walking toward him, the thigh at least still bothering him. Wracking his brain, Jake tried to find some way to fight back, but he was out of tricks.

*No... there is that...*

Jake was speaking of an ability he had already written off as useless before but was now willing to reconsider. It was the one truly “new” thing Jake had learned in the Challenge Dungeon: his Fear Gaze. Instinctively, Jake knew that against Valdemar, it would likely have no positive effect. Fear Gaze was effectively a clash of souls, and with Valdemar being Valdemar, there was a high chance that Jake would take far more damage than the Primordial would receive. Especially considering Valdemar still had all his memories, making it an even more perilous strategy.

But, in this final life, Jake wanted to try everything. No, he had to try everything. He was out of cards and was now willing to foolishly gamble on such a high-risk attack. But... hey, what did he have to lose? Worst case scenario, he would die, and based on how Challenge Dungeons worked, the system would heal him right up in the process of tossing him out. At least he hoped it would also fix mental and soul damage.

With determination, Jake rose once more. He was wobbly on his feet, the muscles throughout his body entirely shredded already by his own arcane energy. He was purely sustained on energy by now, like a terminal patient on life support. The moment he ran out of energy, he would die, and even if he somehow gained infinite energy, his body had an expiration date that was rapidly approaching.

*One last shot.*

Gritting his teeth, Jake met the eyes of Valdemar. He saw that the Primordial had a hint of tiredness in his own gaze, but compared to Jake, who was dealing with intense exhaustion, there was no comparison. The man smiled as he seemed to understand this would be Jake's last attack.

Pushing himself to his limit, Jake borderline emptied out his resource pools as he sprung forward, straight for the Primordial. He wasn't going to set up the attack with anything fancy but would just do a straight charge without any trace of fear.

His opponent didn't seem surprised at first but did frown when Jake did something supremely risky. To make up for the height difference, Jake jumped as he yelled loudly, seemingly aiming to plunge both his katars into the Primordial's skull. An attack that clearly wouldn't work, hence Valdemar's confusion.

In a natural response, his opponent simply swung his axe toward Jake. Anyone could see Valdemar's attack was primed to cut the airborne Jake in two from shoulder to groin before he would accomplish anything. The longer weapon would reach Jake before he had a chance to land his katars... but Jake did have a weapon that was even longer than an axe.

Dismissing both katars, Jake's bow appeared as he stabbed the sharpened tip toward Valdemar's left eye with both hands. The man quickly reacted as he moved his free left hand to simply catch the spear-like tip of the bow. Jake's odd move had clearly confused the Primordial due to its recklessness as he looked at Jake, who met his gaze directly. Follow current novels on **novel★fire★net**

There was no more room for fear or hesitation as Jake lay his soul bare and used Fear Gaze. Every shred of desperation, hope, and pure determination was poured into it as a clash of souls occurred. On one end, an indomitable hunter, and on the other, a golden god of war. Singing pain shot through Jake's mind as he felt the backlash from the clash... but...

Valdemar's hand that had moved to block the bow had been delayed. For but a fraction of a second, he had stopped moving, and even his golden aura temporarily stopped its ever-flowing movement. It was so brief that only a few of the spectators in the stands would have time to notice, but despite its brevity, it was enough.

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The sharp tip of the bow stabbed forward into the eye of the Primordial as Jake's mind was barely lucid enough to register it. Right as Jake felt the feedback of hitting something, a wave of golden energy exploded out of Valdemar as the axe swinging for Jake also let out a crescent wave, blasting him back with a nasty cut across his chest.

Valdemar had tried to jump back as he had instinctively released this golden wave but stumbled as he leaned back too fast, ending up falling on the sand. As he tumbled

awkwardly, drops of blood flew into the air before the Primordial stopped rolling, still down on one knee.

Jake landed on the sand with a heavy sound and instantly tried to stand, but his legs buckled as he fell down on both knees, blood oozing from his new wound across his chest. Lifting his gaze, he saw the now one-eyed Valdemar staring back at him with astonishment as he only now seemed to realize what had just happened. This had been Jake's final gamble, and despite having failed... well, at least this felt like a bit of a win.

"Made you retreat and dodge," Jake said with a chuckle that quickly turned into a cough as blood filled his mouth. He had said it would be his last attack, and based on how he felt and the massive headache he felt, that would truly be the case. He knew his soul had taken some serious damage that he really hoped the system would help fix.

Valdemar, holding a hand to his bleeding eye socket, regarded Jake for a few seconds before he smiled and stood up. "Ya sure fucking did."

Despite wanting to, Jake couldn't join him in standing. He simply wasn't able to anymore. Talking had already been a damn struggle.

"For a fraction of a second there, I felt something I haven't in a long time... I wouldn't quite call it fear, but it was pretty damn close. Close enough that I hesitated," Valdemar muttered as he kept staring intently at Jake.

"You know what? If I don't recognize someone like you as a fellow Grand Champion of the Colosseum, then who the fuck is worthy of such a title? Just saying, no one should complain about favoritism here even if you are a fellow human!" Valdemar said with a bit of a belly laugh as he spread out his hands. "So there you have it. You've earned my recognition and beaten the Colossum of Mortals. Congratulations, mate, you've earned it."

Jake's eyes opened wide as he faintly heard the sound of a notification... but he didn't pay it any attention.

Rather than any notifications, his eyes were fixated on a Valdemar that only a second had looked a single step away from death, suddenly acting like he was barely injured. And it wasn't just an illusion either, as the golden luster surrounding his body only grew more and more abundant.

Jake realized that despite everything... Valdemar had truly been holding out on him till the very end. Golden aura erupted from his body and intensified even more than before as he was practically burning with power as he stood there, but in contrast to Jake's destructive arcane energy, Valdemar's fighting aura didn't have any negative effects at all based on what Jake could see.

"I know ya gave it ya all, and the fight is over... so let me give you a final honorable moment with a proper sendoff. A proper final attack to end our duel!" Valdemar smiled as he lifted his axe and gripped it with both hands. A storm of golden fighting aura hit the kneeling Jake as Valdemar truly looked like a golden god at that very moment. Sand was kicked up as a beam of pure fighting aura shot into the air and encased his axe, making it grow several times in size.

The energy was so intense that even the empty eye socket now had a golden glowing eye within it, staring back at him. Every single wound was like a broken vase fixed with gold, once broken, now made whole again. With time... likely only a day or something, Valdemar would be back to his prime and fully healed.

"You are truly a worthy warrior! So farewell, and may we meet again!" Valdemar said, with a tone of genuine respect. Jake wanted to say something, but he didn't even have the energy to speak anymore.

*I gave it my all, right? So to lose like this isn't that bad, is it?* Jake thought as the golden axe of pure fighting aura more than five meters long descended toward him. Jake had to admit that Valdemar was simply a monster, and his Transcending skill was just straight-up cheating. Even if Valdemar didn't choose to do this final attack, Jake had seconds left to live.

So, with his broken body and empty resource pools, Jake simply looked up at the giant axe descending as time seemed to slightly slow down as his death approached. *Yeah... this ending...*

"A better outcome than I expected," the Wyrmgod said as the decisive blow descended upon Jake. "Your Chosen is indeed impressive... the improvements he showed over those nine lives and his ability to adapt is truly noteworthy. The mere fact he managed to get Valdemar's recognition is proof of that, and his victory in the Colosseum is wholly deserved."

Minaga just shrugged. "I already lost my bet when Jake became a Grand Champion. Ah, but I guess he does deserve a thumbs up for good performance."

"I never doubted I would win my bet with you, but I will admit there was a slight tinge of doubt if I would also beat the Wyrmgod," Vilastromoz smiled at Minaga as he watched the fight approach its end. "So yeah... Jake performed well. As expected of my Chosen, of course."

He had made a bet with the Wyrmgod that Jake would be able to go all the way, and in the Colosseum of Mortals, gaining the recognition of Valdemar was considered "beating" the Challenge Dungeon. Defeating Valdemar by killing him simply wasn't a realistic goal to set for the challengers, and Valdemar surrendering was never going to happen either.

So for Jake to push Valdemar that far... honestly, it already surpassed the Viper's expectations a little. The bet he had made was very much a gamble, but he believed in Jake's ability to surpass expectations. Valdemar being the final boss was definitely not expected, though, and the Viper honestly wasn't sure if it was favorable or not that Jake had faced a fellow human.

Valdemar was a bit like a harsh older brother toward other humans. If it had been an elf or any other enlightened race, Vilastromoz was relatively confident that Valdemar would have acknowledged them after getting pinned down by two large magical spikes. But toward a fellow human, Valdemar would be harsher and truly expect them to go above and beyond what could reasonably be expected. He wanted, no, demanded for them to show all they had and then a bit more.

Despite this possibly being slightly unfair for humans, the Wyrmgod was actually fine with this being the case. Not because he hated humans but because the opposite would be far worse. If Valdemar went easy on humans, the Wyrmgod would have a lot of annoying political issues, and with enough complaints, it was even possible the system would evaluate that the Challenge Dungeon wasn't functioning properly. Sure, he could also have chosen not to make Valdemar the final Grand Champion, but if given the opportunity, Vilastromoz knew the Wyrmgod couldn't resist, no matter the potential negative politics surrounding it.

The Viper was happy he didn't have to bother with such politics. Also, in all honesty, it was only good that Jake had truly been pushed to his limits. This fight would be a good lesson in his life, and how he had managed to die ten times was impressive, as he hadn't let the experience demotivate him at all but only helped him to improve. It was a great sign for his mentality going forward.

Overall, the three gods only had praise for Jake's performance as the axe descended upon him, exploding most of the center of the arena where Jake had been kneeling.

"Say, what Challenge Dungeon do you think Jake will try next? On the one hand, I hope he does mine, but on the other hand, I am not sure my feeble heart ca- what the fuck?"

Minaga's train of thought was cut off as all three gods stared at the recording on the screen. The Wyrmgod's eyes were already open wide as he had seen what happened in the arena a moment before everyone else... yet he hadn't been able to say anything due to his shock.

*This ending...*

Time moved at a crawl as Jake didn't feel anything. His body was broken, his resources empty, and his life about to end... yet...

*...Fuck it.*

The axe descended with power no level 0 G-grade could possibly survive as it hit the ground, releasing an eruption of golden light and sand... the noise of the explosion drowned out as the sound of a heartbeat echoed through the arena.

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## Chapter 782: Nevermore: Hunter

Jake had invited death nine times to learn about Valdemar and hopefully find a path to victory. He had done everything with the goal of somehow winning and defeating Valdemar, and in all honesty, he could see a scenario where he would have accepted his loss.

That is until he realized Valdemar had never truly taken him seriously. He had, through his own will, increased his fighting aura to a level far above anything he had done in the fight prior. Jake hadn't forced him to either... he had just done it to show Jake how truly powerful he was. It probably wasn't to make Jake despair, but just because Valdemar liked to show off, but to Jake, it felt like all his struggles had been for naught.

Again and again, Jake had underestimated the power of Valdemar's Transcendent skill. Till the very end, he never saw the Primordial's true limits while inhabiting a level 0 body... but then again, did Jake ever really give it his all?

As Valdemar had said, they were just in a Challenge Dungeon. Nothing was authentic in there. There was no true death, but just a potential loss of some points or a lost attempt on a hard opponent. Compared to experiencing the end of your own existence, it was completely meaningless. The stakes were too low... and perhaps this was where Valdemar truly set himself apart from Jake. Because at that very moment, when Valdemar used his final strike, Jake became certain that Valdemar truly was in control of his Transcendence. At least enough to "fool" it into recognizing the battle as one with real stakes.

But Jake...

With every death, he had restrained and stopped his final survival instinct... the final act of his Bloodline to allow him to survive. He got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach that using it was a final act of desperation and not something to casually do. Jake was confident that had this been the real world, his Bloodline would have reacted without even giving Jake a chance to stop it, but here, with no genuine danger, he had a choice.



Every prior time, Jake had chosen to suppress it and not take a massive unknown risk by unleashing something best saved for a true moment of desperation. However, this time... this time, Jake was done holding anything back as he wanted to show Valdemar everything he had. So when the Bloodline came knocking, rather than restrain it this time, he let it loose with that one thought:

*Fuck it.*

The moment he did, time itself seemed to stop. Valdemar's massive golden axe looked as if it moved at a snail's pace... and then he felt a heavy heartbeat. It echoed throughout the arena as a pulse reverberated through his body. A pulse of unknown energy released directly from somewhere deep within Jake's Truesoul. It did not stop simply when it hit the edges of his physical body but spread out. A hundred meters, two hundred, five hundred... it continued hundreds of kilometers all around him. It was incredibly vast, yet a familiar range.

Because the pulse released had filled not just Jake's body but his entire Sphere of Perception – the range he could usually only see with Pulse of Perception, too.

Right as the realization struck him, Jake's vision went black. Then sound died, all smells disappeared, and he no longer even felt his own body or could taste the blood in his own mouth. For a mere moment, all his senses were gone as if he was struck in some void, and then...

Only clarity.

Every detail, every sound, taste... the feeling of the heat of the sun, countless grains of sand touching his body as it had gotten stuck under his torn clothes... not a single thing was missing. He felt it all. His usually heightened senses had reached a new level above anything else before, and as Jake stared up at the axe descending toward him, he saw not just the fighting aura but what existed between him and the axe - the mana in the air, the concepts that constituted the reality the axe was traveling through.

Raising a hand, Jake didn't think much but simply sent out a small whisp of energy infused with his will. It merged into nothingness as the golden axe momentarily seemed to disappear from sight. At nearly exactly the same time, the ground around Jake exploded, golden fighting aura ravaging the entire middle of the arena, except for one small area around Jake.

Standing there completely unharmed, he looked up casually as what looked like a small black dot in space still floated for a few seconds where Jake had commanded the whisp of energy to move. Like a dead pixel on a screen, there was simply nothing there, and when the axe had pierced through this spot, a part of it had met the same fate as everything else when it simply ceased to exist, allowing none of the golden energy to ever reach Jake.



Time still seemed to move at a crawl as Jake slowly stood. Slowly, because he simply couldn't move his body fast enough to keep up with how he perceived reality. By the same the erupted sand fell down, reality had mended itself as the black dot was gone. Gone, but not forgotten.

"You... how did that happen? A hole in space? Void magic? No... it was more like it just opened up by itself?" Valdemar said, confused. "What did you do?"

Jake didn't answer but instead looked at his opponent as he took a deep breath. "Seven seconds."

It was not a taunt or a provocation. It was simply the time it would take for him to win... and the time he had left.

Seeing as his resources were all emptied out, Jake addressed that flaw first. With a thought, the sand around him rose into the air and began disintegrating as the grains returned to Origin and became pure energy that Jake casually commanded into his body. Within a second, his body – but not his resource pools – was filled with energy. Enough for him to burn during what was to come.

*Six seconds.*

Valdemar, who had just been staring, suddenly displayed a light smile as he nodded. "Then come."

Jake's body filled with pure arcane energy the very next second. His arcane energy, which usually took on a pinkish-purple color, turned a darker shade as it almost became red. Sparks appeared in his vicinity, yet his body didn't seem to burn with energy. There was no fancy display outside of crackling discharge around him, as it all stayed contained within him.

Before, Jake had boosted his body haphazardly without control. Foolish and inefficient, he could admit, especially when it seemed too easy to control now. It was so simple to tame as the energy followed his every whim now, as the world lay bare to his senses.

He regarded his bow and found it lacking as a new one of pure arcane mana appeared in his hand, condensed from the environmental mana. The same level of inadequacy proved true for the scattered arrows in the sand as he condensed an arrow and nocked it.

*Five seconds.*

Valdemar, who had invited Jake to come, didn't sit still even if he had welcomed the attack. Roaring golden energy filled the arena as he charged forward faster and stronger than ever before, as the luster that made him look like a golden god had simply

never fully faded. Jake rapidly shot his arrow as he infused even more power into the blow.

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The arrow pierced forward as it seemed to warp everything around it, absorbing even more energy during its flight. Valdemar chose to meet it with his axe, but Jake found humoring Valdemar's attempt to make this a direct clash of power laughable. Even now, he knew he stood before a man with far more pure raw power than Jake could possibly command in his current state.

Right before the arrow and axe clashed, the arrow dodged the blow. As if it had a mind of its own, it expertly flew by the head of the axe, and even Valdemar's attempt to block his face with an arm was predicted as it changed direction for a second time and shot under the arm and into his chest, exploding.

Valdemar was blasted back by the condensed arcane mana and flew more than a dozen meters back and hit the back wall of the arena, sending stone blasting out. Jake considered shooting another arrow with the same power but stopped himself as that didn't appear feasible.

Sadly, he was still limited by his level and lack of skills and the fact he was a mere level 0. The limitations meant his heavily weakened mind would break if he tried to do something like that again. It was unfortunate he was in this state, but it would have to make do for now. Without any useless hesitation, Jake charged forward as two katars of arcane mana appeared in his hands.

*Four seconds.*

He moved even faster than before as space itself seemed to give way, voluntarily moving out of the way at Jake's behest.

The wall Valdemar had been blasted into exploded the very next moment as a massive golden crescent wave shot out. With little difficulty, Jake jumped over it and continued his sprint toward the emerging Valdemar.

A large bleeding wound marred his chest, and arcane energy still burned on his body, but his golden aura was as strong as ever. With a roar and almost fanatic gaze, he also charged forward to meet Jake in a direct confrontation.

*Three seconds.*

Valdemar had already been predictable before, but now, it was almost funny. With his heightened sense of perception, even the axe seemed to move relatively slowly now, though it was still the fastest thing around... well, besides Jake himself.

Dodging to the side, Jake stabbed Valdemar with one of his katars, the weapon slicing through fighting aura and flesh alike. Valdemar quickly responded with a heavy punch as Jake positioned his second katar for Valdemar to punch into. The hand began to glow golden, and at the very last moment, Jake chose to abandon his attempt to counter as he instead avoided the punch entirely. If he hadn't, Jake would have likely cut off one or two of Valdemar's fingers but lost a hand himself in return. He had to admit that even if he could read the Primordial, his pure, overwhelming power was still awe-inspiring.

Mana began to condense in the air all around them as five arrows of pure mana were formed, all aimed toward Valdemar. Jake would have preferred to summon them closer to the Primordial than he did, but the one place Jake felt no sense of control was everywhere the golden fighting aura touched. Valdemar's Transcendent skill created the type of energy that Jake simply had no way of ever touching or affecting, as it belonged to Valdemar and Valdemar alone. He was its Origin and its creator, and there was simply nothing for Jake to do to it.

With a mental command, Jake sent all the arrows flying toward Valdemar, who let out a loud roar, releasing a shockwave of golden energy that only managed to slow down the arrows that all hit him in the back and right side.

Immediately after these five arrows hit, Jake summoned another five, but he felt a heavy strain as he did so. His clarity was wavering, but he had to maintain it for at least a little longer. Valdemar was far more prepared for the second barrage of arrows which were all coming for his right side, where he wielded the axe. Jake also attacked in tandem with these arrows, his attack seemingly with the intent of limiting Valdemar's ability to swing his axe by potentially putting the entire arm out of commission.

*Two seconds.*

As Valdemar focused all his attention on Jake's attack on his right side, he didn't notice what was going on to his left. Lying partly covered in sand, not even four meters away from them, was an arcane spike from Jake's quasi-Protean Arrow he had shot earlier. The one that had missed.

Without any warning, it shot out of the sand straight for Valdemar's left side as Jake commanded the spike made of his own energy. The Primordial's eyes opened wide as his fighting aura expanded out of him to try and lessen the impact of the attack, but Jake had predicted that move. Using the very last of his mental energy, he looked straight at Valdemar as he welcomed their souls to clash once more through Fear Gaze.

For a mere one-tenth of a second, Valdemar's fighting aura froze as the spike pierced into his left forearm and, as Valdemar had been extending forward with his right side, forced the arm behind his back and out of the way.

Valdemar didn't seem surprised by the Fear Gaze this time but only showed pure determination. He was midway through an attack when Jake made his move, and rather than abandon it, he did just the opposite. He empowered it. His right began to take on a golden luster as the fighting aura seemed to merge with his skin, the man having clearly decided to finish Jake off here and now.

With power outmatching the finishing strike from earlier, the axe chopped down like an executioner's axe from god, aiming to cleave Jake's entire body in two. Follow current NOVELS ON *novel✕fire✕net*

From the beginning, Jake knew a trade had to be made if he wanted any chance of victory. And, in truth, his goal had never been the right arm. He was nearly out of time, after all, so he had to end it here and now. Valdemar would have time to react if he gave even a little space... so Jake also committed fully to his plan. Rather than disengage or dodge, Jake kept charging straight into the axe. Only at the very last fraction of a second did he react as he slightly shifted his weight and swayed to the right.

Jake's left ear was entirely obliterated by the golden energy of the axe as it practically slid down the side of his skull and into his shoulder, sending his left arm flying into the air, the powerful swing also mangling the entire left side of his body as even a part of his hip was cut off. However, it had created an opening. The katar of arcane energy was gone as Jake's right hand formed a claw as he pierced forward while the arcane energy that formerly made up the katar surrounded and infused it. The golden aura standing in his hand's way tried to stop it, but most of Valdemar's Transcendent aura had been focused on attacking, making his defenses lacking.

*One second.*

The clawed hand went through flesh and aura alike and pierced the Primordial's chest, right through the same wound the very first arrow Jake had shot after his powerup had left. His fingers folded around the beating organ that Jake knew not even Valdemar would be able to live long without. Without missing a beat, he squeezed and poured in the final energy he had stored within into the heart that beat in his palm.

A torrent of arcane energy burned into Valdemar's body as Jake's hand became a conduit to infuse pure destruction into the Primordial. Reddish purple veins spread around the hole Jake's hand had created, and a moment later, the heart in Jake's grasp disintegrated as pure destruction turned it into nothingness.

Jake quickly pulled his hand out and only managed to take a simple step back at the very last moment.

*Zero seconds.*

He had barely pulled back as the world around him began to spin. All his senses once more disappeared as the world turned into a void. Less than a second later, a faint

sense of perception returned as Jake felt the entire world contract all around him. His sphere shrank back to the usual range he limited it to as all his other senses also began slowly returning to normal. The world was still murky and indiscernible as Jake left like he was devolving.

What was left of the original pulse of energy that had been released from his Truesoul poured back into Jake as, in the final moment before he had lost his clarity, he had infused it with a final command. Energy entered his Truesoul as it gobbled up everything, and Jake's body restored itself as his wounds began to heal in seconds, with a new arm and ear instantly regenerating, and even his resource pools were filled, revitalizing him fully.

Only after all of this was done did Jake's senses return enough for his eyesight to come back, and he found himself only a mere two steps from a still-standing Valdemar who was looking straight at him. His fighting aura was still burning, and he had a smile on his face, even as blood dripped from his mouth.

"What's your name?"

Jake's eyes were wide open as he felt incredibly weird as if the world didn't seem quite right. Everything seemed slightly blurry, and he barely heard what Valdemar said... but he didn't feel any danger from the man in front of him and thus still managed to answer. "Jake... Jake Thayne."

"Jake, huh..." Valdemar nodded slowly as he smiled and looked Jake straight in the eyes. "A name worth remembering... from a fight worthy of being called legendary."

The arena was entirely silent as Valdemar stood there, looking at Jake as his golden aura slowly disappeared, and the luster in his one remaining eye faded as there once again was only one Grand Champion.

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## **Chapter 783: Nevermore: Rewards/Cost of the Impossible**

Jake looked at the still-standing corpse of the Primordial as he tried to fully understand everything that had happened. Alright, that wasn't entirely accurate... he knew what had happened; he remembered everything without any issues, but it all still felt oddly hazy. The same kind of hazy as his mind and vision currently were.

As he still stood there, taking in the atmosphere and collecting himself, a certain someone made himself known once more, kind of ruining the tense mood.

"We have a winner! The undefeated Warrior has met his doom at the hands of the Doombringer in a battle truly worthy of a Grand Champion match! Only a single Grand Champion now remains, having defeated all others in his path, becoming the most powerful Grand Champion we have ever seen! Where is this limit!? Perhaps we will learn one day, but for now, go, our Grand Champion. Rest. You've earned it!"

Jake thought the announcer was a lot quieter than usual, making him frown a bit at the commentary. While still frowning, he saw a man approach from the entrance to the arena, and as he got closer, Jake saw it was the Battlemaster, who seemed to be in a brilliant mood.

"You fucking did it," he said with a massive smile. "To take down that monster... you really do stand at the apex of mortals."

"Thanks," Jake muttered, looking around. Instinctively, he wanted to check out the stands to check in on some of the people he knew, which is when he noticed... he couldn't see them. More accurately, he couldn't feel them through his sphere at all. The sphere was still there, but everything it saw was murky. He could feel through the sphere the stands were there, but it was so hazy he couldn't even tell where people sat, much less differentiate the spectators from one another.

Rubbing his temples, Jake looked at the Battlemaster. "So, what happens now? And please speak up when you answer. You're way too quiet."

The man looked at him and shook his head as he practically yelled. "That's up to you if you feel any need to stay when you have already proven yourself the strongest."

Right as he got said, Jake got a system message.

**Congratulations! You have successfully defeated the Grand Champion and become the sole Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals. 5,000,000 Colosseum Points gained. No more opponents stand in your way, as no worthy foe remains. As the sole Grand Champion, no greater honor can be earned in the Colosseum of Mortals.**

Even if everything else seemed blurry and his head still hurt, at least the system messages were still as clear as ever, so he happily focused on them as he began going over the one in front of him. It just acknowledged his win, and, damn, that was a lot of Colosseum Points. Five million nearly doubled his points, though honestly, Jake didn't care much about that part. Colosseum Points only mattered now insofar as to affect the final calculation of rewards. The rest of it was pretty much just a summary.

As soon as Jake was done reading and considering the first system message, a second one popped up.

## **Do you wish to exit the Colosseum of Mortals Challenge Dungeon?**

**If you remain, you can choose to participate in weekly Show Matches, earning you additional Colosseum Points.** Read complete version only at [novel■fire■net](http://novel.fire.net)

**Choosing to exit will give you all currently earned rewards.**

Jake read the message, and for a few seconds, he considered staying around for a bit. Not for the Show Matches – those were just a damn waste of time, and honestly, Jake didn't feel like he was in any kind of fighting condition – but to talk to some of the people in there. Specifically Artemis, Polly, and Owen. But... he had already said goodbye to them, having fully expected him to just be thrown out of the Challenge Dungeon that day. Beating Valdemar had been a long shot, after all, and he even guessed that it was possible that the dungeon would just toss him out no matter if he won or lost.

With that in mind, he truly saw no reason to remain as he threw the Battlemaster a final look and smiled before accepting the prompt. Another major reason he just wanted to get out of there was for the system to heal him. Sure, he had healed himself when he ended his power up, and physically, he was fine, but he knew his soul wasn't in optimal condition. Hopefully, the system could fix that.

Jake's vision went black right as he accepted leaving, and half a second later, he appeared in a familiar place. It was the same white void he was thrown to every time he had died and had to choose a time to go back to, but this time, there was no prompt for him to choose when to revive. No, instead, he was there for those sweet, sweet rewards. The first of which was something Jake had predicted would be a thing and was happy to have confirmed: a Grand Achievement.

**Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Colosseum of Champions while defeating the reigning Grand Champion. Colosseum Points converted: 113.821 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 25% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.**

The number of Nevermore Points gained didn't exactly seem impressive, and there appeared to be a 1-100 conversion from his Colosseum Points, but one had to remember that Jake only had 744,673 Nevermore Points currently that he had gained over thirty years. To get more than a hundred thousand within two years was honestly insanely good.

Not to mention the massive 25% multiplier, which was at the same level as what beating Minaga had given them. Jake would argue that defeating Valdemar had been way fucking harder, but he wasn't going to say no to the extra multiplier. With it and the others, he was now up to a 60% bonus to the final calculation. Moreover, he still had four Challenge Dungeons left that could potentially give him similar rewards.



Jake only now truly understood what people meant when they said that the true winners of the Leaderboards would be found in the Challenge Dungeons. If one did well in all of them, they could get a more than doubling of Nevermore Points at the final calculation, putting them well ahead even of the groups who cleared far more floors.

Besides the Grand Achievement, Jake had also gotten something he honestly hadn't expected to see but was more than happy to get:

A title.

**Reward gained: Colosseum of Mortals: True Grand Champion title.**

Without hesitation, Jake opened up his status menu and checked the effects of the title.

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

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Reading it over, Jake was seriously happy he hadn't spent more of his Colosseum Points within the Challenge Dungeon, as he might have missed out on this title if he had done so. He also finally noticed that he hadn't gotten a refund on any of the equipment he had bought, which made him even happier he hadn't decided to splurge.

Jake then saw the final part of the description that said only one title can be held, so he made the obvious educated guess that should he gain a better title than this one from any of the four other Challenge Dungeons, this one would simply be replaced. He seriously doubted he would be able to do that, though. At most, he would gain equal titles as he didn't think there were ones of a higher tier than this, which would probably mean he would just keep the first one he got.

As for the title itself, Jake was a bit surprised at what it gave. It was just pure stats. There was no percentage increase, but just +200 to all stats. Mind you, Jake wasn't really complaining. In fact, this was probably better for him than if he gained more percentage titles.

Jake already had a lot of percentage titles, along with the percentage boost from his Bloodline, so to gain one that just gave pure stats was honestly huge. It did kind of suck it was to all stats and not just focused on the ones he used the most, but Jake at least did use all of them at times. Still, he would have preferred to just get them in Agility,

Strength, and Perception mostly. Or, well, he wouldn't have complained if he had just gained +1800 Perception outright, but you can't always have what you want.

Even with just this title and the achievement, Jake would say It had been a very productive Challenge Dungeon, and honestly, he would have been happy with what he had already gotten, but there was one final message, and after seeing what he had gotten, Jake honestly wasn't sure how he felt.

### **Reward gained: [Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)]**

A Mythical item... that had to be great, right? Well, it was a bit more complicated than that.

**[Emblem of the Grand Champion (Mythical)] – An emblem infused with the powers and concepts of the Colosseum of Mortals, given only to those deemed worthy. This Emblem can create a replica of the Colosseum of Mortals arena within a virtual space for individuals to duel one another. Allows the user to choose two targets who must consent to take part in a duel within the virtual space. Those entering will leave their true bodies defenseless during the duel period. All levels and stats of those entering will be normalized. Most skills and abilities will also be restricted. Dying within the virtual space will have no negative consequences. As the owner, you can always observe the inside of the Emblem of the Grand Champion. Cooldown period: 1 hour.**

### **Requirements: Soulbound**

Now, who could ever be disappointed at getting a mythical item? It turns out Jake could. Though it was more the opportunity cost of getting this rather than a weapon or something. Jake didn't have a single piece of equipment that was mythical, and the only thing he owned with the rarity was the Soulflame Cradle from Minaga, so to see his second item also be some auxiliary item like this was a bit of a downer.

After overcoming his initial disappointment, Jake finally looked at the Emblem in earnest, and at least it seemed to have earned its rarity. It was an item that allowed two people to duel safely while even normalizing their stats. The restrictions on skills were also something Jake wasn't even sure how worked... but seeing as the description mentioned that the true bodies of the ones who entered the arena would be defenseless made it pretty obvious people only actually entered with their souls.

That one couldn't die was also pretty huge and allowed people to experiment within and fight without feeling any fear of death. So, while Jake wasn't overly keen on gaining this kind of item as a reward, he understood why it was good from a more objective standpoint.

Anyway, that was the end of the rewards for the Colosseum of Mortals, and overall, Jake had to say it was a pretty good haul. He had also experienced growth in many

areas of combat, and Jake was excited to see what would happen once he got his real level back.

As a last thing, Jake checked his Nevermore Points, which had grown nicely from the Grand Achievement.

**Nevermore Points: 858,494**

As he prepared to leave the void, Jake thought about what Challenge Dungeon to do next... or if he could even do one properly in his current state. Even in the void, he still felt incredibly wrong and like his senses didn't work right, but hopefully, it would all be fixed once he was out of the Challenge Dungeon proper... right?

After Minagas's outburst, the room with the two Primordials and the Unique Lifeform remained silent as they all simply stared at the battle happening within the arena. The entire final arc of the battle only took a few seconds, but it left an impression on all of them as they saw a scene none of them had expected.

They saw Valdemar die, his heart destroyed, and his body broken to a level where he couldn't sustain himself any longer. A Primordial slain, even if he was only a level 0 image.

So many things had happened during these few seconds, leaving them all with more than a few questions.

"What the hell happened? What did he do there?" Minaga asked as he looked at the Wyrmgod.

The Primordial looked on for a while as he frowned. "I don't know."

"Huh?" Minaga exclaimed, confused. "What do you mean you don't know? It's your damn dungeon, you know everything that's going on."

"When the Chosen of the Malefic used... what he used, I lost authority of the domain in and surrounding the arena," the Wyrmgod responded after a brief pause. "I could only see what you saw. The system cut me off."

"You lost authority?" Minaga questioned even more now. "You mean that..."

"Yes," the Wyrmgod nodded. "Transcendent Authority was established temporarily."

Minaga nodded slowly in understanding. "So, in summary, he some-fucking-how used his Bloodline to take control of a massive domain with enough authority to push you out? Did he do it to hide something, maybe? How whatever he did truly works?"

"I believe it was more a side effect of what he did than the actual purpose," the Primordial shook his head.

Vilastromoz remained silent as he heard them talk. Partly because he wanted to hear what the Wyrmgod figured out and partly because he didn't really know what to add. Eventually, the two other gods in the room turned toward him for answers, but the Viper just shook his head.

"The secrets of my Chosen are not mine to share."

"Oh, come on!" Minaga complained. "Just a few hints? Pretty please?"

The Viper shook his head again, shutting down the notion. He had purposefully chosen to skirt around the subject and avoid answering... as he didn't have any answers. The other two gods believed he understood, but in reality, he, too, was stumped.

Vilastromoz had believed he had a pretty good grasp of Jake's Bloodline, but what had happened in that arena wasn't something he could have ever expected. Even now, he wasn't entirely certain how Jake had done what he did, even if he could partly understand *what* he had done.

By far, the most impressive from an outside perspective was how he had blocked the initial strike that was meant to finish him. Jake had absorbed the blow by creating a hole of sorts... a single point in space where space ceased to be, not allowing Valdemar's strike to have medium to travel through.

If it had been the true Valdemar, he could have simply powered through, but no mortal, not even someone like him, could overpower a complete erasure of space. He needed space for his fighting aura to move through.

However, in the same vein as how not even Valdemar could forcefully attack through nothingness... no level 0 should ever be able to create a point of nothingness either. In fact, it was something the Viper had seen few beings ever do, period. What's more, it was hard to say Jake had even done it. He caused it, yes, but he didn't "create" the point of nothingness through sheer power as one usually had to. It was more like space, time, and reality itself just decided to cease to exist in that very spot for a few moments.

The second most impressive feat was that final absorption that had fully healed his body in seconds. Even now, the Viper wasn't entirely sure how that had worked... the same as how he wasn't sure how he had effectively used the energy he had gained, somehow turning the sand into pure energy. To turn matter into energy wasn't super difficult and quite normal in alchemy, but to then directly absorb and use it? It was borderline unheard of. Plus, it took more energy to convert matter into energy in the first place, never making it worth it, even if you had the ridiculous control to pull it off.

Jake had pulled off many things that were impossible. These were things only Bloodlines or Transcendent skills could do. Which did make the Viper worry... because no matter what, these had a cost. So the ultimate question now was, what price did Jake have to pay to pull off something impossible?

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## Chapter 784: Nevermore: Backlash

Hope was such a powerful feeling, but it was very much a double-edged sword... because the disappointment and sadness when hope was squashed truly sucked.

And for Jake, things very much sucked right now. He had still held onto hope that he would be healed after leaving the Challenge Dungeon, but that had turned out not to be the case. In fact, it was nearly the opposite. Getting his C-grade status back had instead resulted in Jake feeling far fucking worse than before.

At least he had his equipment back now, so he could cover his face and head with his cloak as he stumbled through the city floor while trying to go somewhere he could sit down and relax. When he appeared outside the Challenge Dungeon, he found himself surrounded by people, and he instantly felt an assault of murky auras, while every sound reminded him of nails on a chalkboard. Not to mention the lights. The lights were the damn worst, as they all appeared either blinding or far too dark.

After stumbling into an abandoned residence in the city, Jake went inside and headed straight for the basement. If in the arena, his senses had been far too muted, now they just seemed inconsistent. Some sounds were deafening, while others were entirely silent as if the spectrum of sound he could pick up was entirely out of whack.

However... the worst of all was the smell. People stank, period. Jake himself stank, too. Everything was just horrible. So, with all that in mind, Jake decided that the best course of action would be to find a quiet little cellar to relax in as he tried to get a full understanding of what had happened.

Well, okay, he knew what had happened. Jake was currently experiencing backlash from unleashing far more power than he was capable of. He had more or less used an aspect of his Bloodline he wasn't capable of handling, which had left damage on his soul and body alike. Damage that the system didn't heal. Content originally comes from ***novel~fire~net***

What he had to figure out was the extent of the backlash. He knew his usual senses were all off, but nothing seemed entirely gone. Even the sphere was there, and in an act of recklessness, he even released a Pulse of Perception. Let's just say that the average Van Gogh painting was way more discernible than the utter mess Jake got back.

But it worked. Next, Jake checked something else he really hoped wasn't messed with. Something he had a feeling still worked as it should, which was a good start. Reaching into his spatial storage, he pulled out a small metal coin and tried to flip it.

*Heads.*

Catching it, he saw it landed on heads. Of course, one result didn't really say anything as he tried again.

*Heads. Heads.*

He continued this and did about ten more throws, predicting all of them right. He then even tried to do it with three at once and predicted all three accurately, too.

*Okay, so my intuition seems fine,* Jake thought with relief. If that had also been screwed, Jake wouldn't even have been able to trust his own gut, which would be a serious problem. That it worked also meant that Jake's feeling this backlash wasn't permanent and would heal with time was likely true. Then again, even without his Bloodline-empowered intuition, he would likely have been able to know it. The Sword Saint at least said that he had an uncanny understanding of the backlash he suffered upon using his Transcendent skill. So, there was a good chance that even if the system didn't help heal these kinds of injuries, it did at least allow the one suffering to understand their situation.

As for how long it would take to fully recover, Jake quite frankly had no idea. What he did know was that it wouldn't just be a day or two. However, even just sitting there in the cellar for a bit, Jake began to slowly adapt to his messed up senses, making everything slightly less overwhelming. Fighting was still not on the table, but at least he should be able to function within a reasonable timeframe.

While sitting there and just relaxing his head, Jake felt a mental nudge. One he hadn't felt in quite a while as he faintly smiled and allowed it.

*"Well, hello there, slayer of Primordials,"* Jake heard the voice of Villy after he accepted the divine message. *"So, who's next on your list? Eversmile? Oh, maybe Stormild! Or wait... is it me? Sorry, you will have to get in the queue for that one; you have a Yip of Yore ahead of you in the line."*

*"Damn. Well, seeing as I am already in Nevermore, I guess taking down the Wyrmgod would be the easiest,"* Jake responded jokingly, relieved that at least telepathic messages seemed fine. Also... it felt damn good to communicate with a real person



who would actually retain their memories. The Colosseum of Mortals just hadn't been the same, even if Jake did treat all the people there as real. *"Speaking of the Wyrmgod, did he allow you to cheat by talking to me again?"*

*"You can phrase it like that, sure,"* the Viper simply answered. *"In reality, he wants me to get some clues as to what you did there in the arena, including any backlash you are currently suffering. Of course, you shouldn't give any answers. At least not for free."*

*"Pretty easy to answer the first one, though. I went ham in there,"* Jake sent telepathically with a smile. *"As for the backlash... actually, who else is listening in right now?"*

*"Just me, no worries,"* the Viper assured him. *"No way I would give them a free sneak peek into our conversations. You are way too damn heretical for that."*

*"Aight, fair enough,"* Jake surrendered as a thought struck him. *"Say, would any of-*

*"None of your party members are available right now, as they are all currently taking part in Challenge Dungeons,"* Villy cut him off.

*"Oh..."* Jake sent back in a mutter. That sucked. He kinda hoped to catch up with them or at least hear what they had been up to. That would at least have helped him burn some time while recovering. *"Are they also all done with their first Challenge Dungeons?"*

*"Some are, some aren't. Maybe. I guess you'll find out at some point, but for now, focus on yourself, alright?"*

*"Okay, fine. I guess I can't have you tell me how any of them are doing while also giving me a scoop on the performance of some of the people I know also participating in Nevermore currently?"* Jake shot his shot.

*"No. Now, for the real reason I contacted you, besides just catching up with my favorite Chosen. The Wyrmgod has an offer. Answer just three relatively non-intrusive questions from him, and he will give you a tip on what Challenge Dungeon should do next, including a tip for performing well there, probably packaged as advice that somehow doesn't directly count as cheating,"* Villy proposed. *"I will, of course, make sure to not even relay any questions you really shouldn't answer."*

Jake considered the proposal for a moment before ultimately accepting. However, he did have one concern. *"Not sure how good my answers will be, though. I am not exactly clear on everything either."*

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*“See, that’s one of the reasons I am fine with you even trying to answer these questions. The Wyrmgod will know if you are lying, but if the genuine truth is that you don’t know how you did something, that still counts as a spent question answered genuinely, right?”* the Viper said in a devilish voice.

Shaking his head, Jake leaned back and leaned his head against the wall of the abandoned house. *“Alright. Let’s hear these questions.”*

*“Let’s jump right into it. First question. What you did was reliant on your Bloodline and not any other skills or abilities you have, correct?”*

*“As far as I am aware, no other skills were involved, no,”* Jake answered. He couldn’t exactly say it was all Bloodline, as it also used his arcane affinity as well as his own skills in archery and whatnot. Sure, his affinity also relied on his Bloodline, but he couldn’t say everything he did was all his Bloodline.

*“Second question. Do you personally judge that the backlash you are currently experiencing from doing what you did in the arena includes any permanent negative effects?”*

Jake had to take a second as the question had gotten quite specific with its phrasing. For the Wyrmgod to ask how he judged the backlash was a good idea, as Jake could have easily answered: “I don’t know, too early to tell,” if he asked for a definite answer. Instead, this question pretty much asked him what his own intuition told him.

*“I don’t think it will have any negative consequences, no. But I am also unsure as to how long it will take to recover,”* Jake once more answered truthfully.

*“Alright, onto the third and last question. Is what you did replicable by you in the future?”*

*“Yes.”*

That one was easy enough to answer, as Jake was absolutely certain he could if he was once more put in a life-and-death situation where he had no other way to survive.

Nearly a full minute of silence followed before the Viper returned.

*“Alright, the Wyrmgod is satisfied, so here comes the reward, starting with what Challenge Dungeon to do. Based on your weakened state, there is only really one option. The Neverending Journey, House of the Architect, and Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth all require you to be at your best, leaving only the Test of Character one. Luckily for you, no matter how weak you are in that one, it doesn’t matter for shit. At least your level of power doesn’t matter,”* Villy explained.

Honestly, many people could probably have guessed the Test of Character one was the best option, but having it confirmed was nice.

*“Now for the Wyrmgod’s tip, which is predictably a little vague: As individuals differ, all judgment remains unreserved. So, yeah, take that as you will.”*

Jake slowly nodded, kind of understanding what the Wyrmgod was getting at despite the deliberate vagueness. *“Thanks for the tip... now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna force myself to meditate and distract myself as I hopefully recover enough to survive the walk to the Challenge Dungeon entrance.”*

*“Good luck with that... and honestly, you got that dungeon. It shouldn’t be too hard on you as long as you just stay true to yourself. Now, considering I have a Primordial staring daggers at me, I should probably end things here. See ya!”*

Nodding once more, Jake said a final goodbye as the connection slowly faded. Being alone with his thoughts once more, his senses began to annoy him again, making him enter meditation that luckily had the “side effect” of cutting off all his senses.

He just hoped it wouldn’t take too long as he seriously didn’t want to be that one guy in a group project who lagged behind, delaying everyone else in his party.

A difficult decision had to be made if he wanted to gain the title of Grand Champion. He had taken two deaths at the Necromancer, one to the Lord of the Hunt and one to the Phoenix Queen, while he had beaten three Champions without any serious issues. All of the special challenges during his ascent through the ranks of the Colosseum of Mortals had also not proved fatal. Still, each battle had been hard-fought and a valuable experience, and he believed his chances were good... until he encountered the final fight before he would become a Grand Champion: the Mistress of Shadows.

The Sword Saint was aware that her true name was Umbra, and he had gone in fully expecting her to be the toughest opponent. However, even so, he had underestimated her. The Necromancer had also been incredibly difficult and ultimately required him to use more than one Glimpse of Spring to win. In fact, he had to admit most of these Champions opponents had required him to use Glimpse to pull out a victory.

His problem, he realized, was that even if he could beat his opponents in a battle of skill, he simply fell too far behind in pure raw stats, and he also came to discover that for big finish blows, he relied far too much only on his skills, while his freeform energy manipulation lagged severely behind. Stats-wise, he also lacked many of the percentage titles that would truly help him, forcing him to rely more on technique and high-level concepts rather than raw power. So, if he met someone with concepts or skills that countered him, he would find himself struggling. In fact, he found it very lucky the Phoenix Queen used fire magic. If she had used some other school of magic, he could have seen that fight be his stumbling block.

Miyamoto also discovered that, sadly, not even death and revival would heal the backlash of using more than one Glimpse of Spring in a row. As a Transcendent skill, the system simply didn’t heal the aspect of him when it reset his body after death.

That's why he knew that he would only have one chance when it came to winning the final fight. He had just hoped that the final fight would be against this other Grand Champion, but fate had other plans.

The Mistress of Shadows was a nightmare for the Sword Saint to face. She was far faster than he was, and while he believed he would win a direct confrontation, he never got the chance. Using her speed, she managed to get in light blows from blind angles that accumulated until she could land a lethal blow and end the fight. Her trump card was especially difficult for the Sword Saint to deal with, as he didn't have any good abilities to detect others, so he would just find himself stumbling in the dark.

Against the Mistress of Shadows, the closest he got to victory was one fight where he managed to cut off one of her arms using Glimpse of Spring, but he had died right after. Using his remaining lives, he attempted all he could, but ultimately, reality became clear.

When he reached his final life, he decided to fully gamble and, at the very least, become a Grand Champion. Using his Transcendent skill within the Colosseum of Mortals was naturally far weaker than before, but Glimpses were still far more powerful than any other attacks he could use as they still relied on incredibly potent concepts. Concepts that originated from when he fully used his Transcendence.

Thus, on his final life, the Sword Saint entered the arena and welcomed springtime once more. With its advent, the Mistress of Shadows fell shortly after, unable to defeat the vastly more powerful swordsman. After his win, the backlash hit, and while he was happy to see it was far less severe than the first time he fully used the skill while fighting Jake, he knew he would have to pay for having used it once he got out of the Challenge Dungeon.

As the newly promoted Grand Champion, there was only one thing left to do. Even if he was weakened and knew he stood no chance, he at least wanted to see the Grand Champion. Partly to see what he missed out on and partly to see if his actions invited regret as he couldn't have a proper fight. Regret that he couldn't have beaten the Mistress of Shadows without using his Transcendence fully, which would have allowed him to then use Springtime Advent against the Grand Champion.

Luckily for him, there was no need for regret. Because upon facing the Grand Champion, Valdemar, Miyamoto realized that this would have been the end of the road no matter what... for Transcendence or not, he had absolutely no confidence in ever defeating such a monstrous existence. Especially not if he only had a single attempt.

Alas, at least he had other Challenge Dungeons to aim for instead... he just hoped there was one that he could do even while severely weakened. In retrospect, perhaps it was unwise to have weakened himself as such just to get one more win in the Colosseum of Mortals. However, he didn't regret his actions. Also, at least he got both an interesting Grand Achievement and a title for it.

**Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Colosseum of Mortals while becoming a Grand Champion. Colosseum Points converted: 53.599  
Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.**

**Reward gained: Colosseum of Mortals: Grand Champion title.**

**Colosseum of Mortals: Grand Champion – You have proven yourself a Grand Champion of the Colosseum of Mortals, defeating all other Champions before exiting the Colosseum of Mortals with more than 5,000,000 Colosseum Points. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +100 to all stats.**

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## **Chapter 785: Nevermore: Package Deliveries**

“If it had been a Transcendent skill, it would be far less concerning, but the fact it is a Bloodline is... hm,” the Wyrmgod muttered mostly to himself.

“I already told you, Jake is a little monster with an utterly broken Bloodline, and thinking too much about how stupid it is will only cause you pain. Trust me. Been there, done that. I am just waiting for the day the system decides to delete him outright,” Minaga shrugged.

Vilastromoz just listened in as the two of them kept talking and discussing. After Jake had answered those three questions, the Wyrmgod was even more deep in thought, and the Viper understood why. There were a lot of implications to what Jake had done. What his Bloodline had done.

Transcendent skills pretty much always came with positive effects, as why wouldn't they? They were created, after all, and even if it was often through enlightenment or even half on accident, they were always tied to the desires of their creator. It always aligned with them, so unless their Path called for them to do self-harm, the chances of seeing a Transcendent skill that was just downright detrimental wasn't going to happen.

The same thing couldn't be said about Bloodlines. Bloodlines were more like freak mutations that just occurred randomly throughout the multiverse and could take many forms. Some of them were strong, some were weak, and some were downright curses. Some would even kill the ones with it without offering any benefit. This meant that it wasn't necessarily cause for celebration when someone was born with a Bloodline. Of

course, if they were positive Bloodlines, they were a huge boon, but it was very much a toss-up. Also... Bloodlines often came with some ticks and quirks.

This was an aspect of Bloodlines that was not often discussed enough. Because the impact on the person with the Bloodline was massive, and not just when using it actively. As Vilastromoz had said to Jake a little bit ago, if you had a Bloodline, it became central to your being. You are your Bloodline, and your Bloodline is you. But... in this relationship, one has to consider that the Bloodline came first.

You do not shape your Bloodline; the Bloodline shapes you.

That's one of the reasons why Jake's Bloodline was so puzzling. He had managed to do something Vilastromoz had never heard of before... he had suppressed it. Shaped it. Suppressed it to a level where even the system didn't instantly recognize it when he was integrated into the system.

But, perhaps this ability to suppress the Bloodline was, in actuality, a necessary aspect of it. One that was required for it even to properly exist. Jake had, in prior talks, discussed how he suppressed some elements, such as his spatial perception. How he could manipulate the Bloodline's effects, far more than the Viper had seen anyone with Bloodlines do before.

In some ways, Jake and his Bloodline were able to remain somewhat separate. They seemed to exist like two sides of the same coin, always connected, yet with a thin layer separating them at all times. Based on Vilastromoz's best guess, what Jake had done in the arena to beat Valdemar was to temporarily remove this layer and fully unleash his Bloodline and all its effects. At least, that had to be a major part of it. The Viper also had a feeling Jake's Origin Energy, as they called it, was also involved somehow.

And if that was true... then the backlash Jake was suffering from now was just the result of him actually using his Bloodline fully. The implications of that were quite frankly terrifying, as that meant Jake's Bloodline in its full form was powerful enough for the system to judge that simply existing required a severe backlash.

So the Bloodline had adapted... Jake had adapted to suppress the Bloodline, just enough for him to not face constant backlash. Just enough for his own body to handle it.

Of course, this was just his own theory and not one he would share with the Wyrmgod, but he had a pretty high level of confidence in his assessment. Jake also said that the percentage boost to Perception increased every time he evolved, which meant the Bloodline evolved with him. It slowly became more and more unleashed the higher grade he reached, which begged the question... when would Jake turn himself into a vessel truly capable of always having his Bloodline fully unleashed?

If all the Viper's theories were true, he definitely looked forward to seeing that one day.

“By the way, have you sent out the recordings yet?” Minaga questioned the Wyrmgod as he changed the topic entirely, also catching the Viper’s attention. “I am pretty sure Gudrun made sure that Valdemar would be informed immediately if anyone managed to kill his image.”

The Wyrmgod nodded. “I have.”

“How about Artemis? I know there weren’t any criteria set up beforehand, but...”

“It has been made clear by her image that her true self is also to be informed immediately. I have already sent both packages.”

Hearing this, the Viper could only sigh internally. While having a Chosen who could create an uproar was incredibly entertaining, and he genuinely liked the chaos Jake created... he had a feeling Jake didn’t quite enjoy it as much.

And Valdemar and Artemis? Based on what he had seen, both of those could definitely create some chaos.

But... he did hope that the two of them didn’t decide to pay Nevermore a visit out of curiosity, as that would just make things unnecessarily rowdy. Hopefully, they had something more important to do or didn’t find it worth sending one of their avatars, much less their true body.

One could only hope.

The giant beast wandered across the verdant plains with steps that created massive pits the size of cities. It had two thick legs and huge arms that it used while walking, with eight spider-like eyes on its face. Leathery skin covered half its body, while long, thick hair covered the rest. If Jake had seen this scene, he would have pointed out how the beast looked vaguely like a huge gorilla, though of a size larger than any beasts he had ever encountered. Its power was also incomparable as it gave off the aura of a divine being.

On top of its head sat a single woman with her legs crossed as she tinkered with her bow. The string seemed to almost be alive and moved in odd patterns as she tried to tame and communicate with it, her struggles mainly in vain. She suppressed her annoyance at the silly plant lifeform as she slowly coaxed it into working with her.

Looking up, she gazed toward her target. Five humongous trees towered into space in the distance, their heights incredibly impressive even for divine trees found on a Great Planet. She was on her way to inspect them and see how well they had grown since her last visit. The last time she had been by was a few hundred years ago only, and Nature’s Attendant, who had helped her plant them, assured her they would do fine even if she didn’t protect them. An assurance she had not heeded, as she had promptly ordered the divine beast she was currently riding to defend it.



However, before she could get there, a figure appeared within her range of perception. A minute or so later, this figure entered her line of sight and flew toward her with rapid speed, riding atop a giant falcon-looking beast. The second she was above her, the newcomer, who looked like a beastkin, teleported and appeared right in front of the elven god.

“Mistress, I come bearing a message from the Wyrmgod of Nevermore,” the newly ascended beastkin god spoke as she kneeled and offered her a sealed black cube. “Your eyes only. The Primordial insisted.”

“Nevermore?” she frowned.

Artemis, who had been the elven archer riding the giant beast, took the cube and wondered what it was all about. Usually, the ones like her who had provided images for the Challenge Dungeon only be given these information packages at set schedules for them to look through. For the Wyrmgod to send a special delivery like this was both concerning and exciting. She didn’t quite remember even setting any criteria for getting contacted, which made the entire matter even more puzzling.

Seeing no need to delay, she infused some of her energy to unlock the package and inspected its contents. It contained a message and a vast number of recordings. The message was from the Wyrmgod and was just an explanation that he had made the decision to send it despite there being no set criteria, as he judged it necessary and because her own image had requested it. Along with a final mention that the content within would speak for itself as to why it had to be sent immediately.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Curious, she opened up the first recording. It was a match between her image and a human that she vaguely recalled having seen before. It took her a bit as she recalled where he was from. *The Chosen of the Malefic One? What was his name again...*

Watching the battle, she could admit it was impressive. He was good. His archery had much to be desired, but his overall movements and judgment mid-battle were top-notch. Moreover, his ability to dodge was uncanny, and from the looks of it, he had an extremely high Perception stat. Of course, within the Challenge Dungeon, it was severely reduced, but he definitely still had more than her image.

From the looks of it, he also had a danger sense. The same as Artemis herself. One that was quite honed and didn’t rely on any skills, which was nearly impossible to find these days. Most just relied on the minor danger sense a high Perception stat provided and never actively trained the sense, but clearly, he had. In fact, his danger sense and overall ability to detect his surroundings were definitely superior to her image. Also, seeing him fight, she did have an amusing thought.

*For the Chosen of the Malefic One to be a human hunter. How intriguing.*



She would definitely have expected the Malefic Viper to choose a monster of some kind as his Chosen. Probably a dragon or a snake. Of course, she understood why he had chosen this particular mortal. Based on everything Artemis had heard, he had quite an impressive Bloodline, and there had been talks in the Pantheon of Life to try and get their hands on some of the unique opportunities he could provide.

As she continued to look at the recording, it eventually reached its end, and she saw her image be defeated. If everything the Wyrmgod wanted to send her had ended there, Artemis honestly wouldn't have complained. It had been a highly entertaining battle, and she liked the demeanor and fighting style of the human. If he wasn't already the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, she would definitely have wanted to recruit him, even without considering his special abilities to manipulate Origins.

With the battle done, she wondered what the rest of the recordings were about. Because the fight was only a minor snippet. The first thought that struck her was that he had potentially used several lives before winning, but she quickly dismissed that thought. In the fight, he clearly gave off the feeling of it being their first battle. This just left her with the second thought: her image had chosen to interact with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper after getting all its memories back.

It didn't really surprise Artemis. She could totally see herself wanting to know more about this mysterious human hunter with such an interesting vibe. It was a shame she couldn't feel the presence of the human, as she got the feeling he was quite impressive based on how her image had reacted throughout the fight.

Yet despite this... she hadn't expected what happened next. When she saw her image invite him to her place after the fight to "recuperate," she was already surprised. When her other self then led him into the restoration pool, she had to do a double-take, and when she went even further than that...

Artemis had an odd feeling at that moment, especially after skipping through the many other recordings. Some of them included the two of them intimately together, while others were just of them training in the forest or talking.

It was just the two of them spending time together. Nothing exciting happened in most of the recordings, but Artemis still couldn't help herself from watching it all. Finally, toward the end, she saw a recording of just herself sitting in a chair and staring directly back at her as she began speaking.

*"Jake went to fight Valdemar today to become the one true Grand Champion, which means my time here is up at any moment. With that in mind, I have a request for you, Wyrmgod. I know you are watching. I want you to send recordings of everything that has happened between this version of me and Jake to my real self outside, and make sure to include this message. This next part is entirely addressed to my real self outside:*

In the recording, Artemis saw her image slightly lean forward as she continued.

*“Hi, me. I hope I’m doing well out there, not being stuck as a level 0 image in a Challenge Dungeon that will soon cease to exist. Now, I know how much I hate to beat around the bush, so let’s just get straight to it. Jake Thayne, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, is worth pursuing further. I am not saying you, my true self, should replicate my actions... but at least consider it when you judge the time is right and he becomes capable of standing tall before you. I honestly cannot give you any concrete reasons why I did as I did, but I do believe you will understand if you ever meet him. You won’t be disappointed; I can promise you that. Oh yeah, on a final note, he also has an absolutely monstrous Bloodline, so that is also worth investigating further.”*

Artemis’ other self said the last sentence with a teasing smile and a wink as the recording ended, leaving Artemis just standing there silently for over a dozen seconds.

“Mistress?” the beastkin god asked with concern.

Artemis snapped out of her spell as she threw the bow she had been working on into her storage and took out a long-range teleportation token. “I’m heading to Nevermore. Now.”

“What?” the other god exclaimed, confused. “What’s happened? What about the divine tree proj-“

The words didn’t even finish as Artemis disappeared, going straight toward Nevermore without delay.

“It’s gonna be bad,” the dwarf muttered.

“It can’t be worse than the last one, can it?” a large, bulky human woman questioned.

“Never underestimate him; that’s how you end up like Marcus.”

All six people at the table cringed at the mention of Marcus as a few muttered a silent prayer for their fellow god.

They were all sitting at a bar as they waited for today’s main character to arrive. All six of them had been chosen for this great honor, though most of them would have preferred to just head to one of the deadly zones of a World Wonder instead.

Soon enough, he appeared. A man wearing only a simple leather tunic, carrying a large barrel, walked through the door, a massive grin on his face. They all bowed their heads slightly as they welcomed the god of war and leader of Valhal, Valdemar.

“Glad you six could join me today!” he said, still smiling as he put down the big barrel. While hiding their fear, the six gods stared at the barrel as the Primordial introduced what they would be drinking that day.

“My all-new creation! I call this one the Starry Explosion!” Valdemar said as he slapped the side of the barrel proudly.

“What’s it made of?” one of the braver gods asked. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY  
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“Alcohol.”

Alright, that one made sense, even if it could be a bit dangerous based on its potency.

“A mix of berries.”

Again, totally fair. Hopefully, at least half of them were edible.

“And a bit of star.”

...

They all sat there silently until the dwarf raised a hand. “What do you mean when you say a bit of star?”

“Well, I wanted to add something to spiff it up, and last time, someone said it could be hotter, so I added some star!” Valdemar responded proudly.

“I think what that person meant when they said hotter, they meant as in more spicy?” the dwarf muttered as the rest silently applauded him for his bravery.

“Hm?” Valdemar exclaimed. “Oh! Yeah, that could be the case. Anyway, give it a shot; I think it’s pretty good! Plus, it took a long time to cut the star into useable pieces, so not even giving it a shot would be a waste!”

Valdemar took out metal mugs and poured them all a drink from the barrel. The bubbling liquid gave off heat enough to kill weaker gods if they ingested it, and the sheer aura of the alcoholic beverage was suffocating. Just the fact Valdemar brought out the special mugs he had commissioned from the Starseizing Titan was proof this one was not to be trifled with.

“Say, what kind of star did you use?” the large human woman questioned.

“Well, I wanted one of the yellow ones as that would add some nice color to the drink, but they didn’t seem good enough and way too weak, so I went and chopped up one of

those small white ones. Took a while to get all of the star into the barrel, but I think it turned out great!" Valdemar said with a big smile.

Six souls stared at the barrel and their drinks for a moment, reconsidering how they ended up there. It wasn't just the damn star mass that was the problem, but the other ingredients.

The problem with the Primordial's alcohol was very straightforward: he had made it and done all the taste-testing. This meant it was alcohol he himself could enjoy, making it far more potent than something any average god could handle.

At least Valdemar did have the sensibility to create mortal versions of his successful creations, so he didn't accidentally kill anyone who consumed even a drop, but gods were not offered the same courtesy. In fact, gods were the ones who helped find the successful creations.

The six gods who sat around the table all exchanged telepathic messages until, finally, one of them took the fall. The dwarf lifted the mug and, with determination, downed it as Valdemar stared expectedly.

There was deafening silence for nearly a full second before the brave soul suddenly opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"Hey, It's actually not that ba-"

The dwarf's eyes suddenly rolled to the back of his head before he fell out of his chair and hit the floor, completely and utterly unresponsive. A second later, his clothes caught on fire.

"Hah! It's strong, eh!?" Valdemar said with a huge belly laugh as he took out a bucket of water and dumped it on the burning dwarf. Seemingly having fully expected this outcome.

The other five gods stared at their own mugs with fear as Valdemar looked expectedly at them. They all exchanged glances to see who would take the fall next... but suddenly, their savior arrived.

A Valkyrie goddess, sent by Gudrun herself, arrived with a package from the Wyrmgod of Nevermore. At first, Valdemar wanted to continue testing his new drink, but the Valkyrie insisted.

Valdemar took the recording and checked it out. The six of them looked on as he slowly began nodding, then he smiled before frowning, back to looking happy again. Then there was a pang of sadness until his eyes suddenly opened wide, and he wouldn't stop grinning from ear to ear for several seconds until the recording stopped.

Looking up, Valdemar looked slightly apologetic as he still smiled with a hint of excitement in his eyes.

“Sorry mates, gotta postpone this one; Imma go visit my mate in Nevermore!”

That day, Jake unknowingly earned the deepfelt gratitude of five gods from Valhal.

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## Chapter 786: Nevermore: The Test of Character Begins

It took Jake a good week of sitting in meditation before he got the feeling he could handle the world around him again. Upon reflection on his current state, Jake would liken his injuries to as if he had strained some mental or soul muscle far more than he should have. As if he had torn something metaphysical that wouldn't simply heal in a few days. Luckily, though, it was healing. In just a week, Jake had gone from feeling either wholly overwhelmed by his surroundings or having all stimuli nearly completely suppressed. In fact, he felt confident enough to walk all the way to where one entered the Challenge Dungeons now.

However, Jake still had one thing that seriously bothered him. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't recall how he felt during the moment he unleashed his Bloodline, and he honestly didn't quite understand what exactly he had done. He remembered everything he had done, but the methods as to how he had done things eluded him. He had tried to replicate aspects to no avail, as he realized that during his full unleashing of his Bloodline, he had somehow embodied concepts he simply had no way to touch upon now.

While this was annoying, Jake wasn't that demotivated. Because he knew that it was something he could replicate in the future. Perhaps one day, that state of clarity would just be how he felt all the time, and he couldn't wait for that day to arrive. A man can dream.

Oh, Jake did also discover one more thing that did genuinely suck. During these thirty years of doing Nevermore, Jake had built up quite a lot of Jake Juice – or Origin Energy, as boring people called it – but that was now pretty much all gone. It had functioned as the fuel to allow him to do what he had done, and without it, the backlash would probably have been way fucking worse. Of course, that energy would also come back in due time, but it was the one true “loss” he suffered.

Either way, during this one week of healing, he tried to keep himself distracted by focusing on things that could keep his mind occupied, which luckily included messing with some of his items. His energy also moved normally, so he used what he had to infuse into the Soulflame Cradle. Sadly, the Puzzle Box wasn't really useable, though, as that required him to use his senses.

The Cradle had been out of his possession for more than a year and a half, yet when he checked it out, the inside looked just like it had when he entered the Challenge Dungeon. He guessed that time inside had been frozen by the system during his absence, which was probably for the best. Jake could already imagine someone like Dina, who walked around with a garden in a spatial storage, entering the dungeon only to see her garden entirely ruined the second she got out due to lack of maintenance.

Inside of the Cradle, his arcane affinity was gaining more and more ground. A few small areas now consistently birthed – and instantly killed – elemental-like creatures made of his affinity. By now, it was only a matter of time before an Arcane Soulflame would appear... Jake just hoped it would be a high-grade one. If not, well, he wasn't in a hurry and could wait for some better to come along. Working on the Cradle was a nice distraction, for sure.

Another place Jake felt all fine was within his own Soulspace. There, all his senses worked as they should without any problems, making it a place he could seek out if he needed reprieve. Unfortunately, him immersing his consciousness in his soul seemed to slow down, if not entirely halt his recuperation, so he only checked out his Soulspace sparingly.

He still took the time to make sure his curse energy was fine. Having all his equipment back was great, too. Especially Eternal Hunger had been dearly missed. The Sin weapon luckily also hadn't starved during his time in the Challenge Dungeon but had been frozen in time the same way as the Cradle.

Anyway, after this week of just healing, Jake believed it was time to stop stalling and get a move on. He didn't want to be that one guy on a group project who dragged everyone else down by being late with an assignment, so he had to get his ass moving if he wanted to avoid being the last person to finish all his Challenge Dungeon.

He just hoped this Test of Character dungeon would indeed be one he could do even in his messed-up state while hopefully even finding the space to heal in there. Also, he seriously hoped it wouldn't be as hard, but it shouldn't be, right?

Jake wasn't all that confident he would do super well, though... he had always sucked when taking tests. Well, besides multiple-answer tests where he could pretty much cheat by just getting a feel for the correct place to set a cross or fill in the circle. He doubted this test would just be him having to pick between a few choices on a sheet of paper, though.

No matter what, he didn't really have any other choice as he made his way to the entrance of the Challenge Dungeons and began his second Challenge Dungeon out of five: Test of Character. Follow current novels on [movel~fire~net](#)

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And boy, was the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon an odd one. Jake immediately recognized that.

From the name alone, it gave plenty of clues, but Jake honestly hadn't expected it to just test the character of the person who did it, despite the name. How would that even work? What were the criteria for judging a person? What type of character was "best" and deserving of a better evaluation?

Also, how would the Wyrmgod and system even test someone's character? By having them take some silly personality test? Maybe it would use his horoscope and star sign or throw some tarot cards in the mix? In either case, Jake found the notion of a dungeon judging someone's character kind of dumb, so he couldn't really see it being that simple.

Turns out it wasn't simple indeed.

Upon entering the dungeon, after a brief moment of nothingness, Jake found himself lying in a large, comfy bed. He was momentarily confused as he couldn't quite move his body, but with a little push, he raised an arm.

His senses were still off, but he felt like his stats were all normal. As he was thinking this, he lost concentration, and his arm dropped down again, as he lost control of his own body. Jake was perplexed and taken aback as a system message appeared before him.

### **Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!**

**You have entered the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. This dungeon is composed of an anthology of events and scenarios for you to experience and live through as you influence the stories while embodying characters within these stories.**

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**As a character, you are both the controller of the outcome of this story and a silent passenger. You are free to choose between controlling the current character you inhabit or letting the original story play out as a simple bystander. Taking control allows you to change the course of the story to create an outcome you find ideal based entirely on your own judgment.**



**During this Challenge Dungeon, you are fully capable of using your full stats, though some skills may be limited. All current items and equipment have been confiscated and shall be returned upon exiting the Challenge Dungeon. Each story has a final choice you will be presented with that will also mark the beginning of the end of the current story and allow you to move on to the next. Stories can be ended before the final choice is presented should certain actions be taken. Be warned that should the character you are inhabiting die, the story will immediately end, and you will move on to the next. The death of the character you are inhabiting will have no negative effects on you but may influence your evaluation during the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon.**

**Objective: See the anthology through to its end.**

**Current objective: Experience the first story.**

Reading the entire message, Jake was more certain than ever. This dungeon was weird as hell. So weird that Jake, in all honesty, had no idea what he was actually supposed to do.

An anthology? Stories? Taking the place of characters? This all seemed incredibly weird, especially considering he was clearly in his own body right now... wait, was he in his own body? He felt like he was, but upon focusing really hard on his sphere, he saw that something was different. He was a human, yes, but this wasn't him.

Forcing himself to take control of the body, Jake moved to touch his own face, only to feel his body instantly morph. The second he had taken control, the character he was currently inhabiting had morphed into Jake's body fully.

Letting go of his control, it instantly morphed back. Jake let it be as he tried to understand the dungeon a bit more as a minute or so passed. Then, without warning, his body began moving on its own as the character he was currently inhabiting appeared to wake up.

Sitting up, he stretched and yawned before getting out of the bed. Jake watched everything out of his own eyes, truly feeling like a passenger going along for the ride. His character soon walked in front of a mirror as Jake saw who he was supposed to be. In the mirror, a man who looked in his mid-thirties stared back as he stroked his beard a bit, seemingly considering if it had gotten a bit too long.

From there on, the guy just began his day. During this period, Jake realized that even if he saw everything the body did, he didn't know the character's actual thoughts or motives, forcing him to interpret any actions by himself. Perhaps this was part of the test of character? Again, what the hell was he supposed to do right now?

Time moved on as the man soon finished up at home and left his house. Jake still had his murky shitty sphere, but at least his eyesight and other "normal" senses were good

enough for now. He couldn't see even close to as far as before, but he could manage. Moreover, from the looks of it, this entire scenario he found himself in was filled with only weak people. His ability to sense presences was also still intact, and so far, not a single being above E-grade had appeared, with most even in F-grade. The body he was currently in seemed to be in late E-grade, if barely.

Jake felt like he was watching a weird and very boring POV movie as the character went through his very mundane day. After leaving home, he went and got some breakfast at a local café before heading to work as a guardsman for the city. He guarded the walls, checked the documents of traders and travelers who wanted to enter the city, and shot the shit with his fellow guards. Only once did any action happen that day as a single late E-grade beast got too close to the city, and a few mage guardsmen quickly killed it.

After getting home, the guard went into a small woodworking shop at the back of the house, where he worked on a full dining set. Once he was done for the day, the sun had long gone down, and the guard went and relaxed a bit in his small living room, reading a book for an hour or so before he headed to bed and went asleep.

Jake sadly didn't have the ability to sleep as he just lay there in darkness. At any moment, he could take charge of the body, but he didn't. He hadn't done anything throughout the entire day either but had just followed along.

During this time, Jake contemplated the Challenge Dungeon introduction and noticed that one option he did have was to skip any current story by simply killing himself. Or, well, killing the character he was currently inhabiting. It said that would end the story prematurely, along with there being no negative consequences for death. Not that he planned on doing that... but it was an option.

Six hours later, the guard woke up, and another boring day went by. It was far from stimulating, but Jake didn't feel rushed to do anything. Sure, it did feel like he was wasting time, but hey, he was slowly healing up and improving. Plus, he had plenty of time to work on his Bloodline-related senses while he was on cruise control.

On the fourth day of this "story," something finally happened. A group of traders had come, and one of them said that they passed an area nearby that was usually peaceful, but it seemed like there had recently been a lot of activity from beasts. It wasn't much, but it was something. That something being incredibly obvious foreshadowing.

The next day, there was more action than any other as a lot of scaled horse-like creatures got close to the city and had to be put down. On the sixth day, it got even worse, and there were even reports of travelers being killed on the road. Rumors began to be whispered around the city that a Beast King had emerged and united the nearby monsters, causing much concern. The bar that the guard Jake was riding along with sometimes visited was buzzing with activity that night, and Jake's character actively tried to calm everyone down.

Yet Jake knew he himself wasn't confident things were fine, not based on how he couldn't focus while at work and his constant nervous ticks. He obviously hoped it was just a false alarm.

Well, on the seventh day, it became clear this was no time to be calm. A scout had arrived and confirmed that a Beast King had indeed emerged, and based on context clues, Jake was pretty sure this so-called "calamitous monster" was just some D-grade. However, to these people, such a beast would be dangerous, even if it had just evolved. From the sounds of it, Jake also doubted it was even a strong variant.

On the eighth day, it became clear the city was in trouble. The Beast King was on the move and headed toward the city, likely to grow the power of its army by killing all the inhabitants of the city off for experience points. Human cities were the best kind of farming ground for beasts if they could get away from it, and clearly, this Beast King knew it.

A large meeting was called with the governor, officials, and many of the guards, including the guard captain, who was close to a peak E-grade. The meeting proceeded as several ideas were thrown out, including evacuation, fighting back while making use of the city walls, laying traps, having only a select few leave, or maybe trying to somehow make the Beast King not attack, with some even proposing that perhaps they could negotiate. Offer tribute to the Beast King to leave them be.

As everyone came up with ideas, Jake's character didn't say anything, but suddenly, as there was a moment of silence, the guard captain suddenly addressed him.

"You have worked as a guard here as long as me... do you have any suggestions?" the guard captain asked as he looked straight at Jake. Well, Jake's character.

As he did this, time slowed down significantly as a message appeared before him, but at the same time, he knew he had to make a decision relatively quickly.

**Make your final choice. With the Beast King coming, choose how you will influence the city's response to the crisis.**

Jake felt like he was put on the spot and doing a damn quick-time event... except he didn't just have to press a button really fast.

What's worse... Jake still had no idea what in the bloody hell the purpose of this place even was... so he just stopped trying to figure it out as he took control for the first time and spoke:

"Let's just hunt it down before it attacks?"

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## Chapter 787: Nevermore: Confusing Stories

The people in the room stared at Jake, who inhabited the body of the guard, seemingly wanting him to elaborate. Something he gladly did.

Whenever Jake took control and spoke, his body morphed into his own, but nobody around seemed to notice at all. That made things much easier as he shared his thoughts on the matter, with everyone thinking it was the guard talking.

Jake began to explain his plan of attacking the Beast King with a squad of elites before it could get the chance to attack the city to not allow it to build up power.

Based on everything Jake had heard, this Beast King was just a newly evolved D-grade. Sure, it was stronger than everyone in the city individually... but it was just one D-grade. The gap between E-grades and D-grades was pretty big but far from as prominent as, say, the difference between a D and a C-grade.

The true danger lay in a Beast King's ability to unite other beasts under its banner. As a being of a higher grade, other monsters would instinctually want to follow it and be submissive, allowing a single D-grade to create an army that could easily take the Beast King down several times over if they turned on it.

So, with that in mind, if this Beast King was allowed to gather an army, the city would truly be in trouble. Moreover, if they attacked the beast within its own domain, there was a good chance they wouldn't even have to battle the army at all. It was the same concept as how armies of beasts would not interfere if two Beast Kings battled to become the new leader; as a general rule, they just often didn't interfere if the Beast King was fighting. Its death would only mean a stronger alpha would take the position of leader, after all. At least, this non-interference of the army was what Jake gambled on.

Finally, if they managed to defeat the beast, there was a chance someone like the guard captain could finally overcome his limits and become a D-grade himself. If that happened, the city would be a lot safer in the future.

This was all sound logic that Jake shared with the room.

There was a lot of opposition, but Jake pointed out how shitty all the other plans were. Evacuation would result in most dying anyway, as why wouldn't this army just chase them down? Moreover, the majority of the beast army was of horse-like beasts who could move far faster than a bunch of humans trying to run away. Defending meant facing the entire army, so that was definitely out of the question. What was also dumb

was evacuating the elite, as that was just the strategy of a bunch of cowards and something Jake could never get behind.

In the end, the group relented. Jake did think everything went a bit too smoothly when it came to getting approval, but he chalked that up to the Challenge Dungeon mechanics helping him out. It reminded him a bit of how, for some reason, the opinion of the main character in a game would always dictate the plot. With everyone in agreement, plans were quickly made.

The operation included fourteen late E-grades between levels 70 and 95, one guard captain at level 99, and finally, the personal bodyguard of the governor, who was also level 99. Moreover, they made many preparations and prepared tools to make the fight easier. Casters got catalysts that would help amplify the power of their spells, and the best equipment was given out to everyone in the group.

With conviction, they moved out to strike down the threat before it had a chance to destroy their home.

The sixteen humans successfully snuck into its domain using magic to hide them before they got close enough. The D-grade beast in question looked like a large, nearly five-meter-long, six-legged horse with scales covering many parts of its body. Jake quickly confirmed it was indeed a pretty weak variant, and it didn't even look like it was level 110 yet. Moreover, there were no other beasts close to it, as the beast lay resting on the ground, fully exposed.

Going along with their plan, the bodyguard and guard captain would make the first move. Both of them attacked simultaneously, startling the Beast King. The rest of the group followed up rapidly after a solid blow was landed by the two of them as they joined the fight, and... well...

Everyone kind of died?

While it was true the D-grade was a shitty variant, the humans were also just shit. Even the two "strongest" humans in the group sucked ass, and not just stat and skill-wise. Their movements were also beyond horrible, and Jake was pretty damn sure he could have killed the two of them together when he was only level 60 or something.

But it wasn't all bad. Sure, the guard captain was trampled, but he managed to cut off a leg in the process, and while it was true the horse bit off the bodyguard's head, he managed to blow up the inside of the Beast King's mouth right before he died.

Jake's character was the final person to die as he was trampled too, but he managed to penetrate his spear deep into the Beast King's body before death. As the final human died, it was also clear the Beast King would die, and as predicted, it soon succumbed to its wounds.

So... the city was saved in the end at great cost. After Jake's character died, he had expected the story to end immediately, but instead, he saw what reminded him of an epilogue that displayed a scout who had seen the battle from afar run back to report to the city. At the same time, all the beasts that had gathered in the area slowly spread out again, no longer having a Beast King to gather around.

There had still been guards left in the city who managed to pick up the slack, and a grand funeral was held for the fallen. As time fast-forwarded, the city thrived for a while before it was eventually abandoned as an unknown faction invaded the land, and everyone chose to relocate.

With that, the first story came to an end... and Jake honestly wasn't sure what to think or what to conclude based on how everything had gone.

Could Jake just have taken control of the body and killed the D-grade by just looking at it? Sure, but what would the point of that be? This wasn't his fight anyway. During these nine days of "living" in this story, Jake came to the conclusion that the way he wanted to guide these stories was to influence his character to do what he would have done if he were in their situation. If he genuinely didn't know what to do, he would just let the characters decide themselves. It was a simple approach, but honestly, considering he had no fucking idea what he was supposed to do in this dungeon, it had to be good enough.

With the story over, his vision turned dark as he still wondered how his "character" was assessed based on this first story, just as a system prompt appeared before him.

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**You have completed the first story.**

**Second story initiating.**

In the second story, Jake took the form of an advisor to a local warlord who controlled a massive area with several cities. Okay, Jake called it massive, but in actuality, it was only considered massive by E-grade standards. The Warlord himself was an early D-grade, with Jake's body, in this case, a peak E-grade.

The central conflict in this story revolved around deciding the allocation of resources to different craftsman guilds. All of them had sent their representatives to speak their case, and Jake, as the advisor, was brought along to each guild to see how much they contributed to the budding kingdom.

While it was kind of interesting learning about a bunch of different crafters, Jake spent most of his time in this six-day-long story just focusing on his recovery as his senses still improved by the day. By the end of the tour of the different guilds, and when the



Warlord called Jake in to give his advice on which guild to support the most... Jake did nothing.

What the fuck did he know about managing a city or allocating funds? He had purposefully offloaded everything to Miranda in his own city, and he honestly believed his opinion didn't matter for shit in this situation. That is why he let the character he was inhabiting decide entirely on his own.

After the final choice, where a masonry guild had been selected based on Jake's character's decision, an epilogue played that seemed as neutral as could get. The masonry guild was happy and began a lot more construction with their new resources, even erecting a large statue in honor of the Warlord, making the advisor even more well-liked. As for any wider impact, Jake never really saw anything special happen as things just seemed to proceed as normal as the story came to an uneventful end.

**You have completed the second story.**

**Third story initiating.**

In this story, Jake took the form of a young man who was to be "married" to some old duke or something. The duke apparently liked younger men and women, and while Jake's character's family felt terrible about the whole ordeal as they knew they were throwing their family member to the wolves, they also knew opposing the duke would be to oppose the royal family, which would cause severe problems for the entire family.

Jake never even got to the final choice on this one, as he ended up ripping off the head of the duke after a particularly nasty scene was about to play out. From there, Jake was forced to take some actions of his own and ended up just acting like his character had actually been temporarily possessed by a divine being and was now an apostle or some shit. Jake was winging it hard and fully improvising at that point. Seeing as the strongest people in the kingdom were early D-grades, a mid-tier C-grade with Jake's Bloodline-empowered presence was more than enough to convince them.

The third story ended with Jake's character being recognized as a semi-divine being and his entire family uplifted by the royal family, who ended up purging the duke-faction entirely, using the young man's emergence as an excuse to wipe out political opponents. In the final part of the epilogue it showed the young man going on a journey to explore the world, with the words that even now, he felt the presence of the god who had used his vessel.

So, yeah, in this story, Jake learned that the actions he took molded the personality of the character he was inhabiting, even after he relented control. The young man truly believed he had been possessed by a god. Though remembering the first story, the guard had also fully tried to carry out Jake's plan, even after he gave up control, so it probably shouldn't have come as news. Just confirmation.



**You have completed the third story.**

**Fourth story initiating.**

In the fourth story, Jake was a squad captain on an ongoing battlefield, leading a group of around a dozen soldiers. This one ended with their side winning through Jake doing nothing but giving some advice on how to attack to increase the chance of victory for their squad, which ultimately resulted in them successfully sneaking around the enemy rear and killing the enemy army's tactician, throwing them into a state of panic.

The fifth one revolved around solving an internal conflict in the character's family. Jake's character had suddenly gained a lot of money through securing rights to a new trade route, and now everyone was scrambling to get a piece of the pie. In this story, the final choice was Jake – taking the form of the old Patriarch who would soon retire – choosing who would take over the budding business empire. Jake had no idea who to pick but did contribute by having the people who tried to assassinate his character killed, even if they were family. Whether the killed people were better or worse at running the company didn't really matter to Jake; he just didn't like people trying to kill him in such cowardly ways, such as trying to poison him. Based on the epilogue, the non-killed guy Jake's character ended up picking didn't do all that badly, though, so it was probably fine.

The sixth and seventh stories were both kind of boring, with Jake having no real input in either. He only took control once in each during the final choices portion and shared his thoughts, and that was it. As a general rule, he still just didn't see any need to decide the lives of others, especially not strangers. Something all these people ultimately still were, even if he did inhabit a character.

Well, he said that, but then there was the next story.

In the eighth story, Jake's character was a slaver and had to decide to whom he would sell his merchandise. There were a bunch of options. One wanted to use them as soldiers, one wanted them as human experiments, one simply wanted more workers, and there was even someone who wanted to buy them to free them all.

Anyway, Jake freed all the slaves and killed himself, as well as all the other slavers who had come to buy them. Well, besides the one who wanted to free them, he seemed decent enough. The epilogue showed the slaves all escaping and running wherever, with some finding true freedom, some getting recaptured, and some dying, unaware of how to live, though the majority were picked up and saved by the guy who wanted to free them all to begin with.

In the eighth story, Jake had thrown his non-interference stance to the wind and done as he wanted, having control pretty much all the time. If that had been the right choice or not for this "test," he wasn't sure, but honestly, who knew at this point?

The more stories passed, the more confused Jake got as to what the hell he was actually doing. Why was he doing this Challenge Dungeon? What the hell was it measuring? He was just making decisions for random people. The dungeon or system gave no feedback at all. No scores, no comments, no nothing. He was just doing story after story with no feedback.

He did take note of how the dungeon liked for him to spend some time in the story before presenting him with the final choice. Even in the war story, Jake's character had spent a few days bonding with the soldiers he was leading. Perhaps it wanted him to have time to get emotionally invested in them as people? Or maybe it just wanted to give him more data to base his final choice on?

Ultimately, Jake decided to just not think too much about it. He just went with his guts and stuck to his own, albeit flimsy, personal beliefs. He had never really cared if people called him a hypocrite or not when he decided to get involved in some matters while taking a stance of non-interference in others. Jake was Jake, and trying to find the "best" ending in all of these stories frankly didn't matter much to him. If this was the right approach to get a high score in the Challenge Dungeon, he seriously doubted, but if Jake had to effectively act like someone he wasn't, he didn't want to go for a high score. He would just take whatever evaluation the system and Wyrmgod gave him, and if it sucked... well, fuck em.

But, hey, this Challenge Dungeon where he had no idea what the fuck he was doing, things weren't all bad. All this time had brought one good thing with it, as after about four months inside the Test of Character dungeon, something seemed to finally click back into place.

On this day, Jake's vision cleared up, and his senses all returned to normal as his Sphere of Perception became as clear as ever. Follow current novels on *novel•fire•net*

That's right, Jake was back.

Back to doing more stories filled with E-grades where being recovered didn't matter, except for watching everything happening in the stories through his sphere was now more entertaining. Also... seeing as how he was now back in good condition, it was time to also consider working on something else:

Consolidating his gains from the Colosseum of Mortals by getting some sweet skill upgrades under his belt.

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## Chapter 788: Nevermore: Gaze

Jake got really lucky in story number twelve. In that one, he was so fortunate as to be a suspected mass murderer who was thrown into solitary confinement for potential crimes against humanity.

Now, Jake had to admit this story was kind of interesting. Jake had arrived after the suspected crime was done and in the middle of the arrest, not knowing what was going on. What's more, the character Jake was in didn't seem to know if he had murdered anyone either. At least he claimed that he didn't have any memories of the last week, which was one of the reasons he had just been imprisoned and not killed.

This left the mystery of whether he was guilty or not, and if he wasn't the true mass murderer, who was behind this plot? Jake knew that losing memories was very, very rarely a thing with the system, so there was also a good chance the character was just lying. But it was technically possible he didn't have any memories.

Jake would guess that a big part of this particular story was to figure out if the guy was guilty and, dependent on the answer – or your personal conclusion to the answer – how you would react to the entire judicial system.

Interesting, yes, but far less interesting than controlling the character for ninety-five percent of the time to practice his own skills while in isolation anyway. Considering Jake knew he was just waiting for some unknown investigation going on and that he would have to be stuck in prison for at least two weeks, according to the guards, Jake decided this was prime time to get some skills upgrades in. This was definitely not how things were intended to be, as Jake guessed it was meant to be some mental training exercise or something, but that just sounded like a needless waste of time.

Plus, Jake hid by erecting a stable arcane mana barrier to seal his cell away, and he seriously doubted any of the local E and D-grades could ever see through it. The cell itself was decently large, being around five-by-five meters, so just enough space for Jake to move around and work on skill upgrades. The reason for this size was to make space for the energy-draining magic circle installed on the floor that was meant to drain the one trapped there of stamina and mana, but, well, it didn't seem like the thing worked properly on C-grades. This magic circle was part of the reason Jake was confident in controlling the character without missing anything, as with no resources, he would just have been on the floor, unable to move.

As for why he had waited with his skill upgrades, it was naturally due to the backlash. One could only upgrade skills when one intended to upgrade them or experienced a moment of sudden insight or enlightenment, so he had purposefully kept it off till he had fully recovered. Jake feared that if he upgraded his skills while all his senses were messed up, it could potentially fuck up the upgrade. It was maybe an irrational fear, but

better safe than sorry, especially considering he didn't need the upgraded skills while inside the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon.

But now it was time to finally integrate what he had learned.

During the Colosseum of Mortals, Jake had primarily worked on three things: basic archery, what he called Fear Gaze, and his expertise with making quasi-Protean arrows. While he had also worked on general energy control and whatnot, the gains there were far lesser than with these three.

One also had to remember that Jake had practiced energy manipulation far more than he had ever practiced archery. Every single time he did alchemy, he practiced manipulating his mana, and when using nearly every single skill, he improved his use of stamina. On the other hand, general archery was something Jake only ever really improved when he consciously worked on doing so. In battle, he only often used his skills, such as Arcane Powershot or Splitting Arrow, giving him little time to work on his usual archery.

However, archery was still part of all these skills. It was the foundation that all of Jake's other bow-related skills worked with. Even when Jake, say, used Arcane Powershot, the loosed arrow benefitted from his archery skill as well, even if he didn't think about it.

Having decided to start with improving his archery, Jake got to work with consolidating his gains and insights. He spent the next day or so going through his practiced archery in his small cell, no one coming to bother him at any point.

After this one day of practice, the system finally recognized his efforts to integrate what he had learned, if barely.

### ***[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)]***

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***[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. As your horizons expand, you realize flaws and build upon a foundation to make that expansion everpresent. You do not shy away from mixing archery with magic and making your arrows arbiters of your will. Your arrows will cross all horizons and bend over any obstacle to pierce your target, with only your own will limiting the possibilities. Allows you to affect the trajectory of arrows already in flight. By infusing arrows with your will before shooting, the effect is significantly improved. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception. Arrow trajectory control based on Willpower.***

The “upgrade” was less than exciting but still recognized by the system to be enough for a notification. The only real change was a single sentence being expanded and one more functionality added to the skill. The skill before the upgrade said:

***“Allows you to apply your will to control the trajectory of arrows before releasing them.”***

While now, it had turned into:

***“Allows you to affect the trajectory of arrows already in flight. By infusing arrows with your will before shooting, the effect is significantly improved.”***

Again, it was very minor, but at least he now had skill-assistance when controlling his arrows mid-flight, while he didn’t doubt his prior method of infusing his will before shooting was even better than before.

Sadly, it stayed as an epic rarity skill, though it was no doubt peak epic now, extremely close to ancient rarity. Overall, it didn’t appear like a big deal, but Jake knew that he had taken an important step forward in his archery journey.

Even if the skill hadn’t suddenly grown significantly or even added much new and fancy, he knew he had shored up many weaknesses in his archery. He had hammered out some bad habits, both through his own practice and through the advice and sparring with Artemis, who naturally was a far better archer than himself, even as a level 0 significantly nerfed version of herself.

She understood that Jake didn’t really learn much when taught, so they just fought as he watched what she did, taking inspiration. It was a bit similar to how Jake trained against Sim-Jake, though he, of course, had far more time with his other self. Jake learned incredibly well by seeing others, likely because he had such high Perception, proving it was truly the best stat.

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Either way, Jake believed his skill was now far more primed for future upgrades.

As for how he would actually continue to upgrade the skill, well, Jake felt like one of the best ways to do that would be to expose himself to more skilled archers. He had learned so much watching melee fighters, mages, and whatnot, but people using bows were just too rare. But hey, who knows, maybe he could even get the real Artemis to give him a hand...

*Eh, doubtful... I am sure a literal goddess is too busy to waste time with some random C-grade. Maybe in the future...*

Jake shook his head as he refocused his attention on something else. After thinking for a while, Jake consolidated his gains in regard to Protean Arrow, but even after two days in the isolation cell, the system didn't give him any notifications.

He did feel like he improved some aspects of the skill, though. Jake could assemble the arrow faster and make the structure of the arrow even more complex, but clearly, the system didn't think it was enough to warrant even an in-rarity upgrade.

Jake was admittedly a bit annoyed at this but not that surprised. The skill was already ancient rarity, making it a lot harder to upgrade.

Taking the time, Jake also went over all his other insights, including those to his general energy control and his Arcane Powershot skill. Nothing was upgraded, nor did he get any system messages, but he hadn't expected any either. He just knew that many skills were now far closer to an upgrade than ever, especially those he hadn't upgraded in a long time... which brought him to the final thing he wanted to do. The final skill he wanted to upgrade: This chapter is updated by [novel.fire.net](http://novel.fire.net)

Gaze of the Apex Hunter. It was naturally to be augmented by the "new" technique Jake created while inside the Colosseum of Mortals.

Fear Gaze was a weird one. The technique Jake had created when he was skillless was very similar in many aspects of his regular Gaze of the Apex Hunter, yet he also introduced some new elements. He simplified its concepts a lot and also made the skill far, far more risky. Right now, Jake would only experience a headache after using Gaze too many times and a quick sharp pain if he used it on someone too strong. He wouldn't take any actual damage to his soul, even if he tried to use the skill on a god, though it would give him a headache for sure and make the skill unavailable for a while.

With the skillless Fear Gaze, that wasn't the case. This was also the reason Jake had been reluctant to use it on Valdemar during their fight. The backlash he suffered was intense, as the skill effectively made their two souls clash, and if Jake wasn't confident about coming out on top, it would end badly for him.

Now, while Jake did have his Bloodline, which was just a straight-up cheat in a soul clash, it wasn't perfect. The quality of his soul was incredibly high, and it would allow him to come out on top against pretty much anyone of equal level, but against higher-leveled foes, it could easily become problematic. Even if Jake was the highest-quality and most powerful ant around, he would still be squashed by the lowest-quality human.

This meant he had to willingly make regular Gaze more risky to use if he wanted to integrate Fear Gaze. At least he would have to accept that should he introduce the concepts he had learned, the backlash he would suffer from misusing the skill would increase significantly. He didn't necessarily think he would die, even if he tried to use Fear Gaze on a literal god, but he would definitely knock himself out for a while.



However, with this trade, Jake would also make the skill far more powerful. One of the big differences between Gaze of the Apex Hunter and Fear Gaze was that Fear Gaze also affected all the energies of his target. His regular Gaze only froze the physical body, allowing his foe to continue controlling mana and likely even internal energy to some degree.

He often experienced foes erecting barriers even while paralyzed, with some even counterattacking using magic while frozen. Fear Gaze would stop all that. It had even been able to stop the Transcendent aura of Valdemar... though it was more accurate to say he himself had stopped it as Fear Gaze had made him hesitate for a moment.

Now, Jake knew he wanted these aspects infused into Gaze of the Apex Hunter. The question was how he was supposed to do that properly. Looking at the skill he wanted to upgrade, he realized he really hadn't looked at the description for a long time.

***[Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – A hunter who has seen his gaze reflected in the eyes of the Apex Predator and now stares back with equal zeal. With a glance that penetrates into the very soul of its prey, the gaze of the Apex Hunter can immobilize or even kill any it sees. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his prey through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. Passively enhances the hunter's eyes, increasing the effect of Perception while also making weak points easier to spot. All effects of Gaze of the Apex Hunter are determined by Perception.***

This was one of his first legendary skills and one he had gained right after the Tutorial. He had it since E-grade but never once upgraded it.

Jake couldn't help but smile as he saw the "making weak points easier to spot" part of the description. When had he ever used this feature? At least consciously. Finding a weak spot usually wasn't hard. In fact, weak spots were often incredibly obvious. Didn't take a genius to figure out that shooting something in the eye was a good idea. Plus, the higher grade Jake got, the fewer natural weak points every creature got. Even now, Jake's organs didn't really matter for shit. The ones he had left anyway. So if he could improve this aspect somehow, he wasn't opposed to it. In fact, he had a good idea of how to do it.

Fear Gaze was to gaze upon a soul. The soul – or at least the Soulshape – was far more informative to look at if one searched for weaknesses, and it shouldn't be too hard to expand it so he could glance at Soulshapes using Gaze.

Compared to the prior skills he wanted to upgrade, this one was naturally far harder, but in some areas, it was surprisingly more straightforward. As mentioned, this skill was one Jake had for a long time. Shit, it had even integrated Hunter's Sight, which came from one of the very first skills Jake ever got when he entered the Tutorial. Through the many levels and even grades he had the skill, minor improvements had naturally always been



made. Jake had gotten better and better at using Gaze of the Apex Hunter, even using parts of it to nullify Identify-blocking skills.

His changed orange-yellow eyes from getting the skill had always been synonymous with who he was by now. It was something every person in Haven recognized and was, in many ways, truly part of his identity. In fact, during the Colosseum, it had been incredibly weird to see himself in mirrors without his changed eyes.

The thought of mirrors gave Jake an idea as he summoned a stable wall of arcane mana that he made to reflect his own image back at him. A large mirror appeared before him, and Jake met his own reflection's eyes. Opening them wide, they began to glow as the pupils turned into slits.

Jake had expected days to pass before he would see any progress, but reality turned out differently. Throughout the years, he had been assembling puzzle pieces, and now he just had to put them together into one picture. So, as he stared at his own reflection, he felt the ease of what he wanted to do, and in that moment, he fully understood. He understood why Fear Gaze – a seemingly high-level technique – had come so easy to him in the Colosseum. He understood why he felt wrong when he didn't have the skill.

Gaze had indeed become integral to him as a person. It suited Jake and aligned with him, perhaps more than any other skill he possessed. Gaze had long become part of Jake's Path, and as he felt his own heartbeat, truly part of who and what he was... now more than ever.

### ***[Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)]***

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***[Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Mythical)] – A hunter who has embraced primal aspects of himself, his gaze more deadly than even most apex predators. With will befitting that of an apex hunter, unleash a Primal Gaze that forcibly penetrates into the soul of your foes. The Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter can immobilize or even kill any it sees, the weak crumbling before you. Gives the hunter the ability to paralyze, knock out, and even kill his opponents through visual contact. This skill directly targets the soul of the target, ignoring distance, physical defense, and most magical defenses. Due to the nature of the skill, the soul of the hunter will also be exposed to the soul of the target when using Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter, potentially causing the hunter harm. Passively enhances the hunter's eyes, increasing the effect of Perception while also allowing you to glance at your opponent's soul for weaknesses. Passively inspires fear in all that enter the hunter's eyes, whom he displays hostility toward. All effects of Primal Gaze of the Apex Hunter are determined by Perception and the overall power of the hunter's soul. May your gaze inspire primal fear in all who dare impede the Path of .***

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## Chapter 789: Nevermore: Out of Hand

Having an itch always sucked, especially when it was somewhere that was hard to reach, such as that particular spot on your back. However, Jake would argue that one of the worst places to have a serious itch was inside your damn eyeballs.

After getting the notification, Jake's eyes subtly began changing, and with that came the intense itching. It made him want to scratch his own eyes out, but he resisted the urge as seconds that felt like minutes slowly passed. He had closed his eyes the second the change began to happen as his vision completely distorted during the restructuring. He faintly felt every part of his two eyeballs being remade, making him more sure than ever that should anyone ever manage to kill him, they would get some dope eyes as drops, ones that were potentially even at mythical rarity now.

Of course, Jake didn't have any plans of dying, but occupying his mind with weird thoughts was the best thing he could do to distract himself from clawing out his own eyes. Luckily, the process was soon complete, and Jake opened his eyes again and...

Well, he couldn't really tell anything had happened. It was not that surprising, considering he hadn't actively aimed to make his eyesight better, and as he didn't have any other people to look at, he couldn't test the ability to look at other people's souls.

With the evolution of his eyes completely done, he could also finally turn his attention to the skill upgrade itself. Jake stared at the skill for a while but didn't get longer than the name alone before he had something he bit onto. Primal Gaze. Jake hadn't expected the skill to necessarily become named "Gaze of ," but he sure hadn't expected it to be Primal Gaze either. What did that even mean?

Clearly, it meant that "primal" concepts had been infused into the skill, but not to the degree of turning it into a Primal Hunter skill. It felt more like a halfway point before becoming a true Legacy skill for him, and if that was true, wasn't it still kind of awesome?

Because that would indicate that when he upgraded it to a true Primal Hunter skill, it would be one above mythical rarity.

Another possible part of the explanation why it wasn't "of " was due to the inherent Records of the "of the Apex Hunter" concept being too powerful. Jake was ultimately still only a C-grade, and unless he did something unique to himself, it was difficult to make a

skill that could truly be called part of his own budding Legacy, especially if it was built on top of a legendary skill.

Something like the Core Manipulation skill was something unique that relied on Jake's unique concepts, so it was easy to make the vast majority of the Records in the skill belong wholly to Jake. The same was true with the Moment and Eternal Shadow skills that both came to be due to his Bloodline more or less directly getting involved.

Primal Gaze, on the other hand, was a true mix. It wasn't truly something Jake had made himself but was instead only filled with Records that very closely aligned with his Bloodline and who he was. Jake did have full confidence that one day it would become a Legacy skill, but for now, he wasn't going to complain about what he had gotten.

As a final note, the skill did also at least include mentions of who he was, with the nice little sentence: "May your gaze inspire primal fear in all who dare impede the Path of ." This pretty much served as confirmation that the skill was well on its way to becoming a Legacy skill.

Now, the actual upgrade to the skill was in the form of pure additions rather than any major changes. It was just Jake adding on "primal" aspects to the existing Gaze of the Apex Hunter, upgrading it without changing any of the fundamentals.

The new things added were the ability to directly clash his soul with others, the ability to see souls for weaknesses, and then an unexpected effect to inspire fear in targets he showed hostility toward? That last part of the skill definitely wasn't something he had intended to add or even expected, but something that seemed to have snuck in with all the other stuff.

These changes to the skill meant that Jake could now also freeze the energies of people. At least, he instinctively felt so. However, there was one more important aspect of this upgrade to consider:

He could still use only the old version of Gaze. The one where people could still control their energies. He didn't have to use the Fear Gaze aspect if he didn't want to, which opened quite a few doors. First of all, it would allow him to use it on targets he didn't wanna risk a direct soul clash against, and secondly, it meant he could use it strategically. What if he used regular Gaze in a fight against someone a time or two, making them adapt by keeping constant energy barriers ready, only for him to unleash a Fear Gaze for the finishing blow? Yeah, that could definitely be a thing.

Jake kept considering the potential use cases of his skill for a while longer before he continued to practice some other stuff. He really felt like he had to do a lot of catch-up after having spent so long as a level 0 in the Colosseum of Mortals, and if the dungeon hadn't taken his items, he would probably have been busy doing alchemy by now.

Days passed before something finally happened in this particular story, also reminding him he was still inside the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. Jake, with his Sphere of Perception now working properly, had early warning if anyone ever approached, and on that day, he saw someone going to the cell he was in.

Dispelling his stable barrier and lying down on the floor, Jake quickly relinquished control as his character returned to being an unconscious guy without any resources. A few guards arrived shortly after and didn't notice anything wrong as they hoisted up the unconscious guy and dragged him away.

At this point, Jake was back to just being a spectator. He had been in the isolation cell for about ten days, and during this time, no one had come by to even check on him, though the magic circle meant to keep him trapped did have the ability to detect if anyone exited it. Considering the character was meant to be unconscious for all this time, he didn't seem to have been much affected by Jake's actions either, so Jake hoped he hadn't messed up this storyline too much.

The guy was dragged to what looked like a temporary holding cell, where a healer came by and made sure he was awake and lucid. Once it was confirmed the character was awake – and very distressed – he was dragged off again toward a large building Jake quickly came to learn was a courthouse of sorts.

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From there, the trial began. Jake felt like he was in some crime show as both sides presented evidence, with Jake's character's defense being that he had no recollection of anything he was accused of and that he had potentially been mind controlled or at least messed with by some soul mage. Pretty much, they were just trying to sow doubt.

Meanwhile, the prosecution said that the guy was just lying because he had gotten caught. The evidence he had committed the crime was indisputable, so one would think they had an easy case considering there was a damn recording, but it appeared that the laws of the world in this story required them to prove a motive before he could be judged guilty. That he was some maniac who just liked killing was a legitimate claim, but the problem was that Jake's character seemed genuinely heartbroken when he heard what he had done when he – allegedly – wasn't in control of his body.

Both sides argued, and during all this time, Jake wondered if there really wasn't anyone with a truth-telling skill like Silas anywhere. Jake tended to be pretty good at discerning if people were telling the truth, but with the character he was inhabiting, he genuinely had no idea.

Anyway, both sides had a hard time winning the case, and investigations continued as Jake spent several days being dragged in and out of a courtroom that looked very much like it could have come from Earth.

As time dragged out, the investigations into whether the guy had somehow been controlled really got momentum, which was when a change happened.

That night, while Jake was in a temporary holding cell, the truth was revealed. One of the guards approached the cell, and Jake instantly knew something was off. The guard looked like the regular guard, but Jake felt like he wasn't... in fact, he reminded him of a certain someone.

*Eversmile?*

That's right, the character Jake inhabited was innocent, and in reality, a shapeshifter had taken his form and killed a bunch of people! What's more, the shapeshifter had done all this as a job for a powerful local bigshot to get rid of one particular person in the crowd slaughtered.

Meanwhile, Jake's character was just the fall guy and had been put in a trance of sorts at home, where he just slept for a week straight while experiencing weird dreams that made him believe he could have been the killer.

Seeing as the investigation had gone on for too long, the bigshot decided that assassinating Jake's character and making it look like a suicide due to guilt would be for the best, which was why the shapeshifter had come that day.

As for how Jake learned all this? Well, it turns out his new Primal Gaze's fear function was quite effective at making others figuratively shit their pants and spill everything once he looked at them in a mean way. After a few threats where Jake acted like he was a being that had taken over the guy's body – which technically wasn't untrue – the shapeshifter turned on the bigshot, and from there, the rest of the story went as one would have expected. The bigshot was found out to be the real culprit, Jake's character was released, and justice was served as everyone lived happily ever after.

At least that is what one would have expected, but there was more corruption and more shapeshifters around who also worked for this bigshot. Anyway, to make a long story short, Jake ended up gathering up a crowd of around two dozen shapeshifters and kindly threatened them with very painful deaths. It was only after that things ended in a satisfactory way, though it did also include Jake dismantling several institutions in the judicial system. So, yeah, things maybe got a bit out of hand.

So, when Jake said he believed it was satisfactory, that was only according to his own beliefs, where he tended to like good endings in stories, but if it was a good conclusion to the story from the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon's point of view? Who the fuck knows! Follow current NOVELS ON [novel~fire~net](http://novel-fire.net)

By now, Jake had pretty much resigned himself to getting a shit evaluation for doing this Challenge Dungeon. The advice he had gotten from both Villy and the Wyrmgod didn't really help him much, as both just boiled down to being himself... but hey, maybe that

actually meant he was doing super well and was on his way to the best evaluation ever? When you didn't know the criteria you were being measured by, it was pretty damn hard to tell.

Oh well, all he could do was continue as he went on to the next story... which was pretty much just a reskinned trolley problem. Yeah, he wasn't a big fan, but hey, maybe the audience watching him do these stories enjoyed the show?

*This is... getting out of hand.*

Vilastromoz looked around the room, which had quite a few new additions since Jake completed the first Challenge Dungeon. The first of which was naturally the most expected of the bunch: Valdemar. Within a day of getting the information package, he had popped in with a huge grin on his face as he wanted to see the one who had beaten his image in the Colosseum of Mortals.

Only a few days later, the second person the Viper had kind of expected to come did. He was naturally speaking of Artemis. However, one of the reasons he had only kind of expected it was due to who and what she was.

For someone like Valdemar to show up to Nevermore and want a personal meeting and hang out with the Wyrmgod was entirely what one could expect. However, for someone like Artemis, she simply didn't have the status to do something like that.

Moreover, Valdemar, the Viper, and the Wyrmgod were naturally all Primordials, and as a non-pinnacle god, simply being in their presence could be quite unsettling. So, she had made a wise decision and invited someone along who did have the status required: Nature's Attendant.

That is how they, less than a week after Jake completed the Challenge Dungeon, ended up doubling the number of people sitting within what was effectively a large living room, watching recordings and livestreams of different mortals currently doing Nevermore.

It had to be noted that the Wyrmgod didn't simply stream everything to everyone in the room. The only reason the Viper was allowed to see Jake was because he was his Chosen, meaning the three newcomers were not offered this privilege despite Valdemar's loud complaints. Complaints primarily aimed at Vilastromoz, who was the one that was supposed to give permission, but after a while of the Viper refusing, Valdemar just settled with watching some of the young prospects from Valhal instead.

To avoid things getting too annoying, Vilastromoz did say he would share if something exciting happened on Jake's side, but honestly, they weren't missing much with the Test of Character dungeon. Not that it wasn't fun to see Jake trying to figure out what he was supposed to do, but the Viper believed he was quite unique in his enjoyment of that.



Artemis and Nature's Attendant eventually settled on watching his granddaughter. The hunter god was quite subdued in the room, contrary to her demeanor in the Colosseum, but the Viper couldn't blame her. In fact, it was pretty odd she was even allowed to be in the room, considering the others there. Valdemar and the Viper being capable of existing in the same room without showing hostility toward one another didn't mesh well with the official conflict between their two factions, after all, so for Artemis to be there was quite a risk.

Alas, the Wyrmgod allowed her to stay, Vilastromoz not doubting for a second that Minaga had something to do with it. At least the Unique Lifeform seemed to enjoy teasing her quite a bit as he showed her some of his own recordings from when Jake did his labyrinth.

Around a month passed like this until suddenly, two additions he had not expected arrived together. In retrospect, he probably shouldn't have been surprised, as a gathering of three Primordials and Nature's Attendant was already considered rather extraordinary, and these two had the pulse on the happenings of the multiverse and wouldn't miss a happening like this.

And that's how the Viper chilling with the Wyrmgod to see Jake's antics turned into a meeting between five Primordials, with potentially more apex beings of the multiverse yet to arrive as they noticed the continued confluence of powerful beings in one place.

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## Chapter 790: Nevermore: Reunion

Two beings appeared in the living room the six gods were sitting and relaxing in, the atmosphere instantly changing with their entrance. Unsurprising, considering both of them were Primordials that one rarely saw in a room together.

"What a joyous occasion. When was it we gathered like this?" the winged woman asked with a smile on her lips as she regarded all her fellow gods.

"Your rhetorical pleasantries are as nauseating as ever," a ghostly pale elven man responded. "What are the chances of you deciding to visit Nevermore at the exact same moment I did?"

"Considerably high, considering I decided to arrive here today due to finding out you were going," the winged god chuckled as she turned to the dragonkin in the room. "It is



good to see you again, old friend. Thanks for allowing my entrance and bending your rules.”

Waving his hand, the Wyrmgod dismissed the Holy Mother. “I would be accused of choosing sides if I only allowed one of you in, which is why I waited to bring you both together.”

Inmortau, the Blightfather, sighed at this statement as he turned to the Viper and Valdemar. “Skipping the pleasantries, I wonder why the two of you are here together. Were you not supposed to be in an open conflict right now?”

“Is that how you’re gonna greet an old friend?” Vilastromoz smiled at the first Risen.

“Please, I know it has been a while, but don’t tell me you have lost your curt attitude.” the Blightfather said, shaking his head.

“Oh, I’ve totally turned into a softie,” the Viper shrugged. “And yeah, me and Valdemar are in a huge conflict for sure. I even think he wants to fight me or something.”

“A fight you will give me,” Valdemar huffed as he looked at one of the livestreams displayed in the room, not overly interested in the ongoing conversation.

“In due time, in due time,” the Viper waved him off as he returned his attention to the Blightfather. “Also, should you really be spreading miasma when you yourself live in a garden? Last time I checked, the Risen are still at war with the Holy Church with more ongoing battlefields than I bother to figure out the exact number of.”

“Bah, an endless conflict by design,” Inmortau said unbothered. “A way to cull the weak and nurture the strong while occasionally proving slightly entertaining when divine beings get involved.”

“What a crude way to put it,” the Holy Mother shook her head disapprovingly. “Conflict is sadly just a necessity for growth and a great way to motivate and give meaning to many. A necessary evil, if you may.”

Vilastromoz just chuckled at their conversation. The war between the Risen and the Holy Church truly was an endless war by design. As the two gods said, it was a way to make a constant training ground in the form of a battlefield. It was to the level where the battles were curated into grades and even tiers within some grades. Billions would join them, with sometimes only thousands leaving, but those who survived would be beings who had a chance to reach for true power.

It was very different from the war between the Endless Empire and the Automata Legion. That war was one where both sides genuinely wanted to wipe out the other and where the battlefields could easily have powerful beings sweep in and kill millions on a bad day. There was still some structure, but as there was no planning between the two

genuinely warring factions, what structure there was occurred naturally and was just accepted mutually by both without communication.

“War is war. Stop trying to make it sound like more than it is,” Valdemar scoffed at the Blightfather and the Holy Mother. “Also, your little skirmish cannot be called a true war.”

“Call it what you may, it serves a purpose, and it is well-known she and I never clash directly and sometimes even enter negotiations and temporary truces. Your alliance with Yip of Yore, on the other hand, is one made with the express purpose of him slaying the Malefic Viper,” Inmortau said as he looked at the Viper and Valdemar carefully. “And I cannot figure out why you would do something like that... moreover, with Eversmile seemingly involved...”

“Clearly, Vilastromoz is planning something,” the Holy Mother said in a calm tone. “So let us just wait and see the result. Show some trust.”

“Last time we did that... no, never mind,” the Blightfather began but stopped himself. “I will assume you know what you are doing.”

“Who knows? I may just be a true gambling man,” the Viper smirked mischievously in return as he turned to the Holy Mother. “Now, I do wonder why you also chose to come here, Anora. Giving the children in your Pantheon a break?”

“Am I not allowed to reunite with old friends?” she smiled. “You have been back for a while, and we simply never had the chance to meet like this. Seeing as Valdemar was already here and Inmortau was making his way over, I decided to join them for a little reunion.”

“I guess that’s the best answer I’ll get,” the Viper just muttered as he turned his attention toward Jake’s livestream that he was the only one that could see. Besides Minaga and the Wyrmgod, of course.

“I, for one, am flattered you wanted to come all this way to see me,” Minaga said in a cheerful tone as he gave the Holy Mother a thumbs up. “When was the last time we met?”

“Less than a thousand years ago, when you infiltrated a dunge-”

“Ah, happy memories,” Minaga cut her off. “In my defense, the design of that dungeon was super interesting, and I did it purely for research purposes, which should give me a pass, right?”

“I believe you promised to offer compensation when caught?” the winged god said with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh? No, that wasn’t me then, or if it was me, it was another me that isn’t the me right here,” Minaga said with a confident nod. “But no worries, if I ever see that me, I’ll be sure to give myself a stern talking to about sticking to promises!”

The Viper held back a smile as the Holy Mother just kept her usual calm demeanor. Despite ruling the biggest and potentially most powerful faction in the entire multiverse, she knew the futility of trying to deal with Minaga. There was simply nothing to gain from needlessly antagonizing him, while you had too much to lose by making him an enemy.

Usually, gods tried to not antagonize one another too much, as it tended to be futile. In most cases, even if a fight broke out, neither party would even get anything out of it. Also, it wasn’t like any of them there were at any risk, even if everyone else turned against them.

In fact, pretty much none of the gods present had shown up in their real bodies, not even the Wyrmgod. His true body was somewhere deep within Nevermore, hidden away with his power used to control the massive World Wonder. Alright, one could argue Minaga was truly there, as his body was technically real, but the rest were avatars. Of course, they were primary avatars, with most of each god’s focus on it.

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Even Valdemar was in an “avatar” of sorts, though it wasn’t a real one. Unsurprisingly, the simple god never properly managed to master the art of making avatars but usually just showed up everywhere with his real body. It was only after he met Gudrun that he began to use these quasi-avatars, which were pretty much just homunculi, that he infused his power into and could control for a limited time. This limited time still tended to be around a century as long as the quasi-avatar didn’t fight, but compared to the real thing, it was far worse.

The reason why Gudrun had insisted that even the potentially strongest god in the multiverse had to use an avatar when going to a place like Nevermore was due to pure safety. In fact, gods, in general, rarely left their divine realms. Some extremely powerful gods did go around places with their real bodies unbothered, but they never used them to enter godly territories, much less the divine realms of other gods.

Because even someone like Valdemar would find himself on the losing end if he decided to fight someone like the Wyrmgod while within his domain. The territorial advantage was simply too significant to be overcome, which was why Gudrun had been so insistent on him using this quasi-avatar. Even if all of the gods had been there in their real bodies and worked together, they still wouldn’t stand a chance against the Wyrmgod, though they potentially could have escaped. Well, everyone could have besides the one god there that truly felt out of place - something the Blightfather absolutely had to point out.

“Since we are talking about how great this reunion is... why is she here?” Inmortau asked as he clearly looked at Artemis, who was sitting beside Nature's Attendant, clearly nervous. Again, couldn't blame her. With three Primordials, she always felt pressured, and now that there were five, it was impressive she was even staying.

“Someone who was allowed to be here, same as you,” Nature's Attendant answered in a soft tone. “Besides, I question why you even need to ask. Why are you here anyway? Because we came here to observe the happenings inside of Nevermore, not to participate in some impromptu reunion, so our presence should be of no interest or bother.”

“Now you just raise my curiosity. Let me guess, you here for the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?” the Blightfather asked with a raised eyebrow, the look on their faces serving as confirmation. “I will admit he is a curiosity. Both the Endless Empire and Automata Legion are pretty up in arms about his appearance, and I do see why. Origin manipulation to such a degree is not something we've seen before outside of certain unique system-granted items.”

“If you understand, then let us simply enjoy our shared curiosity, shall we not?” Nature's Attendant asked, the Blightfather conceding.

The Viper was just observing the interaction as he smiled a bit to himself. It was kind of comforting to see that despite so much time passing, nothing much had changed. His fellow Primordials were still the same as they were so many eras ago.

Inmortau was very much still an ass, but the Malefic Viper also understood he had to be that way. He had to be the strong and uncompromising leader, for if he compromised, the entire Risen race would likely have been wiped out by now, and his faction crumbled a long time ago.

As an undead faction, the Risen had spent a long time before reaching a point where they weren't outright hated by the entire multiverse. However, even now, the most common approach was to just tolerate their existence. “Neutral” was the most gentle term most would use when asked about their relationship with the Risen, which did leave much to be desired. It also meant that for the longest time, if a faction could take advantage of the Risen, they would gladly do so, as they knew the chance of backlash was low. What would the Risen do? Attack them? That sounded like a great way to make the Risen look like the evil faction many already suspected them of being.

Inmortau's solution to this was to be a faction with a soft but strong approach to politics. They preferred soft politics where they made friends and proved themselves valuable allies, but should the other party try and take too much advantage, they would show they were not to be pushed around. Using his status as a Primordial, the Blightfather could squash most unfounded rumors easily and often even justify when he mobilized his armies to wipe out those who went too far.

Of course, some factions remained adamant the Risen was an evil faction, the Holy Church included. The reality was that concepts such as good and evil didn't particularly matter to Primordials, as such things were simply too feeble. Sentiment changed with time, and what was considered evil in one place and time could be considered a necessity in another.

This meant that the thing that mattered the most to gods were their own Path, their own personal rules, and the relationships they forged with their peers. And the relationship between the twelve Primordials could honestly only be described as one big dysfunctional family that spent more time arguing than actually getting along. However, when needed, they would still come together. They did so in the past, and ancient accords still persisted even to that day, forcing such a balance to be sustained.

Back on Earth, Miranda kept herself busy as the work never stopped, though it had gotten better. At least things had gotten into a pretty good routine by now, and most things had calmed down. The influx of slaves had stopped, and toward the end of the influx, it had gotten a lot easier to deal with. Many of the prior groups of freed slaves took the jobs of integrating new ones, easing the transition significantly.

The construction projects were also all going according to schedule. Hank, who had now fully transitioned to just being an overseer of sorts, had even evolved to C-grade despite having been stuck at peak D-grade for a bit.

What's more, the gift the Golden Road Emporium had given Jake during his Chosen ceremony had truly come through. Having projections of high-grade experts teach Earthlings was a brilliant way to get lacking know-how and experience that was otherwise impossible to obtain for a newly integrated universe. From the conversations Miranda had with these experts, they were also surprised at the rate at which the Earthlings and even the new slaves who had arrived there learned and improved.

All in all, things were going great, which was something she hadn't expected to say. This even left her more time to focus on her class, as she, for too long, had only focused on her profession. While she did still practice her class a bit while sleeping due to her Verdant Dream skill, it wasn't like she slept much anymore, and the time she spent in the Verdant Dream didn't really give her any levels; she just practiced to more easily go out hunting later. So, in conclusion, It was definitely great that things had finally calmed down and were running smoothly.

However, there was one thing that saddened her a bit. Many of the people from Haven who were originally their backbone were beginning to meet their limits. As an example, Neil's party, the formerly strongest five-person group in Haven, was no longer working together due to the disparity of their members. Eleanor, the archer, Levi, the magic swordsman, and Christen, their tank, had all gotten stuck in D-grade and seemed to have hit a wall. They also had simply lost their motivation to keep going and had settled down for calmer lives, most of them just focusing on their professions now.

It was a fate many shared. When the hectic barrage of constant action and more than one system event every single year stopped, many stopped with these things. When the world didn't push them forward, and the external pressure was gone, they simply didn't have the internal motivation to keep going. For many, the only reason they had even progressed and gotten powerful was to stay alive and protect those they cared about, and when the immediate danger was over, they finally had time to stop and reevaluate their lives, ultimately deciding they had done enough.

But luckily, there were many to step up and take their places, too, and some of the old talents did still grow. Especially now that the Nevermore Tokens had gotten more abundant than ever, and thousands had already traveled to the World Wonder to participate. Most didn't participate on the Leaderboards or even met the requirements to do so, being too high level, but to spend a few decades there was still a massive gain and a great way to get some more levels. Even high-level C-grade beasts had gone.

Miranda herself honestly hadn't planned on really going, but she began to feel like she had to. As a witch, Nevermore wasn't particularly suited for her, but the Verdant Witches recently began to teach her great methods for dungeon diving, the implications of their actions obvious.

And considering things were calming down on Earth, she soon didn't have any excuse to not go... besides, it wasn't like she couldn't just leave and go back there again as she didn't qualify for the Leaderboards, right?

Yeah, it wasn't like she actually wanted to go and test out some of her new and improved skills in a proper environment. Not at all. New **NOVEL** chapters are published on **novel•fire•net**

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## Chapter 791: Nevermore: Test of Character Fully Tested

If you stood before a rail with a switch in front of you, that could change the path of an oncoming train onto another path, with five people tied to the train's original path and only one on the...

Okay, everyone knows the trolley problem. Apparently, the Wyrmgod did, too, as Jake was presented with one that was pretty much a magical carbon copy where he could choose who to teleport away from an incoming monster horde. As for Jake's choice?



*Why not just kill the monsters?*

Which is what he did.

Jake didn't know if the system didn't like that or something, as, in the very next story, Jake was represented with a very similar scenario. However, this time, he was on a whole other planet operating a teleporter where he could either choose to let the story run its course or teleport a bigger group if he personally intervened.

As for Jake's choice? He did nothing.

See, he didn't really see this as a legitimate trolley problem, the same as back on Earth. He felt it was more like one of those modified ones, where you got told that the one person you killed to save five actually had the cure to cancer in their head, and you were now a monster who had doomed millions to die due to your decision. Of course, Jake didn't know this was the case, but he also didn't know it wasn't, so he just let the character who was in charge of teleporting do his thing, assuming he knew better.

Ultimately, Jake didn't really see why he should care much which group was saved either way. He didn't know who they were, and if he was to make a purely utilitarian judgment call, he lacked the information to do that. What if the smaller group he saved were all C-grades with good future prospects, while the larger group was filled with F and E-grades who had a better chance of randomly becoming Transcendents than reaching D-grade?

So, with all that in mind, Jake remained passive when he couldn't directly interfere to change the situation to something he thought was better. If he could reveal his true power to save people, he saw no reason not to, but if he had to make these weird moral choices, he chose not to engage. He was aware that in itself was a choice, but it was one he stuck to.

There was one of these trolley-problem stories where Jake did choose what to do. It was one where he was riding a space shuttle that was crashing toward a star, and he had to decide who could evacuate in escape pods. Jake himself was the captain in this one and the person who had been flying the spaceship when he had fucked up and hit an asteroid before Jake entered the story.

With only a total of fifteen escape pods but twenty-five people on board, ten people had to stay and die. During the story, he had gotten to know all the other crew members as they tried to repair the spaceship before it was too late, and when the final choice of who to escape appeared, Jake knew what to do as he took control.

"Well, to say we're fucked is an understatement... only fifteen of us are getting out of here, which means ten will have to stay. So, let me first ask first... any volunteers for dying?" Jake questioned before he did something none of the crew members had expected as he raised his hand.



Jake had learned something during this story he genuinely hadn't known. That entire thing where the captain goes down with his ship was not a thing in the multiverse. In fact, it tended to be the opposite. Seeing as the captain was often the person with the highest level, he would often be evacuated first as he held more value. A high-level captain could have more value than the entire spaceship itself, so to lose both was just unnecessary in the eyes of most.

However, Jake didn't agree with this. In his eyes, the captain – himself - in this case, had been the one who had fucked up. He had hit an asteroid due to his own incompetence and gotten at least nine others killed, so of course, he had to take responsibility or at least stay on the spaceship till the very end and try to fix the situation he had created.

Anyway, Jake volunteering to go down with the ship also made five others decide to stay behind. As they did this, Jake suddenly got an odd feeling as he stared at one of the crew members who had decided to leave. He got the feeling she needed to stay... so he made that happen.

"The remaining four who stay will be decided by chance to make it fair," Jake said, as he proceeded to use his Bloodline to entirely rig the game of chance to make that one specific woman stay with him and the other volunteers. She looked devastated when she realized she had lost, but still accepted the result as fifteen people took the escape pods, leaving ten of them in a spaceship that couldn't fly, barreling toward a star. They still had a bit less than two days till impact, but things were definitely less than stellar.

Jake learned a day later, when they were getting closer to the star, why his guts had told him to keep the female crew member who was one of the engineers. With excitement, she ran to him and said she had found a potential solution to allow them to survive. By blowing up one of the engines, they could take advantage of a storm of space mana that was approaching, pushing them just enough to enter orbit around the star, to then blow up a second engine to set free them from orbit again and send them flying home.

It was super risky and straight out of some very unrealistic space movie, but Jake was entirely on board. This was one of the stories where Jake's own power didn't do shit. Something he had noticed was a general theme. Either power didn't matter at all, as everything else was just too damn powerful compared to any C-grade, or everyone was E and D-grades. In fact, Jake hadn't seen a single C-grade even after doing more than fifty of the stories.

Anyway, in a twist that wasn't super surprising, the engineer's plan turned out to work, and in the epilogue, Jake saw his captain character and the rest of the crew miraculously survive. It did also show his character getting scolded by his superiors for not escaping in a pod, but ultimately, he was still hailed as a hero along with the engineer for "great decision making."

The lesson Jake learned from this test was to always trust his gut and that rigging a game of chance was acceptable as long as it was for the greater good. Ah, who was he kidding?

Jake hadn't learned shit during all these damn tests of his character or whatever. The novelty had long worn off, and while he did his best to get engaged in the stories, some of them proving genuinely interesting due to the setting, his attention span was waning. Most of them just weren't that engaging or interesting to him, and he felt like he was wasting time. Moreover, most stories took over a week, and at that point, he had already spent over a year inside the Challenge Dungeon with nothing to show for it.

Stories from there just felt slower and slower. Soon Jake had done sixty, then seventy, eighty, ninety... Jake had no idea when it would end until finally, he reached story number one hundred. This story in itself didn't have anything hugely enjoyable about it, but as he entered it, Jake felt like he was finally approaching the end of his suffering.

Once the story was done and the princess was not saved from a dragon that just turned out to have a massive crush on her, he finally went somewhere that wasn't just another random story.

Jake found himself within a white void – on a side note, the system really liked white voids for these kinds of situations – where nothing happened for a few seconds. Finally, a system message appeared before him, making him sigh in relief.

**Congratulations! You have completed the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon!**

**Evaluation performance...**

*Thank fucking Villy,* Jake thought to himself. For a second there, he was afraid the white void was just the setup for another story or something. Jake was sure happy to finally be out and was already looking forward to the next Challenge Dungeon, as it could only be better than this.

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But, before that, he still needed his final evaluation. One that he had to admit he was kind of nervous about. It had to be reiterated, but Jake had no idea how he had done or what he had even been tested on. So, with bated breath, he waited until suddenly, a Grand Achievement popped up in front of him.

**Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Test of Character with an excellent performance. You have shown a consistent sense of justice, character, and a high level of self-belief. However, you also displayed a lack of dedication to certain Paths and a lack of interest in understanding stories, even when doing so could prove beneficial to you personally. Throughout the test, you**

have shown no growth or regression in your character but remained wholly consistent. 49.108 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 10% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

Reading it over carefully, Jake could honestly only shrug. It said he had an excellent performance, so that was good, right? Also, at least it called him consistent, even if it also recognized he was bored. But was it really that bad to not show dedication toward something that he really didn't like doing? Sure, it said he didn't display interest even when doing so could have benefitted him, but it wasn't like missing some benefits here and there would ruin him. He could always just make up for any losses elsewhere while doing something he actually found engaging.

Jake knew one of the reasons he had kind of hated the Challenge Dungeon was simply due to how "complicated" it was. He liked to keep things simple, and some grand social experiment mixed with a personality test wasn't something he liked at all. If it had told him how to perform, he would have taken it as a challenge, but what even was the challenge in this Challenge Dungeon? He still didn't fucking know.

But... oh well, he had at least gotten some more Nevermore Points and another multiplier, so that was nice to see. With this, he got his points above nine hundred thousand, rapidly closing in on a million. For original chapters go to [novel/fire/met](#)

### **Nevermore Points: 907.602**

There was also no title this time around, and from the looks of it, there were no levels either. This did make him question if any of these Challenge Dungeons even gave experience, but surely, the Minaga one had to, right?

Anyway, Jake was complaining a lot internally, but it wasn't all bad. Especially not when he got the other reward from the Challenge Dungeon besides the points.

Right in front of him appeared what looked like a single blank page ripped from a book. At first, Jake was confused, but when he used Identify on it, a small smile snuck onto his lips.

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

***Requirements: C-grade. Soulbound***

Now, this was something actually useful. Items like this were incredibly rare to find in the multiverse and would allow him to potentially even upgrade skills where Jake wasn't sure where to take it. Yep, definitely a good one.

**Do you wish to exit the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon?**

**No further actions can be taken within this Challenge Dungeon.**

Jake, standing in the void, sighed, happy he was finally done with the damn Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. Looking up, he stared straight at where he knew someone was observing him. Definitely the Wyrmgod recording.

"I give that damn Challenge Dungeon a two out of ten. It's shit. The novelty quickly wears off, and then you are just doing chores. Definitely one to go back to the drawing board with. And if you say that my not liking it is proof I shouldn't have gotten a better evaluation, then I guess my character just sucks, and I'll happily accept that if it means not going to that shithole again," Jake said, giving a very fair and accurate review of the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon.

If they wanted to do a damn live documentary of his life, he should at least have the right to get a few jabs in, right?

Ultimately, he just decided to mentally write off the entire Challenge Dungeon. Yeah, it had just been a place for him to waste some time while recovering from the Colosseum of Mortals, nothing more, nothing less, and it wasn't like it hadn't still been efficient when it came to making Nevermore Points, and he even got that storybook page. Yep, it was definitely not a waste of time. Definitely not...

Seriously, what kind of person would like that shitty place?

Jacob appeared in the white void, a pang of sadness hitting him as he realized the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon was over. He had genuinely enjoyed the entire experience, and despite it giving him no levels, he felt like he had progressed plenty. The Paths he had seen, the fates he had divined, and the worlds he had experienced were invaluable. To stand in the shoes of another person and truly experience life from their point of view was simply invaluable, and something he would gladly do again if given the chance.

He had barely considered what rewards the dungeon would offer, so he was taken aback when the system presented him with his final evaluation.

**Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Test of Character with a near-perfect performance. You have shown yourself to be a guide, a teacher, an observer, or whatever role you needed to adapt. You have proven you can understand every story and guide it toward an ideal future, your every decision guided by comprehension, empathy, and logic, your thought process adapting to**

each scenario. Throughout the Test of Character, you have grown and adapted to every challenge, never once faltering. 88.201 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 20% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

**Reward gained: Test of Character: Near-perfect Empath.**

**Test of Character: Near-Perfect Empath – You have proven yourself a Near-perfect Empath during the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon, truly displaying compassion and understanding of every story, earning more than 80.000 Nevermore Points. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +175 to all stats.**

Not to mention the odd page he got when everything else was said and done...

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

**Requirements: C-grade. Soulbound**

Despite his gratitude for these rewards, Jacob admittedly would have gladly traded them for another chance to do the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon. He was not a contender for the Leaderboards anyway, and getting more power through titles and such mattered little to him or his Path.

With gratitude for being allowed the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon, he left with a smile on his face, hoping others would find as much enjoyment in the experience as he had.

--

Arnold appeared in the white void, having completed the Challenge Dungeon with an approach he deemed the best. Besides that, he didn't really have many thoughts of the roughly last two years of his life, as he hadn't really done anything he deemed especially noteworthy. This did make him display some surprise as he raised a single eyebrow when he got the final evaluation.

**Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed the Test of Character with an unquestionable performance. You have shown yourself to be an analyst of all stories. Every story was approached with logic, and every decision was made only according to the data provided to maximize benefits for your character. Your**

own personal beliefs or sentiments never once influenced your decision-making, allowing you to always remain impartial. Impartial to forever only make decisions that benefitted the character you inhabited, with no regard or care for any other living being. Throughout the Test of Character, you have been a beacon of consistency. 88.758 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 20% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

**Reward gained: Test of Character: Unquestionable Analyst.**

**Test of Character: Unquestionable Analyst – You have proven yourself an unquestionable analyst during the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon by displaying an analytical and logical mind that defies comprehension, earning more than 80.000 Nevermore Points. Only one Nevermore Challenge Dungeon title can be held at a time. +175 to all stats.**

What's more was the Exceptional Storybook Page he received, which would allow him to upgrade one of his research-related skills that usually had a too time-consuming progression path. This would save him a lot of time and allow him to proceed more quickly with some of the experiments he had hypothesized but lacked the means to adequately collect empirical data and form a proper theory. As for his thoughts on the Test of Character itself?

In truth, he didn't really have any. He didn't believe his own thoughts on the matter had any bearing on the actions he had taken, after all. However, he could admit he did find some level of happiness with his gains. Especially after the entirely lacking performance he displayed in the Colosseum of Mortals, which had proven to be an entirely unproductive endeavor.

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## **Chapter 792: Nevermore: [Redacted]**

The five Challenge Dungeons were something many parties attending Nevermore delayed doing for a variety of reasons. Partly because they were naturally easier once you got stronger. Even in the ones where your stats were normalized or reduced, your conceptual comprehension should increase over the decades of doing all the other floors. Another reason many waited was to do the entire Challenge Dungeon at once. This chapter is updated by [novel·fire·net](#)



Once the seventieth floor was cleared by many groups, they decided, like Jake's, to tackle them. Some also did the dungeons before, as while the fourteenth city floor did mark when all the Challenge Dungeon would be fully unlocked, some of them were fully unlocked even beforehand. As an example, the Test of Character was fully unlocked after doing the floors that were meant to teach "lessons" to the Nevermore Attendees, such as the one about Plagues. The Test of Character was also one that would either be fully unlocked or entirely unavailable due to how it worked.

Before that, the Minaga Labyrinth one was fully unlocked after the Minaga floors were done, making it the first Challenge Dungeon to fully unlock. The final one that fully opened in this incarnation of Nevermore was the Colosseum of Mortals, where one had to clear floor seventy to become able to challenge the Grand Champion. If one did the Challenge Dungeon without having done floor seventy, the Battlemaster would have said that the Grand Champion wasn't available and to come back at a later date. Later, in this case, being after you had cleared floor seventy.

Many of the best parties had begun reaching this stage by now and were moving onto the Challenge Dungeons properly. As had been mentioned many times before, the Challenge Dungeons were where the true top of the Leaderboards would be found, and they were, by far, the most efficient way of getting points for those talented.

Each Challenge Dungeon could give a Grand Achievement upon completion, though it would only be a normal achievement without any percentage multiplier if the performance was too bad. The Grand Achievement usually ranged from 5-20%, with 20% being given if one fully completed the Challenge Dungeon with an outstanding performance. It was usually viewed as the maximum, though, of course, Jake knew there was one step higher. 25% was only given if one did the "impossible" within a certain Challenge Dungeon. If they achieved something that no one was meant to achieve.

With 20% usually considered the limit, the "maximum amplification" one could reach was thus 100% if one had a perfect performance in all five Challenge Dungeons. Needless to say, this never happened, as just getting a 20% multiplier in any of the Challenge Dungeons already put you in the top tier.

On that note, someone like the Fallen King was not expected to get a peak score. In fact, no one expected Unique Lifeforms to. Unique Lifeforms had very narrow Paths by definition, and while they could often do extremely well in some dungeons, they nearly always completely flunked in others if they didn't suit their particular talents. They could still go pretty high, though, just not the peak.

An overall amplification of 30% from all Challenge Dungeons was considered excellent, as just getting 10% was extremely hard, and this was around where many would expect a Unique Lifeform to land. 40% was at the level of true geniuses and were individuals many factions showed interest in. 50% was where one reached the territory of truly versatile monsters. For reference, getting to the Grand Champion in the Colosseum of



Mortals – while expending all lives - would give just 10%, so one had to be at that level in every single Challenge Dungeon. Most people would be over the moon for just beating the seven Champions, but one had to repeat similar feats five times over to reach 50%.

Above 50% was where one entered the realm of genuine monsters. Beings that already had high levels of divine attention on them who were already recognized by the gods. Some were expected to get at least 50%, such as Ghost King Azal, Davion of Valhal, and several other peak geniuses from major factions. Jake, Dina, and Ell'hakan also fell within this group, which was expected to reach at least 50% overall.

However, even if they were expected to reach at least 50%, reaching 60% would be considered absolutely exemplary. Anything above 70% was practically unheard of, and the stuff of legends. Those who reached that level were considered the true contenders for the very apex of the Leaderboard. Going above even this, one reached the level of being an all-time record contender.

So, with Jake being at 35% after only two out of five, he was definitely on track to make his dear Patron a proud snake. Even if he did believe that bullshit Test of Character had been complete bullshit.

He understood Jake's frustration. The Viper truly did. It was an odd place, and in all honesty, one that he would argue didn't truly fit that well in Nevermore.

The Test of Character was an odd Challenge Dungeon by design. Jake's inability to understand why it worked as it worked was entirely purposeful, and while it did provide part of the challenge, it was far from the whole reason.

Vilastromoz knew that out of all the Challenge Dungeons, it was the one the Wyrmgod had exerted the most control on to turn it into exactly what he wanted. To fulfill the role he desired for it to fulfill. And that role wasn't necessarily to offer a challenge... that was just a requirement by the system to turn it into a Challenge Dungeon that qualified to be part of Nevermore. It offered some diversity in what kind of dungeons there were, but it was also a Challenge Dungeon archetype that had been around for almost every single era.

In reality, it wasn't really made for the benefit of the ones actually doing the Challenge Dungeon. Not really. It wasn't even made for people like Jake or the other people who it was expected to get a high score. Instead, it was created solely for the Wyrmgod's own goals.

The Test of Character did an acceptable job of assessing someone's character and allowed the Wyrmgod to get certain data points. It allowed him to categorize people who even got "low" scores based on their personalities and character. It allowed him to learn of their morals, quirks, mental thought processes, and sometimes even red flags that one had to be worried about. Not red flags, as in someone turning out to be a psycho

killer, but red flags, as in potential weaknesses that would display down the line, such as an inability to show patience or deal with long periods of nothing. Something anyone who truly wanted to reach the peak had to be capable of to not go insane. And with the system actively not allowing someone without a mentality capable of evolving to evolve, it could potentially be the doom of a talented prospect.

This information would then be sold to whoever was interested. Some factions had an open subscription of sorts to get information on anyone from the faction it was worth getting information on. Especially places like the Holy Church used this data to weed out or address people who could turn into dissidents or problems for the faction in the future, but even places like the Order of the Malefic Viper also made use of it.

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Other factions had open calls on interesting new prospects. Someone getting a very high score in the Test of Character could indicate someone had a unique talent or was suited for specific Paths. The personality and character of some people even resonated with some extremely powerful Paths, to the level that such a personality and sense of character was the only requirement they had to fulfill.

Jake's former coworker, the Augur of Hope, was a brilliant example of this. His talent in magic was nowhere near good, he couldn't fight for shit, he wasn't adequately assertive at all but a total pushover, and he entirely lacked the ego someone like the Viper was looking for in those he believed could become truly strong.

Yet he had gained a Path many sought after. One recognized as a peak Path among mortals. Because what he did have was an uncanny ability to understand others, an unwavering will to guide them, and a selflessness that was almost nauseating. He would do what he believed was the best for others, even if it meant setting himself on fire. The Augur was simply born to be an Augur... but he did need a little push to get there. He needed the interference of the gods in the Tutorial to set up the scenario for him to realize his Path.

Many of those who did the Test of Character could be close to such a realization. They just needed a small push that some factions would gladly give them. The Primordial Church was a big recruiter of people who were just a single step away from being fanatics and recruited them almost en masse after they participated in Nevermore.

If Vilastromoz had to explain Nevermore and especially the Test of Character to Jake, he would very much compare it to those social media things his planet used to have. Nevermore was free to enter and participate in, but it still had to bring in resources for the Wyrmgod and others who were involved in developing and maintaining it, and one of the best ways to earn Credits was to sell information. As the saying goes, if something is free, you are the product. This was also why the Wyrmgod sent tokens to

enter the World Wonder all throughout the multiverse. He wanted every C-grade in the entire multiverse to come to Nevermore if he could.

Of course, despite this data-gathering, some people still had special privileges to not get theirs sold. Usually, the Wyrmgod would refuse to sell any information on young prospects to rival factions, while he would never sell anything related to someone like Jake, considering he was a Chosen. He would keep all that under lock and key and only give it to the Malefic Viper. Save for a few scenarios like the Colosseum of Mortals, where others had made deals to still get notified when certain things happened, nothing would get out.

All of this is to say that a situation where several gods actively seemed to want information on someone they, under normal circumstances, wouldn't get was odd... but what was even weirder was that they actually got what they wanted.

"Oh, Jake is done with the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon now!" Minaga said with a big smile, getting the attention of the others in the room. It took some of them a second to remember that Jake was the name of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but once they did, their curiosity peaked.

By now, it had been nearly two years since the Holy Mother and Blightfather had arrived, and things hadn't gotten calmer. Nobody had left, as frankly, two years was barely any period of time to them. As immortals, their sense of time was entirely warped, and even just sitting still and staring into nothingness for a century or two could go by entirely unnoticed. Especially when one had several avatars at the same time. The primary focus of the god could always just shift elsewhere as one waited for something to happen with one avatar.

With no one leaving, it had only made the room more packed, though naturally, the Wyrmgod could just spatially expand it if he saw fit. As the Viper had expected, the gathering of five Primordials and Nature's Attendant in one place did not go unnoticed. In the first few weeks, factions were apprehensive about doing anything as some sent representatives to figure out what was happening, which was when the Wyrmgod just decided to effectively say "fuck it" and just allowed any god who wanted to enter to do so.

This had resulted in the room now having around fifty gods present, as they saw this as an invitation of sorts. Even the Dao Sect had sent one of their Wanderers, as they called them. People who actively trained out of the Dao Sect's controlled territories and were more in tune with the rest of the multiverse.

No other Primordials had shown up, which honestly didn't surprise Vilastromoz at all. The Starseizing Titan, Rigoria, and Aeon never showed up unless expressly asked to, Stormild didn't show up even when asked to, and Eversmile and the Daofather were both too unpredictable. As for Yggdrasil... well, she always just sent Nature's Attendant

as her mouthpiece whenever anything happened, and he was already there, making it as if there effectively were half of all the Primordials in the room.

The gods that had arrived were all unknowns that the Viper didn't care to know but were all representatives of major factions, including different internal tribes of the United Tribes, the Altmar Empire, and many smaller and larger Pantheons. These gods were naturally not at the level of someone like himself, and this had resulted in the room effectively being split into two parts. One where the Primordials, Nature's Attendant, Artemis, and Minaga were, and one where everyone else gathered. As for their objective for coming?

It appeared not even they knew... as the Viper came to learn that most were just there, so their faction felt they were present if anything important did happen. The chances of *something* noteworthy happening when half of the Primordial's meeting had to be high, right?

That's why anything that was said or done caught their attention. Minaga calling out that Jake was done with the Test of Character were the first words said to everyone in over a month, as most gods only directed their conversations toward certain individuals.

"Indeed he is," the Malefic Viper nodded at Minaga's statement. "And his performance was pretty much as expected."

10% was really good for Jake in that one. Jake wasn't particularly suited for the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon, and in all honesty, the Viper didn't put much stock in the place at all. It was a useless trial for someone like Jake. It didn't align well with his Path, and it wasn't like the Test of Character was any indication if one had the mentality to become a god as long as the person got above a certain score. In fact, the Viper remembered that some currently living Godkings only got 5% or even no evaluation back when they did Nevermore.

"His review was pretty harsh, though," Minaga said. "Harsh, but fair."

The Wyrmgod grunted disapprovingly, but before he could say anything, Valdemar spoke up. "If he is done, then what are you waiting for?"

With confusion, the Wyrmgod looked at Valdemar. The Malefic Viper instantly understood as he brought his palm to his face. Yeah, there was no way the Wyrmgod would agree unless-

"Very well," the Wyrmgod smiled in response.

... unless the dragon god was being unbelievably petty because Jake didn't like his dungeon.

Jake stood in the white void and was just about to leave the Challenge Dungeon for good and get out of that horrible place when the notification in front of him suddenly began warping as another sentence was suddenly added on, and he was given a choice.

**Do you wish to exit the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon?**

**No further actions can be taken within this Challenge Dungeon.**

**You can choose to either exit and appear at the Challenge Dungeon entrance or at [Redacted]**

He looked at the changed message for a second, threw a glance at where he was being watched from, and shrugged as he accepted to go to the very exciting place known as [Redacted]. *Eh, sure, what's the worst that can happen?*

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## **Chapter 793: Nevermore: Super Secret Meeting**

Artemis could admit she had been too hasty in her actions when she decided to head toward Nevermore immediately. She at least had the clarity of mind to go and ask Nature's Attendant to come along, knowing he had his C-grade granddaughter currently participating in the C-grade portion of the World Wonder. Yet, somehow, she had forgotten that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his granddaughter were in a party together in the brief timespan between watching the recording and approaching him.

Originally, she had only planned to go and stick close to Nevermore, so she was around once the Chosen of the Viper was done with the World Wonder, as she doubted she could enter and get any information. Trying to learn more about him would be difficult, considering he was the Chosen of a Primordial, but maybe she could get lucky there if she had Nature's Attendant with her.

When she arrived and was told by Nature's Attendant that the Wyrmgod himself had invited them to enter a special viewing area, she got excited... only to find out it wasn't just the Wyrmgod there. Not only was the Malefic Viper present, but even the Wargod Valdemar was there for some reason. Three Primordials gathered in one place was an incredibly rare happening and only really ever took place around peak-level system events.

However, despite this, the “meeting,” if you could even call it that, seemed incredibly casual. Too casual. To the level where it was suspicious. The last time she heard, the Malefic Viper and Valdemar were in conflict due to the rising star Yip of Yore, a god who truly did have the right to claim himself to stand among the other beings at the pinnacle as far as she was concerned.

Yet Artemis saw Valdemar and the Viper interact casually, though there was some tension. No bloodlust, though, meaning they didn’t give off the sense they wanted to kill one another. She didn’t display her surprise, though, but just kept quiet and tried to not attract too much attention while internally cursing her decision to come. There was no doubt in her mind that if other gods saw this scene, it would cause quite an uproar, so she couldn’t help but wonder if bigger plans were at play. Nature’s Attendant also gave her a subtle warning.

*“You may see some things that perplex you, but it would be best to keep it to yourself. In due time, all truths will be revealed, but till then, your thoughts are not to be shared, alright?”* he asked her in a friendly tone that Artemis knew was very much a warning. One she quite frankly didn’t need.

Who the fuck was she to risk messing up some plans or plots that involved several Primordials? She didn’t belong in the room at all, and she knew it. The only one with raw power roughly rivaling her own was Minaga, but comparing the two of them was a laughable endeavor. Minaga had hundreds of clones who were stronger than Artemis, and even if he wasn’t at the level of Primordials, his unique ability made him someone who could stand tall by their side.

Artemis wasn’t. She was weak in comparison. She felt small sitting in a room surrounded by titans of the multiverse, with her own strength still a step away from becoming a Godqueen. Meanwhile, all the other gods around had ascended beyond the circles of divinity.

She had honestly expected to be thrown out at some point but was allowed to stay. A decision she slowly began to regret the more time. Shortly after Nature’s Attendant and she arrived, two more Primordials also joined them. What’s more, they were two of the most famous and influential ones in all of the multiverse due to the utterly massive factions they controlled.

Both the Risen and the Holy Church were more powerful than the Pantheon of Life, and not by a little either. Their two leaders, the Blightfather and Holy Mother, were also absolutely unapproachable beings for someone like her.

It wasn’t getting any better when the Blightfather directly questioned why Artemis was here.

“Since we are talking about how great this reunion is... why is she here?” the Blightfather asked, staring directly at Artemis, making a shiver run down her spine, as



she felt like the god could kill her with a mere thought. Even the life energy within her acted up, meeting a far more powerful polar opposite of itself.

Despite how precarious the situation was, she actually saw this as a chance. In all honesty, while she wanted to figure out more about the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, going to Nevermore was probably overkill. She could always find him after he was done and approach him then; she had just been too hasty in her decision-making.

So, if she took this chance to excuse herself, using the justification that she was showing respect to the Primordial, she could-

"Someone who was allowed to be here, same as you," Nature's Attendant spoke up for her. While Artemis certainly appreciated it, she did scold herself for missing her chance to get the hell out of there.

At least Nature's Attendant rebuttal did make them stop bothering her... except for Minaga, who suddenly skirted over and was a lot more interested in talking to her than any of the Primordials.

"You're here because of Jake, right?" he asked with a sly smirk. "You know... while there were recordings in that information package of yours, I got several times more in my personal stash from when he did my labyrinth. Interested?"

Artemis wanted to reject him and try to attract as little attention as possible... but... she was also curious, and it wasn't like she could just leave now, as that would make Nature's Attendant look bad after standing up for her. Also, when a figure like Minaga was offering, you really shouldn't reject him. Nope, definitely not.

"What do you have?" she asked a bit tentatively as Minaga's smirk turned into a grin.

"Whatever your heart desires..." he said as he turned to telepathy. *"Or, well, the next best thing, as I can't bring Jake himself."* For more chapters visit [novel•fire•net](http://novel•fire•net)

Artemis kept her cool and entirely ignored the last part as she gladly began browsing his lengthy catalog of recordings, though she did notice most of the recordings had some odd names. For some reason, they were filled with expletives complaining about Jake's Bloodline... which only made her all the more interested in seeing them.

Things from there calmed down for a little while, even when a steady influx of other gods began arriving, having been attracted by the five Primordials who had gathered. She couldn't blame them, and it was nice that she wasn't the only god on the weaker side... though she did remain sitting with the non-representative gods even after others arrived.

As weeks of waiting turned to months, Artemis began to focus most of her efforts on her main body, which was training in her divine realm. Everyone present was just waiting for



something to happen as the room filled with gods was eerily silent, most of those who did communicate using telepathy. She also spoke to some people from the other factions, and unsurprisingly, this impromptu gathering turned into a diplomatic meeting of sorts between many large divine factions. Factions that usually wouldn't meet were suddenly gathered in an entirely neutral setting, with nothing better to do, so they made use of this time.

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Nearly two years after she arrived, the silence was broken by Minaga.

"Oh, Jake is done with the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon now!"

Instantly, everyone tuned into their avatars. Artemis found it a bit funny when she saw the momentary confusion on the faces of most gods until they realized who Jake was, and she also noticed how the confusion lingered for many, likely because Minaga used Jake's name and not just his title as the Viper's Chosen.

"Indeed he is," the Malefic Viper responded, everyone now truly perking up.

"His review was pretty harsh, though," Minaga continued. "Harsh, but fair."

More confusion spread in the room, but Artemis instantly understood after having seen all of Minaga's recordings. Recordings that had only made her more curious than ever about Jake. His entire demeanor was odd for a mortal, and he had zero change in behavior after realizing Minaga was a god - the same as with her own image in the Colosseum. For him to give reviews on a Challenge Dungeon was entirely in character, though she did wonder if it was smart to criticize the Wyrmgod. She knew he cared more about the Test of Character than any other Challenge Dungeon, after all.

Valdemar then also spoke up, asking what they were waiting for... only for the Wyrmgod to respond with "very well."

Very well, what?

Artemis wondered what he was up to and what he meant as an odd thought struck her. *No... he can't be serious. That could kill him or cause some sort of permanent damage; surely he wouldn't-*

A teleportation circle appeared off to the side of the large room, the heads of every god whipping over there as a recognizable form appeared a few seconds later. This newcomer stood entirely still as sharp eyes reminiscent of a beast that hid behind a wood-like mask quickly scanned the room. Artemis felt his gaze pause on her for a brief moment before it continued to take in everyone present.

For a mortal to appear in a room filled with dozens of gods, including five Primordials and Nature's Attendant... one would expect him to fall to his knees instantly if he even managed to stay conscious. Even if he did have a Bloodline that made him capable of resisting auras, the sheer accumulated power present should be enough to suppress even that. Also, if he somehow was capable of remaining standing, he should at least kneel out of respect, right?

Perhaps the shock of seeing him just stand there for several seconds was why no one spoke up. After nearly five seconds, Jake raised a hand and scratched the back of his head as he looked perplexed.

"Did I pick the wrong prompt? Wait, I'm not intruding on some super secret meeting or something, right?"

Yeah... Jake was genuinely unsure if he had picked the wrong prompt. Did the system bug out or something, allowing him to arrive in a room full of gods? Well, based on the slight smirk on the dragonkin god's face, who he recognized as the person who had been observing him all throughout his time in Nevermore – meaning he was probably the Wyrmgod – Jake chose to bet on this happening, being entirely purposeful.

As for what purpose? Hell if he knew, he just picked the [redacted] options as it seemed interesting, and he got the feeling that selecting it wouldn't be a bad thing. What his instincts hadn't warned him about was how awkward it would be to suddenly have so many people staring at him at once... but hey, he saw some familiar faces in the crowd, too.

Villy, Nature's Attendant, and Minaga were all people he had met before, while he had kind of met Valdemar and Artemis through his vision using Path of the Heretic-Chosen and, of course, during the Colosseum of Mortals. Artemis naturally being the one he had gotten to know the best during their time in the Colosseum, and based on the odd look she gave him, Jake would put his money on her being fully aware of what her image had done and said.

Anyway, Jake's spontaneous question hung in the air for a few seconds as no one quite seemed to know what to answer. After a bit, the silence was finally broken as a huge laugh echoed through the room. A very familiar laugh Jake had heard within the arena many times both before, during, and after their fights.

Before Jake could react, a figure appeared beside him and threw his arm over Jake's shoulder, though it definitely looked awkward with Valdemar, who was way taller than Jake.

"A secret meeting you're now invited to!" Valdemar yelled as he threw intrigued looks at Jake, almost expecting some kind of response.

“Okay?” Jake just asked, looking at the bearded god as he felt the arm resting on his shoulders, entirely unsure what to do or say. It felt like a mountain was slightly touching him, and at any moment, it could fall down and flatten him into a pancake. But he didn’t really feel any fear as he didn’t feel any intent to kill from the Primordial.

“You’re really okay, huh?” Valdemar muttered, his voice a mix between surprised and happy. “Good! Good! You really are an interesting one! I would have been very disappointed if the one who managed to beat my image turned into a babbling mess just by meeting the real thing!”

“Well, glad to not disappoint, I guess,” Jake muttered, as his mind was preoccupied with considering a lot of other things. He felt the many gods within the room observing him carefully, trying to gauge different things. He felt the barrage of presences wash over him at all times, nobody intentionally trying to suppress him, but all of them nevertheless bearing down on him. It was the natural suppression of grades, and while Jake felt it, he didn’t really “feel” it. He was just aware of it.

What he also felt from all their auras was the surprise when Valdemar said Jake had beaten his image. Nobody said anything, though. Many seemed to now also realize why Valdemar was there, including Jake himself, of course.

“Oh, and thanks for the fight, though I guess it wasn’t actually you,” Jake continued with a heartfelt smile and nod. “It was fun.”

Valdemar’s eyes opened wide for a second as he smiled even wider and began laughing out loud. He continued for a few seconds before he stopped and leaned down. “You do know I want a rematch, right?”

The words were clearly a joke, but Jake smiled and met Valdemar’s eyes. “Maybe later. I should at least become a god first, or it wouldn’t really be any fun, now would it?”

“No, no, it wouldn’t,” Valdemar answered as he nodded, clearly happy with the response. He then turned his gaze toward the Malefic Viper as he raised his voice. “Hey, Vilas. You found yourself quite a nice Chosen, eh?”

“I am not one to complain, though I do raise an issue with you being all buddy-buddy with him. How about you let off a bit and show some basic decorum? As you said, that’s my Chosen, not yours,” the Viper answered in a calm tone. Jake felt the slightly insidious undertone and couldn’t help but notice how he sounded slightly different from usual. More... malefic?

“You’re right; he is your Chosen,” Valdemar said as he let go of Jake and took a step back before throwing the Viper a slightly taunting smile. “A bit odd, isn’t it? That you have a human as your Chosen?”

“I do not remember there being any rules about the races gods can have as Chosen,” the Malefic Viper responded, his tone still calm but with that odd undertone more underlined than before.

“It’s still a bit of a shame, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be better if we both stuck to the usual customs?” Valdemar asked loudly.

The Viper’s smile had disappeared by now, and Valdemar continued as he turned to Jake again. “I know you became that damn snake’s Chosen early on your Path, but wouldn’t it be better to stick with a faction that better represents us as humans?”

Jake was momentarily taken aback, as he assumed Valdemar was doing this invitation as part of some kind of scheme with the Viper and wasn’t serious-

*“I’m not really joking... while you are his Chosen, you would also find a home in Valhal if you so desired,”* Valdemar casually sent Jake telepathically, throwing him for a loop.

... yeah, alright, Jake should probably just reject him publicly right away and-

*“Don’t reject his proposal immediately, but leave your answer ambiguous. Make it look like you are really considering the offer,”* Villy sent telepathically.

Yeah, alright, things were really a mess already, and Jake was seriously reconsidering his decision to go to [Redacted] without properly considering what that could lead to. He felt the many gazes of the gods upon him, many of them filled with interest as the two Primordials were openly arguing with so many gods as witnesses. Again, it was a bloody mess.

What’s more, Jake hadn’t even gotten to Eversmile, who was hiding in the back, dressed up as some beastfolk god.

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## **Chapter 794: Nevermore: Shameless Recruiting Tactics**

Jake had lots of stuff to address for sure and started with the most urgent one. With so many eyes on him, he couldn’t delay answering Valdemar’s bold proposal as he took a deep breath and jumped right into it.

"I am not sure this is the time or place or place for such an important discussion," Jake said, trying to sound neutral to the question.

"But it is a discussion," Valdemar grinned as he patted Jake on the shoulder. "You heard that, Vilas? Do you think this the time and place for such a discussion?"

His tone was very taunting as the Viper scoffed. "Are you seriously blatantly trying to steal my Chosen right under my nose? Kind of pathetic coming for the so-called god of war to fight a battle he should know he can't win."

"I never take fights that I don't have a chance of winning," Valdemar kept grinning as he stayed close to Jake. "My promises won't be empty either. I think we all know your Chosen isn't just some common C-grade but someone valuable regardless of his own power due to his unique abilities and Bloodline, so I won't be cheap. And, honestly, do you think you can support someone like him better than Valhal can? Better than I can?"

Jake was a bit surprised at how articulate Valdemar seemed. Then again... Villy did say that Valdemar wasn't stupid, just very simple. He was a bit like Jake himself in that regard... though the level of his own occasional stupidity was very much still up for discussion.

"Well, isn't this something," the Malefic Viper said with a smile that wasn't really a smile. "My Chosen is not just some mindless warrior swinging around an axe; he is also a skilled alchemist. It is through his alchemy his Path to manipulate Origins was revealed... so let me counter. Do you think you can guide him to be a better alchemist than I can?"

"Odd, the version of your Chosen I saw defeat my image in the Challenge Dungeon didn't look like some weak alchemist. From my point of view, you are sabotaging his Path by making him follow your Legacy. He should walk a path more aligned with his own Origin. A Path Valhal will gladly show him," Valdemar said, crossing his arms. "How about this... someone like him is capable of choosing his own Path, right? Also, what was it you said before that big ceremony you did... oh yeah, that he can make his own decisions with his unique powers and that they only belong to him. Then shouldn't we just let him choose, eh?"

Jake was far from an expert in political stuff, and he had a strong feeling Valdemar wasn't either. With that in mind, he got the impression Valdemar had either been coached or at least given some tips. Maybe by Villy himself, but more likely by Gudrun. If she was talking to his real body while Valdemar focused on this avatar, he could easily relay everything happening within the room.

In fact, Jake was pretty damn certain everything happening in the room was being broadcast to many influential forces spread throughout the multiverse due to the representative gods. Which was part of the reason he had to be kinda careful. He couldn't mess up Villy's plan too much, right?

"I am not some pick-me god, and I find the very notion of having to even try and sell the honor of being my Chosen ridiculous. Being my Chosen is a privilege, not something to be coaxed into. If he is truly so foolish as to reject me as his Patron and give up on my Legacy and the Path he is currently walking with such great success, then maybe he wasn't worthy of being my Chosen to begin with. Not with such utterly questionable judgment," the Malefic Viper said, refusing to engage in the "discussion" anymore.

Valdemar just shook his head while muttering something to himself before looking at Jake, who was just standing there without really saying or doing anything. He was pretty sure that was what he was supposed to do.

"He must be exhausting to deal with, huh?" Valdemar questioned Jake.

Jake was pretty damn sure the question wasn't actually rhetorical, and he had to stop himself from making some silly comment. Instead of saying anything genuine, he answered noncommittally again. "I don't believe I should talk about my personal relationship with my Patron in a room filled with outsiders."

That had to also be considered neutral, right? Damn, where was Miranda when he needed her... actually, it was probably best she wasn't there, as he doubted she would have managed well with a few dozen gods, including a handful of Primordials, staring her down.

"That's fair, that's fair. But, you know, I am sure Carmen would be really happy if you joined us, too. She spoke very highly of you when she became a Runemaiden using my blood, and she even said her successful ritual was partly thanks to you!" Valdemar said with a big smile. "Ah, doesn't that sound nice? Two powerful fellow humans from the same planet under one banner? Could bring you two closer, too."

Valdemar saying this once more got the attention of the room. Jake also understood why after he discussed Runemaidens with Carmen. Based on what he knew, Valdemar had not openly announced a Runemaiden who used his blood and Records had been born before now, much less that she was from the same planet as Jake or that they knew each other.

This was pretty much revealing to the multiverse that Valhal already had existing connections to Jake as a person, ones even predating Jake joining the Order, which gave credence to his claim that Jake could potentially end up joining them and renouncing the Malefic Viper.

Gods weren't the type to whisper among themselves, but Jake was confident many telepathic messages were being exchanged at that moment. The Viper also looked visibly annoyed, as Valdemar looked pleased with himself, awaiting Jake's response - a response he took quite a bit to think about as he was trying to remain as noncommittal as possible... by just straight-up ignoring the proposal.



“Right now, my sole focus is Nevermore and getting a good performance here, including the Challenge Dungeons I have yet to do. I believe it would be best for me to dedicate all my focus and attention to doing this World Wonder over anything else,” Jake answered, not really answering.

Valdemar nodded as he shrugged. “I guess that’s fine. No need to commit to anything here and now that may distract from what’s in front of you. Just know that Valhal still has its halls open for you.”

Jake nodded, happy that one had worked. Valdemar did give up way too easily, making Jake more certain than ever this was all – at least partly – some kind of play he and Villy had planned. Jake said only partly because he had strong feelings that should he agree to the invitation, the Primordial would have gladly dragged Jake back to Valhal with him after Nevermore, even if the Viper complained.

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*That went about as well as it could,* Vilastromoz thought, as Jake and Valdemar did surprisingly well in playing their roles. Anything that had to do with scheming and Valdemar often didn’t go according to plan, much less when it involved both Jake and Valdemar, two people who weren’t known as the most politically apt. Yet things had turned out extremely well, with lots of doubt sown in the minds of the gods present.

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It was a foregone conclusion that even if Yip of Yore himself hadn’t shown up – and definitely wouldn’t – some of the representatives present would be feeding him information on everything that was happening there. In fact, the Viper would bet he had a live view of everything going on. This chapter is updated by ***novel~fire~net***

Valdemar trying to recruit Jake wasn’t overly surprising to many factions, as Jake was ultimately a human, especially not after it was disclosed he had beaten Valdemar’s image in the Colosseum of Mortals, and to Yip, this would serve as further proof of the rift between the Order of the Malefic Viper and Valdemar.

It had to be noted that not much of this had been part of any of the original plans, but things had to be changed due to Jake.

Jake had proven himself both an annoyance and an asset to Yip of Yore’s plans, but also the Viper’s. Originally, Yip wanted his Chosen to defeat Jake in a proxy battle of sorts as part of his story, but that was no longer a feasible method, as the backlash would be bigger than the gains.

Killing Jake would mean removing his unique abilities to manipulate Origins, which would not be seen kindly by many major factions. It wouldn’t necessarily create



enemies, but it would weaken the narrative that Yip was fighting for what was right and that Jake was just some evil follower of the Malefic Viper. So Yip had changed his plans from trying to kill Jake to doing something that would prove even more beneficial to his story:

Turning Jake to the side of justice. Turning him to Yip's side, or at least away from the Viper's. Having his Chosen renounce his Blessing would be a heavy blow to the Viper, especially in the context of the narrative that was being constructed. For the Viper to be so evil that even his own Chosen turned his back on him... surely Yip of Yore was doing the multiverse a favor by putting him down?

However, Yip also knew that personally recruiting Jake directly was out of the question. Ell'Hakan was an enemy of Jake, and their encounter in Nevermore City had only cemented this. That's why Valhal had stepped up to try and snatch Jake away. While it would be better for Yip to get Jake on his side by himself, having Valhal do it was also a good outcome.

Of course, Vilastromoz knew this would never happen.

The Viper would not describe himself as the most trusting person, so he could admit that Jake being locked in when it came to being his Chosen was more of a positive than a negative in his mind. If Valdemar's offer was truly genuine, Vilastromoz couldn't even blame Jake for considering it seriously, especially not if Valdemar went as far as offering Jake to become his Chosen.

While he did trust Jake as much as he could, he also knew that Valhal would suit Jake nicely. Jake loved challenges and fighting, and Valhal would offer that in spades. Far more so than the Order of the Malefic Viper ever could. What's more, Valdemar was a human, so if Jake had his True Blessing over the Viper's, there would be more synergy with their Records.

At least, he thought so... but with Jake, it was genuinely hard to tell. Because there was a genuine chance that the Records of Jake's Bloodline would overpower any other related to his race, making it a moot point.

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Feeling like one thing had been dealt with, Jake turned to another. His gaze pierced through the room toward the very back end, where a Beastfolk man was standing inconspicuously among all the other representatives. It was naturally Eversmile whom Jake had picked out instantly upon entering the room. Jake considered if he should do or say anything, but before he could decide, a voice entered his mind.

*"I do find your ability to recognize me quite troublesome, if very intriguing. However, I would advise against revealing my presence here. Doing so shall bring you no benefits and only serve to hinder me needlessly. It may even impact the plots of your Patron, so*

*reconsider before you make an unwise decision,*” Eversmile’s voice echoed in Jake’s head.

*“Oh? Why are you even hiding in the first place when there are already five other Primordials here?”* Jake asked, not really bothering with the fact he was showing zero levels of respect to a god. *“Are you doing some experiment or something?”*

*“None of that is of your concern,”* Eversmile answered, pretty much confirming to Jake he was definitely up to something. *“Nothing I am doing is detrimental to you or your Patron, so let be what should be left alone. That would be very appreciated.”*

Jake was curious but also feeling petty at the same time. He still remembered how much Eversmile had messed with him during the Tutorial, how he had used William to fuck things up and had even made him come after his family...

*“Well, I appreciate that you wouldn’t appreciate me revealing you. In fact, it makes it quite an appealing choice,”* Jake sent mentally. *“But I guess if you really want to stay hidden that badly... I can do you this favor. Wait, doesn’t that mean you owe me one now?”*

He was fully aware he was just messing with Eversmile now, knowing how the Primordial’s Path worked. Also, if he could somehow make Eversmile owe him a favor, that would totally be worth it. Based on what Villy said, he was very serious about owing favors.

*“You should be aware that is not how karmic debt is formed. There has to be a sufficient balance between the two parties for any debt to form, and you are not powerful enough to enter any kind of agreement with me,”* Eversmile responded calmly.

*“Yet. Not powerful enough yet,”* Jake corrected him.

*“Even if we say that is so, I would suggest not getting too much ahead of yourself. Remember you are only here due to the curiosity of others and who your Patron is, not truly by your own merit. If you wish to speak of karmic debt, then you are far from in a position to make any demand through threats, much less speak of favors. One could also say I am doing you a favor right now by even conversing with you. Or that I allow you to keep living despite the disrespect. I have plenty of cause to take action already, so how about you let off your petty threats? In return, I shall do you the favor of letting you off,”* Eversmile said, his voice still calm but full of warning.

Jake felt an odd pressure and a slight sense of danger that was not at all unambiguous in its message: back off.

*“... anyway, I hope all goes well on your end; I shall be minding my own business,”* Jake responded.

He had fucked around and would very much like to skip the “found out” part.

Their conversation had been relatively long but had, in reality, only taken a few seconds as everything had been said telepathically. There had always been a natural silence after Valdemar had spoken, and only another full second or so after Jake finished talking with Eversmile did someone else speak up.

“Speaking of doing Nevermore, how is little Dina doing? I know my granddaughter isn’t the most experienced quite yet, but I still hope she has proven a valuable party member so far,” Nature’s Attendant asked Jake, changing the topic quite nicely while also advertising he had a close relationship with Jake.

“She is doing great; no complaints from here,” Jake answered with a smile, happy no longer having to consider his words super carefully. He also made sure to not even glance Eversmile’s way anymore. “I hope she is also doing well in her Challenge Dungeons.”

“I am sure she is,” Nature’s Attendant nodded. “Now, while I have you here... how about you come over here and tell me a bit about how she is doing? The stingy Wyrmgod refuses to share anything.”

Jake doubted Nature’s Attendant really just wanted to hear about his granddaughter, but he had no reason to reject a conversation. Especially not considering this was an excuse to talk to Artemis, who was sitting with him.

“That would be my pleasure,” Jake answered as he looked at Valdemar. “Unless..?”

“You go on ahead,” Valdemar waved him off.

Jake nodded as he walked over to Artemis and Nature’s Attendant, the attention of the many gods still on him. As he got over, he saw Nature’s Attendant casually set up a sound isolation barrier for them to talk in peace, something that seemed to annoy quite a few people present, including the Holy Mother, Blightfather, and even Valdemar.

Their dissatisfaction manifested through their presences that weighed down on Jake, Nature’s Attendant, and Artemis. Jake and Nature’s Attendant were fine, but Jake saw Artemis clench her fists, and without even thinking, Jake flared his own presence to cover her.

The pressure on her instantly lessened significantly as Jake’s aura clashed with that of three Primordials... slightly pushing them back to give Artemis breathing room. All of this was done under the gaze of dozens of gods as Jake felt the entire atmosphere in the room change after seeing what he had done.

*I shouldn’t have done that... yep, I definitely should not have done that.*

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## Chapter 795: Nevermore: Aura-Measuring Contest

Sometimes, you just knew you fucked up, and in that moment, Jake knew he had fucked up. Trying to get some petty levels of revenge on Eversmile by getting one over him had already been pushing it, and now Jake had effectively just rebuffed three presences of Primordials, as well as those of dozens of other gods, entirely on accident.

Instantly, Nature's Attendant read the mood of the room and dispelled his soundproofing barrier, giving Jake the chance to apologize as he scratched the back of his head. "Ah, sorry about that; I reacted without really thinking."

Yeah, that also wasn't the best thing to say, as he had just told everyone he had effortlessly rebuffed them entirely accidentally. Jake was entirely expecting some kind of negative response, but then he saw that Villy was just smiling as he shook his head, seemingly not bothered at all. So, it probably wasn't that bad, right?

The Holy Mother just retracted her own presence without saying anything besides giving Jake an inquisitive look, Valdemar temporarily doing the same as the Blightfather chose to speak up.

"I am beginning to get a better understanding of that power of yours after feeling it myself, especially after meeting and Blessing your friend from before the integration of the ninety-third universe. I was intrigued by how he, a mere E-grade at the time, managed to hold up so well before me, but if he was baptized by constant exposure to your presence, that would certainly be an explanation," the Blightfather nodded with comprehension. "Quite a multi-faceted Bloodline you got there. If you ever feel like visiting the Ghostlands, you would certainly be more than welcome. You could maybe even go with that friend of yours?"

His words were both praise and sharing the fact the Risen also had some level of personal connection to Jake while also deciding to once more reiterate all Jake could do was rooted in his Bloodline. Along with that, he also publicly shared an aspect of Jake's Bloodline he didn't really think was that much of a secret, that being his ability to also increase other's resistances through sheer exposure. Valdemar had kind of hinted at it, but the Blightfather pretty much stated it outright.

The final part – the invitation – was the only thing Jake would answer directly to. "I thank the Blightfather for his words, and I am certain I will visit the heartlands of the Risen one day."

It wasn't a lie, either. Jake would probably end up visiting most of the places of note throughout his hopefully eternal life, and the Ghostlands was definitely one such place. He just didn't give any timeline as to when he would visit. It could be in a few decades or a few million years.

Seemingly thinking this answer was good enough, the Blightfather also retracted his aura, having said his piece. Jake thought his mess-up was finally over, only for him to realize it had only truly begun.

"You know, ever since seeing that battle in the Challenge Dungeon, ya got me curious about something," Valdemar said in a loud tone as he stepped slightly toward Jake with a massive grin. "Prepare yourself!"

Jake barely had any time to react as Valdemar's presence came back with full force. Instinctively, he once more reacted as his own flared to meet the challenge, the two auras clashing in an invisible battle. Instantly, Valdemar's was getting pushed back again until he opened his arm wide, and the Primordial's fighting spirit was triggered.

His eyes began to glow golden as a slightly golden luster appeared around his body. He was not using any energy, but the concepts of his Transcendence still bled into his presence as it pushed back at Jake's with indomitable strength.

It was like an unstoppable force, capable of crushing anything in its path, and for the first time ever... Jake felt his presence getting pushed back as pressure descended upon him. He felt like a mountain was crushing down on him as his own presence shrank, Jake gritting his teeth as this reminded him of what had happened inside of the Colosseum.

And like the Colosseum, Jake did not back down as he retaliated in force.

The two auras clashed as an invisible battle took place. Valdemar was slightly pushed back by Jake's release but stabilized just as fast, stopping Jake's advance. Their two auras kept battling as an equilibrium was soon established, neither side capable of gaining any ground as each of their auras extended halfway to the other party.

Jake was both astonished and excited. He was equally matching Valdemar in a pure battle of presences, though if Valdemar decided to pour in just a smidgen of energy, Jake would instantly be crushed. However, the mere fact their two auras were equal was more than enough to prove one thing to everyone in the room:

His Bloodline matched the quality of Valdemar's Transcendence. A Transcendence many recognized as potentially the most powerful one in the entire multiverse. Some of the gods present even failed to hold their poker faces as they displayed genuine surprise at the impromptu duel of auras.

However, things weren't over yet.

“Hah!” Valdemar laughed loudly as he took another step forward, his body exploding in golden light, enveloping the entire room. His aura spiked several degrees as it washed over everyone, Jake included. With a grin, Jake took a step toward Valdemar as he met the challenge, his heart beating with excitement.

### **Thump!**

A shockwave erupted from his own body as their two auras clashed one final time before both faded. The only two people standing in the room were Jake and Valdemar, as everyone else was either sitting down... or looked to be in quite a bad situation.

This was when he also understood why the poker faces of some gods had dropped... their clash in auras had put them quite on edge, many of them unable to take it. Even Eversmile was acting like he had been hit by a bus as he was kneeling while breathing heavily.

Needless to say, none of the Primordials, Minaga, or Nature’s Attendant had been affected. This didn’t surprise anyone... but Artemis was also fine, most assuming she had been protected by Nature’s Attendant somehow.

“Good! Good!” Valdemar said, looking extremely satisfied. “I like you more and more!”

“Likewise,” Jake smiled, having enjoyed the clash of auras more than he thought he would. It wasn’t like an actual fight, but it was a challenge nevertheless. A kind he had never had before, considering there was no one else who could match his presence in pure quality.

The atmosphere in the room calmed down as Valdemar looked approvingly at Jake for a few seconds before speaking.

“Eh, you should go talk to that old druid and your fellow hunter; I think you kept them waiting long enough,” Valdemar waved him off as he walked back to the Primordials, yelling behind him. “Oh, and do come visit Valhal at some time! Our beer is better than the Order’s, too!”

Jake smiled but neglected to answer. He didn’t have to be told twice to go and talk to the two from the Pantheon of Life as he returned to sit down with the Nature’s Attendant and Artemis on a sofa set. The old druid gave Jake a very interested look and an approving smile as he sat down. The isolation barrier was quickly summoned again, making Jake feel like he could talk without as much of a filter or having to consider that everything was being recorded and openly broadcasted.

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"This sure is quite the gathering of gods, huh," Jake muttered as something had been bothering him for a while. "Why exactly are there even so many here? Valdemar, I could understand, but what's up with the dozens of gods who are seemingly just here as observers?"

"It's because of you," Nature's Attendant answered. "At least partly. You made Valdemar come here, getting the attention of other Primordials, who then followed suit. With five gathered in one place, it is only natural it will attract the attention of most forces. And I am certain many are happy they came, as the show you put on just now with the Viper and the Wargod will have made the trip more than worth it."

Jake nodded, considering his words for a bit. Yeah, that probably made sense. If a large group of the top world leaders on Earth before the system decided to have a meeting, you could bet your ass journalists and other interested parties would also show up to see what was up. Even their casual interactions would be gossip at worst and groundbreaking news at best. Plus, something did happen here. At least, it looked like it had. Two top world leaders had just gotten into a scuffle, after all, and were battling over a "resource." The resource in question being Jake in this case.

"Show?" Artemis asked, looking confused, before she quickly gathered herself, seeming a bit out of it in general. She looked at Jake and lowered her head a bit. "No, wait. Before anything else, I should thank you for just now. I apologize if defending me leads to any trouble down the line."

"No worries, no worries," Jake waved off her concern. "I should be the one thanking you for what happened in the Colosseum of Mortals. Well, thanking your image, I guess, though based on Valdemar just now, there shouldn't be that massive of a difference. Either way, I enjoyed the time together in there immensely."

Artemis was taken aback at his answer as the tip of her elven ears turned slightly red. "I... I don't believe there is anything you need to be thanking me for." New NOVEL chapters are published on *novel~fire~net*

"Oh, but there definitely is," Jake said with a big nod as he smiled at her. "I'm talking about the archery training, of course. Wait, what were you thinking about?"

It took her a few seconds before her eyes narrowed. "You... no, never mind. Disregarding that, my image sure must have looked like an idiot with her whole speech about how you wouldn't even be able to stand tall in front of the real me."

"Eh, I found it more cute than dumb," Jake shrugged. "It's not like that wouldn't be the case if I was pretty much anyone else. I just happen to deal with presences quite well compared to most everyone else."

"That's an understatement," Artemis scoffed. "Also, what was that thing about a show you talked about earlier?"



Jake had purposefully avoided answering this one as he genuinely wasn't sure if he should or could give a response without jeopardizing anything. Unsure, he looked at Nature's Attendant, who seemed to be "in" on what was happening, as the old druid responded promptly.

*"I will make sure she can't leak anything even if she wants to. I set up this barrier with the expectation we would be talking about things best left unshared to the masses, so no worries,"* Nature's Attendant sent telepathically, sounding only slightly scary as he did so.

Artemis noticed Jake and Nature's Attendant exchanged glances as she looked confused about what was happening. Jake finally sighed as he leaned back on the couch and looked at Artemis.

"This is quite a big secret that has multiversal implications, so keep it under wraps, okay?" he asked in a serious tone.

"Not sure I want to know now if it can get me in trouble..." Artemis muttered.

"Too late!" Jake grinned. "Anyway, the gist of it is that the entire conflict between the Order of the Malefic Viper and Valhal is mostly fabricated. That entire thing just now was also apparently just part of this bigger plot that I think is ultimately pointed at Yip of Yore. As for what it hopes to accomplish and the entire scope of the thing... I have no bloody idea. Nature's Attendant probably knows more there."

"And I have been very expressly told to not inform you of more," Nature's Attendant continued. "As your lack of knowledge makes you a better catalyst of chaos to introduce more uncertainty into this entire matter."

"So there you have it," Jake said, giving Artemis a beaming smile. "Just a plot involving a bunch of Primordials and a good segment of the peak existence of the multiverse. Kind of exciting, isn't it?"

Artemis stared at Jake and Nature's Attendant for a while as she sighed. "And I guess if I share anything with anyone, I will be killed?"

"No, of course not, what a silly notion," Nature's Attendant said, shaking his head before smiling teasingly. "You will be killed before you are able to share anything."

The wood elf formerly known as the Lord of the Hunt just held her head and leaned forward. "I'll just act like I never heard anything. Yeah, that's probably best."

"If it's any comfort, I try to do the same, but I keep getting dragged back into things," Jake shrugged. "This entire scheming thing is definitely way above my pay grade."

"It sure would be easier if they could just fight it out and not make things so complicated," Artemis sighed. "That's why the nature's way is so much better. Predators hunt prey, and prey sometimes kills the predator in return."

"Nature also has natural schemers," Nature's Attendant said. "Plants or fungi who lay hidden for long, slowly growing in power. Predators stalk their prey for long periods to discover where the rest of their packs are. Beasts who take the shape of others mix into groups, only to eat them from within. But yes, I do agree that schemes like this are not aligned with the Paths of hunters like you two. You should still be able to take part in schemes when it benefit you, though. It doesn't mean you have to initiate them; just be capable of performing as part of one."

"Is this you low-key calling me out for being bad at playing my role?" Jake asked.

"No, I believe you played it extremely well. No one understands you, so you cannot truly act out of character as you have no established character. Plus, there is a high chance people assume any mistakes you make to be entirely deliberate, considering you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper," Nature's Attendant shook his head.

"I definitely didn't make any mistakes," Jake nodded.

"Bullshit," Artemis scoffed. "You constantly act without thinking and make needlessly rash decisions too quickly. Just from the recording I saw from the Colosseum, your reliance on instincts in battle bleeds into your way of acting outside of fighting constantly."

"You're saying that as if it's a bad thing," Jake smiled.

"I didn't say it necessarily was. Not most of the time," Artemis shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with living according to your instincts."

"Glad we agree on that," Jake said, throwing her a look.

Artemis sighed as Nature's Attendant chuckled slightly.

However, before any of them could say anything more, the soundproofing barrier around them cracked, and a second later, disappeared entirely, Jake feeling the energy of the Wyrmgod... no, the energy of Nevermore itself tearing it away.

"Considering you are a Nevermore Attendee, I will not bend the rules further. I also believe it would be unwise of you to waste more time here than necessary if you wish to continue competing on the Leaderboards," the Wyrmgod spoke, nicely telling Jake to leave.

Jake took the hint as he nodded. "Good point. Let me get out of here; I do have a few more Challenge Dungeons waiting, after all."

The Wyrmgod nodded as a teleportation circle appeared under Jake. However, just before he got whisked away, he heard several voices echo out in his head.

*“See you when you do my super exciting labyrinth that you surely won’t ruin all the fun of!”* Minaga said.

*“Acceptable performance here, but now that you’ve shown yourself off so much in front of your little girlfriend, you better do well, or I am sure she and everyone else will be very disappointed,”* Villy said teasingly.

And finally, the voice of the “little girlfriend” in question, Artemis.

*“I will be waiting for when you come out of Nevermore to... discuss more private matters further. Good luck!”*

After Jake had left, Valdemar was back sitting with the other Primordials and Minaga, a big smile still on his lips. The Viper had already set up a sound isolation barrier, making sure none but they could hear the conversation to come.

“What brings such a big smile to your face?” the Holy Mother asked after a bit, seeing as Valdemar hadn’t stopped grinning even after Jake was gone.

“He is just happy another strong human has emerged,” the Blightfather waved her off. “Not that I would blame him. He is quite an interesting specimen.”

“Heh... you really didn’t notice?” Valdemar asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Notice what?” the Viper asked, frowning.

“That I lost,” Valdemar said, clenching his fists as the other Primordials looked confused at him, making the god of war elaborate.

“Our auras may have seemed equal... but he was protecting that gal all throughout, not allowing a single bit of my aura to reach her, no matter how hard I tried.”

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## Chapter 796: Nevermore: Planning a New Approach

Jake was teleported out of the godly meeting and appeared in front of the Challenge Dungeons like nothing had happened. He couldn’t help but smile a bit to himself after

what had just transpired, finding the entire ordeal quite amusing. It was also really nice to see Artemis again.

He couldn't lie... there was something about her divine aura that was just fundamentally appealing. Jake hadn't been able to hold himself back from teasing her a little, and based on her responses, he hadn't offended her too much. In fact, he was pretty sure he had quite an interesting meet-up planned for after Nevermore.

Shaking his head, Jake tried to refocus on the task in front of him. He still had to finish Nevermore before anything else could happen, and he got the feeling that while he found Artemis' divine aura appealing, she would very much like it if he performed extraordinarily well in the World Wonder. At least he was telling himself this because who didn't want a bit of external motivation along with the internal one? Either way, Jake stopped dallying as he thought about the next dungeon to enter as a notification popped up in front of him.

***\*You have successfully taken part in a meeting between gods standing at the apex of the multiverse without compromising on your Path as a Heretic-Chosen. Instead, you have further proven yourself capable of standing tall even when confronted by the most powerful gods, acting far above your station. All while performing your duties as a Chosen and acting according to your Patron's will – A new feat has been accomplished. Bonus experience earned\****

Jake stared at the notification for a while, quite frankly having forgotten he could even get these. Sure, he had gotten one when he made William turn away from Eversmile and even when doing other heretic and Chosen stuff, but he pretty much only leveled his profession using alchemy normally, making it easy to forget this was a thing.

He hadn't really expected anything out of doing this secret god meeting outside of meeting some gods... and looking at the following notifications, he definitely hadn't expected the level of rewards to be so high.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 252 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 259 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points\****

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***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 254 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points\****

...

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 257 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points\****

8 fucking levels from just meeting a bunch of gods in some casual get-together? Wasn't that wholly too much for something so completely non-extraordinary? Jake hadn't done anything super special in his own mind and had acted just like he had when interacting with others... which was maybe the reason he had gotten this "feat."

This was Jake's first time doing it in a public setting and the first time for the system to truly recognize it. For anyone that wasn't Jake, just being able to exist in that meeting would have been an extraordinary feat in itself, while Jake had even talked to them and gotten into a metaphorical dick-measuring contest with a Primordial. All in all, he had entered the meeting, acting not just as one of the random gods there but as a being standing on par with the Primordials.

As Jake considered the matter more, he also quickly concluded this wasn't replicable and some secret super-fast leveling exploit. He could go back to the meeting again, and it wouldn't really reward him as he wouldn't "accomplish" anything in the eyes of the system. These feats would only give massive rewards the first time he did something. Jake did believe that if he continued to attend meetings and continued to show off, he would be able to get more levels out of it. He would also make a lot of enemies and feel wholly uncomfortable doing it, so it wasn't going to happen, but as a Heretic-Chosen, this was a legitimate way to level.

He also guessed that one reason why the experience gained was so high was due to how little he did as a Heretic-Chosen and how much he did as a pure alchemist. Jake, doing something he rarely did, was probably rewarded extra by the system, a bit like how he got more experience from working on transmutations after making potions for a long time. At least, that is what he guessed as he shook his head and decided to move on with what truly mattered.

Getting 8 random levels was definitely nice, but it didn't really change anything, and he still had to focus on the Challenge Dungeons to come. The Test of Character Challenge Dungeon had been chosen purely as a way to recover from the Colosseum of Mortals, and it honestly had been the one he wanted to do the least and the one he guessed he would do worst at.

This left three others that he all thought were a lot more interesting. This was despite Jake not truly knowing what they were about, just him relying on his own guesses and assumptions.

House of the Architect made Jake guess it had something to do with energy control or something like that. Maybe something with imagination and your ability to make up and design new things, or if he got really lucky, a Challenge Dungeon that was similar to his Puzzle Box from the Seeker, where he had to fix and work on mana constructs? Or maybe it was about creating physical structures where he could maybe cheat with his

arcane affinity? Doubtful, but hey, maybe. No matter the case, Jake felt pretty good about this one.

Endless Journey was a bit of a weird one, but he took a shot in the dark that it wasn't about riding some weirdly scary dog-looking dragon through the sky as if he was taking part in some neverending story that wasn't truly endless. There was a good chance it had to do with traveling, though. Maybe some sort of endurance run? A set of traps for one to overcome? Maybe a story where you got chased by something or someone? There were many possibilities, but assuming it had to do with journeying around, Jake felt confident.

Finally, there was Minaga's Endless Labyrinth. Jake didn't believe many comments had to be made about this one. Minaga's Labyrinth on the prior floors had been a piece of cake for Jake, and he looked forward to utterly breaking the poor Unique Lifeform's dungeon while listening to his ever-increasing complaints about how much of a cheat Jake was. Needless to say, Jake definitely felt the most confident about getting a good score in this one.

All of them were valid options, and Jake could do them in any order. All would be a pick-me-up after the horrible Test of Character, too.

Now the question just was... which one should he do first?

While flying to Firebound Peak, the red dragon Albaromoz couldn't help but sigh at how his life had changed. How he had gone from being a diplomat and teacher at the Order of the Malefic Viper to... this.

Stolen novel; please report.

Albaromoz felt like the latest period of his life had only really revolved around one thing. Or, more accurately, one person. How could he have known that the fateful day he talked to a C-grade who participated in his lesson on Soulflames and made Albaromoz suspect he had a Bloodline would lead to all this?

At first, it had just been a simple mission to try to recruit him into the Emberflight clan. Nothing complicated that he, as an A-grade, hadn't done many times before. It turned out to be a bit more complicated due to some unknown backer, but it wasn't any big issue, right? Wrong.

They couldn't find out who the backer was, and it quickly became clear why as the young Bloodline Patriarch was revealed to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. A figure even he, as an A-grade, couldn't casually approach.

And what's more, he was far from a passive Chosen who just trained and did alchemy. Instead, he seemed to create chaos and "happenings" wherever he got involved. Ones involving the Dragonflights, too.

A great example of this chaos he could create was the entire ordeal with the Azure Dragonflight – also known as the Azureflight. Albaromoz wasn't sure about the details; he just knew that an Azure Dragonkin blessed by the Venerated Azure Dragon had attempted to get close to a comrade of the Malefic Viper's Chosen and somehow ended up offending the Malefic Viper himself, making the Primordial personally remove his arm.

This hadn't led to anything back then, as no one knew the Bloodline Patriarch was the Chosen until after the Chosen ceremony was over. However, after, every faction dug up what they could on the Chosen, and through that, the Emberflight's name was mentioned. Albaromoz was mentioned. Something that caught the interest of all the other Dragonflights.

Albaromoz had after the ceremony swiftly been called into a meeting with the Patriarch of the Azureflight himself present. As the person from the Dragonflights who had made contact with and talked with the Malefic Viper's Chosen first, Albaromoz had become the go-to person if anyone had questions. As he had interacted with the Chosen before he revealed his identity, many believed that Albaromoz had known him better than pretty much any other person among the nine Dragonflights. Helen had also been called in for many things but had quickly been dismissed as all her meetings had been under the oversight of Albaromoz, making him the go-to. She also still had to focus on her personal growth and had many other jobs, while Albaromoz had far more time as an A-grade.

This pestering to know more hadn't stopped. In fact, it had only gotten worse as other Dragonflights also wanted to know more about him. The Azureflight was just the beginning as more and more got involved. Especially his ability to manipulate Origins caught the attention of many high-ranking beings, as plans were slowly being formulated behind the scenes to try and get their hands on this ability one way or another. This had made him a busy dragon until, luckily, the Chosen went to Nevermore.

Albaromoz believed this would give him a reprieve, at least for a while. Sure, he would likely perform incredibly well in the World Wonder and gain much renown, but nothing chaotic would happen that required Albaromoz to be called to a meeting, right?

...right?

"Patron Fireplume," Albaromoz kneeled deeply as he arrived at Firebound Peak and entered the Dragon Cave of the Grand Elder of the Emberflight who resided there. While kneeling, he also regarded the other figures who had appeared as projections in the cave. "Grand Elders."

"Albaromoz," Grand Elder Fireplume spoke. "Have you been following recent happenings in Nevermore?"



He got a bad feeling before he answered honestly. “No, I do not believe I have heard anything out of the ordinary.”

“Hm, so it hasn’t spread amongst the mortals yet,” another Grand Elder spoke.

“Perhaps best it is kept that way,” a third voiced their opinion.

“I concur,” a fourth chimed in.

Albaromoz was confused as he quickly pieced together that they discussed something only gods knew about. So why was he there? There were a few options, but considering the mention of Nevermore, there really only be one explanation.

“Child,” the second Grand Elder spoke up again. “You were the first to identify the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his Bloodline, correct?”

“Yes,” he answered, getting confirmed what he already knew. Who else could it be but the Chosen.

“Before he was revealed as a Chosen, how receptive would you estimate he was to the contact we made?” a fifth Grand Elder asked. “I am referring specifically to his interactions with Helenstromoz.”

Albaromoz was a bit confused, as he felt like he had answered this before, and he quickly shook his head. “He seemed neither positive nor negative, just as if he preferred as little interference with his life and Path as possible. His level of interest in Helenstromoz was also low. Moreover, recently, she has begun to get closer to the Malefic Dragonkin called Draskil, who carries a Divine Blessing of the Malefic One. This Malefic Dragonkin is also on friendly terms with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, to the level where they may even be considered friends.”

“I see,” the Grand Elder responded disappointedly. “Do you deem it plausible he will show interest in any other attempts to form a closer relationship with him?”

“Are you asking about deploying honeypots?” Albaromoz asked.

“Potentially, yes,” he continued. “Would it be worth it to try and appeal to him through talented women and men?”

“I do not believe so, no,” Albaromoz shook his head. “In fact, I fear it may have the opposite effect of what we intend.”

“A shame,” the Grand Elder sighed.

“If... if I may, could I know what this is all about? The last time, we agreed upon holding back from trying to reel him in and keeping a respectful distance? To try and assure that

even if we do not better our relationship with him, we at least keep it neutral until he matures more?”

This was far from his first meeting, which other Grand Elders than his Patron attended, though this one was where most were present. When it came to the question about waiting for him to mature, it was something they had discussed many times prior.

As a C-grade, the Chosen had a long way to go on his Path, and many things could go wrong along the way. He could die to any number of incidents, somehow get stuck in his Path, begin to fall behind his peers, and lose the interest and Blessing of the Malefic One, or a myriad of other things. All of this is to say he was still very young, and his situation was volatile.

This was the primary reason the Dragonflights had all agreed to their neutral and passive approach. It had become clear that obtaining the Bloodline in early grades wasn't going to happen, and investing heavily in making friends with a C-grade was rarely worth it.

If the Chosen ended up dying, the Dragonflights would lose nothing but an opportunity, while should he manage to step into the realm of the truly powerful, it wouldn't be too late to approach him then. The Emberflight firmly believed they had a good shot at forming a friendly relationship with him if they worked on their albeit feeble connection through Helenstromoz and Albaromoz, even if they waited a few grades. At least they did before.

“Things have changed due to recent happenings in Nevermore,” the Fireplume Grand Elder said with a sigh. “A gathering of powerful beings is currently taking place in Nevermore right at this moment. It includes five Primordials, Nature's Attendant, and dozens of representatives from factions, including the Draconic Accords.”

Albaromoz nodded, this being the first time he heard of something this monumental taking place. He just had a hard time seeing how that related to the Chosen of the-

“And less than an hour ago, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was also part of this meeting.”

“What?” Albaromoz exclaimed before quickly gathering himself and bowing his head even deeper. “I apologize; I was simply taken aback.”

None of the Grand Elders seemed to care as the Fireplume Grand Elder continued to explain what had happened. Albaromoz's eyes only got bigger and bigger as everything was disclosed to him, including the fact he had directly clashed his aura with that of the God of War.

Albaromoz soon understood... sentiment had changed. Remaining entirely passive was no longer an option, as many other factions would likely try to get in his good graces now.

“When the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had the... incident with the Azureflight prodigy, he was with some people, correct?” the Fireplume Grand Elder asked.

Instantly, he understood. “Yes, he was. From our investigations, he appeared closest to his fellow humans and was originally invited there by a snakekin named Scarlett, who also carries a Blessing from the Malefic Viper.”

If they couldn’t form a connection directly with the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, they would do the next best thing. They would get close to someone who already had a connection to the Chosen, and Albaromoz already knew who they should approach.

The Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake named Scarlett was a perfect target because few knew she had such a deep relation to the Chosen. At least they hoped it was deep... hoped enough for them to gamble on it as the seventeen Grand Elders present began discussing their approach.

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## Chapter 797: Nevermore: Minaga's Nightmare Begins

Jake considered what Challenge Dungeon he would do for all of five minutes until he decided to just go with the one he felt the most confident about. It was also the one he thought would be the most fun and familiar.

Ultimately, he had to do all of them, and as he still felt a bit groggy after having his character tested, he wanted to do one he believed would be interesting. Maybe it would not be super challenging, but he firmly believed there would be some level of challenge, especially the further he moved in.

During the first part, most of the entertainment definitely would have to come from Minaga. Jake genuinely hoped the Unique Lifeform would be commenting again and complaining about Jake. If not, it probably would get a bit dull during the early parts of his labyrinth.

Having only arrived outside of the Challenge Dungeon entrances for five minutes, Jake walked straight to the entrance of Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth and placed his hand on

the massive gateway. Without further ado, he accepted the prompt to enter as his vision went dark, Jake ready to conquer and utterly demolish Minaga's grand creation.

In a certain meeting room filled with gods, Minaga let out a massive groan as he saw Jake enter his dungeon.

"Bloody hell, he just had to go for mine right now, didn't he?" Minaga grumbled. "This is on purpose, right? He is trying to bully me after showing off here, isn't he? Yep, everything he has done was definitely a personal attack on me to throw me off my mental game."

"I am impressed you think Jake would ever plan that far ahead," the Viper commented.

The Wyrmgod had already isolated the area with the Primordials, Minaga, Nature's Attendant, and Artemis, making them the only ones capable of hearing the conversation, likely in preparation for what was to come next.

"Well, if he can attack me like that, I should definitely strike back in kind!" Minaga huffed while ignoring the Viper's comment as he waved his hand. A screen appeared before all of them, not just the Viper and the Wyrmgod, as the Unique Lifeform grinned and threw Artemis a look.

"Let's have this entire Challenge Dungeon be a live performance so you can all see how unfair he is!" he said, hiding a smile as he saw the cute god from the Pantheon of Life lean a bit forward while trying to remain dignified and hide her interest.

"You just want to have an audience to vent to during this, don't you?" the Wyrmgod questioned in a deadpan tone. Find the newest release on [novel✕fire✕net](#)

"Well, duh?" Minaga said. "If I have to suffer, it should at least be entertaining to the rest of you and give me more people to complain to. Now sit back and see injustice and unfairness personified."

Jake opened his eyes in a very familiar hall. It was a perfect replica of the one he and his party had entered the first time they arrived at Minaga's Labyrinth in the regular part of Nevermore. And just like that time, a familiar figure also teleported into the room, appearing on a central platform.

Light filled the room as music began playing, but Minaga quickly clapped his hands once, making it all stop. The room darkened as Minaga just sighed. "Oh boy, here we go again..."

Right as he said that, a system message was triggered and popped up in front of Jake.

**Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!**

**You have entered Minaga's Endless Labyrinth. An endless maze that extends forever until you can no longer keep going lies before you, ready for you to explore, the entire labyrinth split into Labyrinth Sections to conquer one by one.**

**These Labyrinth Sections will each serve as separate challenges, and passing each will trigger a checkpoint. Some checkpoints will allow you to rest and recover for a while before continuing on your journey.**

**Each Labyrinth Section has a time limit that will begin upon entering a section. Your goal is to navigate your way through each section as quickly and safely as possible while overcoming foes, traps, and other challenges along the way. The further you progress in the Endless Labyrinth, the more challenging it shall become.**

**During the Endless Labyrinth, the magnanimous Minaga has taken pity and granted you five attempts in case you should fail any Labyrinth Sections, allowing you to retry them should you run out of time or meet an unfortunate - yet expected - early end. The Labyrinth Section's layout will not change even after an attempt has been expended, but all traps, creatures, and other such challenges will be reset.**

**Minaga wishes you luck. For if you wish to challenge his Endless Labyrinth, you will sorely need it.**

**Objective: Complete as many Labyrinth Sections as possible.**

**Current objective: Complete Labyrinth Section 1.**

**Attempts remaining: 5**

Jake read the lengthy description as he quickly got the gist of it. It was pretty much exactly as he had expected it to be. It was just an endless string of "floors" that Jake had to complete as quickly as possible, hopefully doing as many as humanly possible.

No, better than humanly possible. Jakely possible!

"You done reading it all?" Minaga asked before Jake even had time to consider the whole message.

"I get it. Not like this is that complicated or different from the prior floors," Jake shrugged as he threw the Unique Lifeform a teasing smile. "Also, I must thank thee, oh-so magnanimous Minaga. To bless the lowly me with five attempts, your kindness is truly unrivaled."

Minaga looked at him for a bit before crossing his arms. "I am going to broadcast this to everyone live, so you better not be a bully, or everyone will come to learn how rude you are."

"Eh, there's not that many watching," Jake said, shaking his head. "I guess you're only showing it to a select few and not all the representatives present."

"Maybe I'm recording it and will show them later," Minaga pointed out.

"I guess you could do that," Jake nodded as he smiled. "I must admit, I hadn't taken you to be that kind of guy. You sure are full of surprises."

"... I'm not going to take that bait, so you may as we--"

"Who would have thought Minaga had a humiliation fetish? Truly an astonishing discovery."

"I am beginning to question my decision to broadcast this live," Minaga muttered to himself as he got a bit more serious. "Anyway, let's just get this started, alright? While I am not going to disagree that you have a huge advantage in my Challenge Dungeon, you shouldn't think it will be a complete cakewalk. The difficulty scales infinitely, and you will reach your limit at some point."

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"I shall keep that in mind," Jake nodded, pretty much getting told what he already assumed. "I am looking forward to seeing what interesting things you cooked up in your Challenge Dungeon."

"Then let's get started. I am obligated to say this, so good luck! And more importantly, try and have fun!"

With those words, Minaga teleported away as the massive door behind him began opening. Out came the special fog Jake had seen so many times before. The one that limited Perception and how fast you could move within it while also fucking up divination magic and many other schools and affinities. Of course, what it didn't fuck up was Jake's sphere.

Right as the system message telling him the Challenge Dungeon had truly begun appeared, Jake closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception.

**You have entered Labyrinth Section 1 of Minaga's Endless Labyrinth.**

**Time Remaining: 9 days, 23:59:59**

Jake opened his eyes again with a mental map before him. The first Labyrinth Section was pretty large, extending nearly one hundred kilometers into the distance, with a classic maze-like design. A super classic design, in fact, as one could technically beat it by just continuously following the left or right wall until one reached the end.

Heck, based on what Jake saw, the first section could easily be beaten by doing just that and walking at a brisk pace. Of course, Jake wasn't going to do that as he bent his knees and smiled a bit to himself as he shot forward into the first Labyrinth Section.

There weren't even any enemies or traps in this first section. It was just a pure maze and, quite frankly, kind of boring. Luckily, there was one thing present to not make it entirely mind-numbing.

**“Oh great, he just charges right in as if he already knows where to go... oh wait, he probably does... yay...”**

Jake smiled to himself as he navigated through the shortest path toward the end, not slowing down for a single second or even taking his time to respond to Minaga's very exciting commentary throughout. Though, to be fair, rather than commentary, it was more just Minaga venting in a passive-aggressive tone.

**“How exciting, will he go down the wrong path!? No, of course, he's not, how silly of me.... Is it left or right at the next... right, it was right, yeah... yeah, good job. Halfway already, huh? Nearly there... and... congratulations for finishing the first section!”**

Reaching a giant double-sided door, Jake quickly touched it as a notification popped up in front of him, and the door began to open. Through his sphere, he also saw that the next part of the Endless Labyrinth simply manifested behind the door, popping into existence all at once.

**Labyrinth Section 1 clear time: 1:17:42**

“Damn, it still took me over an hour, huh?” Jake said. “Longer than expected for sure... then again, the maze was just long, not hard.”

**“... screw you and keep moving. The timer for section two already started.”**

Grinning, Jake shrugged as he saw that was indeed the case. He had just been too focused on the clear time to really notice it.

**You have entered Labyrinth Section 2 of Minaga's Endless Labyrinth.**

**Time Remaining: 9 days, 8:59:52**



“Time allocated is going down fast,” Jake commented, and he released another Pulse of Perception. “But the size of the section is about the same. Say, can you give a scoop on the average number of sections cleared?”

**“Four million, four-hundred-twenty thousand and sixty-nine, so if you don’t at least do that many, you suck,”** Minaga said, clearly being entirely truthful and not at all salty over Jake casually using Pulse to cheese his Challenge Dungeon.

“Damn, that’s sure a lot. Better get going, then,” Jake smiled in response as he released another pulse and headed into the second section. This one had a few traps added into the mix, but it was still pretty straightforward. So, the result also didn’t come as a surprise.

**Labyrinth Section 2 clear time: 1:12:30**

“Better than last time,” Jake said as he touched the second door.

**“It will get harder, okay? I promise. Just... it may take a bit, alright?”** Minaga said with exasperation. **“So keep keeping on and stuff...”**

Jake didn’t need to be told twice as he proceeded to have some more fun in a Challenge Dungeon that felt the exact opposite of the Test of Character one. In the Test of Character, Jake had no idea what to do or where to go at any point. It was just an exercise in confusion and frustration as you figured out what the hell the damn dungeon wanted you to do.

Meanwhile, Minaga’s Labyrinth was as straightforward as it could be. Disregarding the fact it was infinitely more straightforward for Jake as he knew the straight path to the end, even for those without a cheat-like Bloodline, Minaga’s Labyrinth was still simple. You just had to make your way through a Labyrinth within a set timer and then keep doing that over and over again until you couldn’t reach the end in time anymore.

Soon, Jake completed sections three, four, five, six... ten... twenty... Jake just kept going as Minaga kept commentating. Most of it was just him talking and Jake returning the banter, but there were some things of substance said, too.

**“Did you notice the wall there? You have seen those before, right?”** Minaga asked at one point. **“I am giving you an actual hint here.”**

Jake had noticed the odd markings covering many of the walls, and he even felt the magical energy infused into them. It was some complicated magic, and while Jake couldn’t immediately figure out what they were about, he had an idea.

“These are hints for solving the labyrinth in time, right?” Jake asked as he rushed through section twenty-seven, jumping over and sliding under traps on the way.

**“Exactly! See, I know you could figure it out! How about trying, just once, to do one of the sections without relying on your cheats but doing it properly? Just for the experience,”** Minaga semi-pleaded.

“Hm, I could,” Jake muttered.

**“Really?”** Minaga exclaimed with surprise.

“Yeah, I definitely could. I won’t, but I could.”

**“... bullying behavior is not going to get you far in life, you know that, right?”**

“Didn’t you tell me a bunch of stories about you bullying and annoying larger factions or stronger gods into submissions, making use of the fact that you are a cheat-like existence?” Jake countered.

**“Well, stories are always exaggerated, and I wouldn’t say I bullied them. I just made very appealing arguments with adequate levels of insistence until I got my will,”** Minaga said in a holier-than-thou tone.

“Right, right, and I am carefully evaluating your proposition for me to handicap myself for no damn reason and finding your arguments for doing so wholly inadequate.”

**“It was just a suggestion...”** Minaga muttered. **“And I put so much effort into those hints, too...”**

On the topic of the hints to solve the Labyrinth, Jake got the feeling they were borderline mandatory if one wanted to do the latter sections. Stumbling in the dark or keeping a hand on one wall as you sprinted through could only take you so far, and already by section twenty, that tactic no longer appeared viable as the difficulty began to step up. Not just with the labyrinth getting longer and having more dead-ends but also with the addition of stuff like traps.

Anyway, Minaga’s Labyrinth also included some level of puzzle or maybe even riddle-solving, which was kind of fun. Jake wasn’t entirely sure how it worked as he never bothered to study the hints given at the start of every section fully, nor did he take his time with the markings covering the walls at other places. But it was probably fun for others, right?

In the labyrinth in section twenty-seven, he took a sharp turn, avoiding the mech-like beast that barred the way down one of the hallways that wasn’t the fastest path. Jake threw the beast a look as he remembered a prior talk with Minaga about these creatures inhabiting and barring his progress in the labyrinth.

Jake had sadly confirmed one didn’t earn any experience inside of the Challenge Dungeon, even if you did kill some of the monsters barring the way. Jake naturally had

to question the Unique Lifeform about this, and he actually got a straight answer when he did.

**“Eh, they aren’t real monsters but just summons tied to the energy barrier. Killing them just cuts off power to the barrier and allows you through, nothing more, nothing less. As for why it isn’t designed so you get experience? Well, there is a good reason. I won’t tell you the reason, but there totally is one, trust me on that. Definitely not just some random decision the Wyrmgod and I made when designing these Challenge Dungeons. Definitely not.”**

Alright, Jake called it a straight answer, but at least it was *an* answer. Only the first part really mattered, explaining they were just summons that powered the barriers.

But, it probably did make some sense? If the creatures gave experience, it would be an incentive to take the paths where they were and not the fastest route. Of course, Jake wouldn’t bother to hunt the monsters in these earlier labyrinths as they were far too weak and often died in a single arrow, but maybe he would have later if they gave him experience.

After Jake passed section twenty-nine, he entered number thirty, and finally, something changed. With a Pulse of Perception, Jake saw that this labyrinth had introduced a new element: teleportation circles. Were they shortcuts? Ways to set your progress back? A mix of the two?

Jake didn’t know if each teleportation circle was good or bad, and while he could try and decipher the hints on the walls around the teleportation circles... he could also just do none of that and leave the decision entirely to his intuition.

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## Chapter 798: Nevermore: Three Limiters

The further into the Challenge Dungeon Jake got, the more twists and turns Minaga began to throw at him. Quite literally, at times, as some of the sections outright twisted and turned, the labyrinth itself subtly changing as he moved through it. Walls would pop up, and others would disappear, shuffling themselves about in a set pattern that Jake could quickly figure out when he could take snapshots of everything with his Pulse.

Then there were the sections Jake dubbed the Labyrinth Archipelago, a name that Minaga liked so much he considered making it official for the next iteration of his labyrinth in the next era. Jake gracefully handed him the trademark to the name and

didn't even need to be credited if the Unique Lifeform did decide to use it down the line. Not that he would have said no to royalties...

Anyway, the reason Jake called it the Labyrinth Archipelago was because it wasn't just one maze but several that were spread out throughout an area, all connected with teleporters. Each maze was a lot smaller than the others, but when you had to do several, sometimes even having to backtrack, one definitely got pressured on time.

Not to mention that many of these islands were fake, only having one teleporter on them, with the entire place just being a waste of time. Of course, you had no way to confirm this before fully exploring it or solving some more odd magical riddles and stuff.

Jake could definitely see why these were supposed to be a lot harder. Of course, for him, it was just an extra Pulse of Perception or two to check out everything. Sadly, he couldn't see all the islands at once as they seemed to exist in separate spaces or were at least very far apart if they were floating in the same void. This meant Jake had to actually take a few wrong turns before finding the right path. Sometimes, anyway. More often than not, he intuitively just went the right way on his first attempt, which definitely got a few comments out of Minaga.

Oh, and then there were the labyrinths Minaga began to throw in around section forty, where illusionary arrays were spread throughout, creating illusions such as fake doors, fake barriers with gatekeeper creatures, and even fake traps that looked impossible to beat. Jake ignored all of these.

Aside from different layouts, the non-illusion enemies and traps also changed significantly. The traps had become deadly even to Jake – assuming he ever let one hit him – and were no longer made just to slow people down. Lasers that could cut Jake's limbs off like butter began appearing around section sixty, and in section sixty-five, he encountered the good old lowering ceiling trap. Except it was entire sections of the maze that would begin to lower at once to crush him, forcing you to quickly find a way out as a mini-maze was created. What's more, with the ceiling lowered, one of the paths you could potentially take got blocked off, forcing you to take detours around the newly blocked-off area.

There were many interesting traps for sure, but what was more were the creatures. At section one, Jake saw only foes around level 210, while at section seventy, they were between 280 and 290. Based on some quick math, the levels of foes scaled up by one every time he progressed a section, making the difficulty rapidly ascend.

When Jake reached section seventy-five, he did something he hadn't done before. He took a breather in the "checkpoint hallway," as he had dubbed it. For a good reason, too, as the last section had been quite arduous and annoying to get through after he decided to fight a level 293 turtle gatekeeper creature that had put up a good fight simply due to how durable it was. This section had definitely taken him far longer than he would have liked.

**Labyrinth Section 74 clear time: 16:54:39**

“Damn, nearly seventeen hours for one section,” Jake sighed as he took a breather in the hallway between two Labyrinth Sections. “I really need to step up my pace if I want to do just a thousand, much less several million sections.”

While it was true the Challenge Dungeon had given him 20 days to complete that section, he still felt like it was a little slow on his part to take the better parts of a day.

**“... you’re killing me over here. Killing me, I tell you!”**

“What’s one clone more or less to someone as esteemed as you?” Jake smiled as he closed his eyes to rest and fully restore his resource pools before it was time to move on.

These checkpoint corridors, or whatever he decided to eventually dub them, were pretty rare in the beginning, but by now, they pretty much appeared after every section. They were nothing more than hallways between two doors, but they did represent a place where no timer was constantly going down, putting pressure on you.

**“Even if you think my clones have little value, are you truly willing to have the death of one on your conscience?”** Minaga asked. **“To live with the fact that you have killed me for the rest of your life... that you have killed such an inspiring figure?”**

Jake put on a serious face as he spoke in a calm tone. “I have resolved myself to the fact that my Path to godhood will be one littered with corpses. I can... no, I must be able to face myself, even if such a thing happens. Your sacrifice would definitely be remembered eternally.”

**“You know what? Now I nearly want to die just to keep this hanging over your head.”**

“That doesn’t sound like something an esteemed figure would do,” Jake said with a smirk. “And why would I bother remembering someone like that?”

**“Rude.”**

“I never said anything rude. I just spoke my truth and was brutally honest.”

**“People who say they are just speaking the truth or being brutally honest are often just saying that as an excuse to be horrible assholes to others without having to face the repercussions of their own actions,”** Minaga chimed in.

“Wow, that’s a brutally honest take for sure,” Jake nodded along. “And are we back to you being a massive bully again?”

**“I always face the consequences. Well, the version of me that did something does. It wouldn’t be fair to get all of me involved just because one of me fucks up.”**

“A great way to truly avoid responsibility indeed,” Jake shrugged as he kept relaxing a bit. “Now, back to this labyrinth in question... you said it would be getting hard, but when exactly does that happen? Still waiting over here.”

**“Some would argue it has already gotten hard. The traps can now prove lethal even to you, the teleporters aren’t as easily exploited, more features to slow you down has appeared, and the gatekeeper creatures can put up a decent fight... so isn’t it at least harder now than in the beginning?”** Minaga tried to argue very flimsily.

“Sure, it has gotten more difficult, but something going from easy to slightly less easy still makes it easy. I think the main thing right now is the length of the timers being more than ten times above how long it actually takes. Removes a lot of the pressure of the situation and makes it all feel a bit too relaxed and casual,” Jake argued.

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**“You do remember this is a maze, right? A labyrinth? You are just running straight for the end every time, already knowing the way. If I had to balance the timer around everyone already knowing the way, I would have put a damn map at the start of every section and not a magical problem to solve, now wouldn’t I? Or maybe I should just make my next labyrinth a straight path for people to sprint down. Would that be better, huh?”** Minaga said, sure winding himself up.

“I never said you had to change anything, just that from my very overpowered point of view, it has yet to be hard,” Jake muttered.

**“Fair, I guess. But there are more things to come, so maybe you will face something that is actually difficult at some point? Heck if I know, though. Your overpowered Bloodline probably has some other secret aspect to overcome anything I throw at you...”**

“You could always throw in a water level. That would sure slow me down,” Jake said semi-jokingly.

**“I find the very notion you believe I could ever do that insulting. I have integrity! Integrity, I tell you!”** Minaga said, getting himself even more worked up.

He remembered Minaga had already shown disdain for water levels prior and definitely believed he wouldn’t do that in his labyrinth. Also, even if there was a water level, Jake would still be beating it, though it would be a lot more difficult and time-consuming.



“Then I guess all there is to do is watch me continue to demolish your labyrinth. Hey, maybe you can use the data for an improved version in the next era? Find countermeasures to someone like me?” Jake said, trying to be a little encouraging.

**“I think that if I implement countermeasures to actually hinder you, an unfortunate side effect would be to make it utterly unbeatable for nearly everyone else...”** Minaga said with a sigh. **“Procedurally generating it won’t work as that messes up many other legitimate scouting methods, and even if I did that, who is to say you won’t just know where to go anyway due to some stupid gut feeling or anything? Yeah, trying to make countermeasures is a waste of time. I would rather just hope there aren’t more people like you out there...”**

Jake just smiled and shook his head as their conversation slowly died down. He knew Minaga had a hard time implementing any features to hinder Jake, and in all honesty, he saw himself as only having three true limiters in Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth - three things that could lead to him not completing a section in time.

The first one was his movement speed. Jake was fast, but he could be faster, especially with the mist slowing him down. That is why he worked on trying to speed up slightly by covering his body in a faint layer of destructive arcane affinity that seemed to help a little bit. Outside of that, it was just to keep good form and keep sprinting while conserving stamina and drinking potions whenever necessary.

Secondly was his fighting power. Jake had noticed that, at least so far, Minaga would never force him into a fight, but there were cases where not fighting a gatekeeper would require him to take a long detour. So when he began to meet foes he simply couldn’t beat, it would all be down to if he was fast enough to do the detour in time. Jake was still not at this stage, but he knew it would come at some point.

The third and last limiter Jake saw was Minaga introducing a new element he had no way of cheesing. The Labyrinth Archipelago was already pretty good at delaying him. Still, it didn’t impact him more than anyone else, but if Minaga added elements Jake couldn’t do anything about, he could also see himself being fucked. He wasn’t sure what Minaga could add, but it was definitely possible.

However... if number three didn’t come into play, Jake felt extremely confident he wouldn’t just be going for a high score but perhaps the highest score anyone on the Leaderboards could get. He did believe there were level 349s out there who didn’t compete on the Leaderboards and could do better, but those didn’t matter. As long as he could beat all his peers, Jake would be more than happy.

His confidence was far from unfounded. One would have to be a complete cheat with a Transcendence or a Bloodline to even stand a chance against him, and even if they had one, Jake believed his Bloodline was better. Jake was also a speed-focused built, having even put all the Free Points gained from the levels to his profession after he visited the gods into Agility to move just a little faster through the labyrinth.



He had everything going for him in this Challenge Dungeon, almost as if he was born to utterly dominate it. He truly had no excuse if he ended up with a poor performance. If he couldn't get the top score, then what the hell kind of living cheat did you have to be in order to do so?

Alright, there was one more potential kind of person who could overtake him. While talking with Casper when they met up in Minaga City, the Risen talked about how he had certain advantages as a Dungeon Architect. That he could also "cheat" in the dungeon and find the way easily.

Casper himself wasn't a threat when it came to being number one, as the Risen, quite frankly, didn't have the speed required to be at the top. Even if he knew the way, Jake could see him get stuck on levels with limited time quite easily, a sentiment he shared with many others with dungeon-making focused Paths. Such Paths tended to focus on mental stats over the physical ones, after all. Plus, while someone like Casper could cheat as a Dungeon Architect, Jake's level of cheating was still far superior.

So... to summarize, Jake was going for the top spot. He wanted the best Grand Achievement he could get... and he couldn't lie; Minaga's constant complaints only served as further motivation.

After his rest, Jake stood back up and stretched as he looked at the next gate. *Let's see if I can do this faster than the last one.*

"How long has it been since he entered?" Vilastromoz asked with a big smile. He naturally already knew, but he wanted to ask just to make Minaga vocalize it.

"Twenty-five days or so," Minaga said, not elaborating further.

"And, color me curious, how long does it usually take for the average person?" the Viper asked.

"... more than that..." the Unique Lifeform said in a small voice.

"How much more, I wonder? A week more? Oh, maybe an entire month! Pray tell, pray tell!" Vilastromoz said, completely unable to hold himself back from teasing the Unique Lifeform.

Minaga just stared at him for a bit before crossing his arms. "Not saying. Figure it out yourself. And Wyrmgod, you better not say a word either."

"How petty," the Viper shook his head as he turned to his secret weapon. "How about you two? Aren't you curious?"

He naturally spoke to Nature's Attendant, but more importantly, Artemis. The old druid just smiled, while Artemis didn't even try to hide her interest as she nodded enthusiastically.

As expected, Minaga couldn't resist as he sighed. "First of all, the Viper's question is flawed. The usual person never even gets this far. And for those who do, the average time for doing so is just around thirteen months, give or take."

"So, Jake is just fifteen times or so faster than the average person?" the Viper asked with a smile. "Not too bad, I guess."

"Faster than the people who make it this far," Minaga corrected him. "Considering it's only the above-average Nevermore Attendees that get above section sixty, with many entirely flunking out within just a few, I guess some would argue his performance is even better than expected."

"If... if I may, how does he compare to the other top contenders? How close is he to being the fastest to get to section seventy-five?" Artemis asked, a bit nervously.

Minaga just threw her a deadpan look. "How close? Come on, are you also teasing me now?"

Artemis looked genuinely confused as the Wyrmgod spoke up.

"He is the top contender."

"Oh," Artemis muttered with a nod.

"Man, he sure is a cheat. That Bloodline of his is totally broken," Minaga sighed loudly. "Hey, Artemis, can you do me a favor?"

"Hm?" she responded. "If it's within my capabilities, I will do my best."

"Great," Minaga said as he put on a massive teasing smile. "If you two ever have kids that inherit his Bloodline, can you give me details on it or at least some tips for countermeasures?"

"I... what?" Artemis exclaimed as the tips of her ears turned red before she gathered herself. "Please stop joking around like that; I find it highly inappropriate. Also, you know as well as I that sharing the secrets of others, including the details of their Bloodlines, is not something one should do."

"Right, right, how rude of me." Minaga put up his hands defensively as no one continued the subject. Jake standing up in the recording to continue the labyrinth served as a nice distraction.

Vilastromoz just shook his head at the interaction between the two gods as he smiled to himself... unable to avoid noticing how she hadn't denied or shot down the notion of potentially carrying forward Jake's Bloodline.

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## Chapter 799: Nevermore: An Unmissable Opportunity

Jake narrowly ducked under the flying glaive before jumping right as the floor collapsed under him. Kicking off the wall, Jake managed to launch himself away from the pit that had opened up beneath him right as a piston-like block of labyrinth shot down, nearly pushing Jake into the hole.

Landing on solid ground, Jake quickly knelt down and braced himself as he crossed his arms and summoned a stable barrier of arcane energy to defend himself. A barrage of small mana spikes hit him right as the barrier was done manifesting fully, blasting Jake further down the labyrinth hallway but failing to penetrate the barrier.

He knew he couldn't land on the ground as spikes would just pop up, so Jake ran on the wall for a bit as he made his way down the long trap-filled labyrinth hallway while avoiding all the remaining traps. At least he tried to. A net of lasers shot after him not soon after, followed by an incredibly fast-moving spike that came out of seemingly nowhere, but before Jake could even address these two, he had to consider something else.

Runic circles began glowing on the ceiling and walls as energy intensified. Jake instantly understood what was about to happen as he gritted his teeth and blasted arcane mana to launch himself down the hallways as quickly as he could while also dealing with the damn everpresent mist.

This decision did mean a sacrifice had to be made as one of the lasers hit him, taking his left arm clean off. It hurt like hell, but it had to be done. Flying down the hallway quickly, Jake hit the back wall and kicked off it as he got around the corner.

Right as he did so, an explosion sounded out as the entire hallway erupted with intense mana, the ceiling even collapsing in a scripted event, blocking off the path. Jake didn't doubt for a second he would have died if he had stayed there or been just half a second slower.

“Maybe I should have taken the non-shortcut route,” Jake muttered to himself as he regarded his missing arm. Taking out a health potion, he quickly chugged it and focused on his Blood of the Malefic Viper skill as the arm began to regrow at a visible pace.

**“Wow, really? But that would have wasted an entire hour or something horrendous like that!”** Minaga chimed in, always ready to add his two cents.

“Oh, good point. Yeah, definitely picked the right hallway,” Jake said with a smile.

These trap hallways had begun to get quite dangerous. By now, everything could kill him, and the attacks moved so fast that Jake could only react due to his near pre-cognitive instincts. He had noticed that some attacks could still be blocked even if Jake should logically not be strong enough to. The barrage of small mana spikes being one such example. If it was dungeon-fuckery or some unique properties of these attacks, he didn’t know, but his stable arcane mana did wonders.

For most attacks, blocking was entirely out of the question, though. The lasers would burn through anything Jake could summon, with him only feeling confident in blocking with Eternal Hunger if he absolutely had to. However, even then, the remnant energy that hit him scorched his flesh. Any physical attack was also not gonna happen as the sheer impact would rip both his arms off.

**“So, is it hard enough for you yet?”** Minaga asked.

“Considering I managed to do the hallway while only losing an arm, I am sure I can handle it getting a bit harder. But yeah, things are definitely improving with every section,” Jake said with a smile as he continued onward. Walking a bit forward, he saw a hole in the ceiling, and without further ado, he jumped as he went up a floor.

A new kind of Labyrinth Section appeared at number one hundred. One that Jake hadn’t even considered before, but honestly, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. It was a multi-layered labyrinth with two floors. It was as if the labyrinth had gotten a basement that one had to use to pass certain sections by either passing through on the first or second floor.

This in itself wouldn’t be that difficult... except the walls could move up and down, with some of them being triggered by the person doing the labyrinth. However, you could only trigger a gate on the opposite floor of the one where you needed to move the wall, making it all quite a complicated puzzle. Well, it was complicated for regular people. Jake, on the other hand, could easily piece together which walls he had to move and see all the trigger mechanisms right as he entered the Labyrinth Section.

So section one hundred hadn’t added the feared third limiter obstacle Jake hoped wouldn’t come. When he reached section one-hundred and three, the labyrinth was expanded once more as a third floor was added. At one-hundred and seven, a fourth one came, and at one-hundred and ten, the fifth one arrived.

Jake realized that Minaga had decided to increase the difficulty of the labyrinth, not simply by making it longer but by adding an entirely new dimension. A usual labyrinth was very much a two-dimensional puzzle, but the further he got after section one hundred, the more it became a cube as it turned into a three-dimensional labyrinth. This update is available on *novel•fire•net*

It only got more and more complicated the more sections he passed until soon, even Jake had to admit he began to struggle and get challenged. It had to be mentioned that even if Jake had an overpowered Pulse of Perception, the labyrinth could still get so damn complicated Jake still had to take his time and think about how to solve it.

He had to consider which walls to raise and lower, which teleporters could potentially be used, which paths he had to avoid entirely, and finally, to create an entire route that he could complete in time. Okay, the time limitation still wasn't a real problem quite yet, but he had a feeling it would be soon.

Because right now, Jake was in Labyrinth Section 151, and by now, it was pretty much just a giant cube. He had to climb up and down all the time to get to the exit that was often incredibly far away, with a shitload of near-impassible obstacles in between. These trap hallways were something Jake could still do, but he had reached his limit somewhere.

Jake, having run for a few hours and with a newly fully regenerated arm, snuck around a corner and took a quick glance in to confirm something. What he saw was a creature that stood in front of a large barrier, with a shimmering wall nearly right in front of him. He knew that if he passed this wall, he would be trapped in there with the gatekeeper until one of them died, so he couldn't just escape even if he wanted to. The shimmering wall also marked when space would be expanded, as each gatekeeper pretty much had an entire arena to itself. Fighting in a hallway wasn't going to happen, after all. Especially not when it came to the kind of gatekeepers Jake now found himself facing if he wanted to pass these barriers.

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What stood in there was a large mammal-like beast with massive arms, each with long blades growing out of it. Its body looked more metal than flesh. It was about five meters tall, very bulky and bear-like, and looked to be a slower tanky variant. As it stood on two legs reminiscent of a werewolf, and even with the shimmering wall, he could feel its presence subtly come through.

### **[Scytcheborn Gatekeeper – lvl ???]**

He had been right... after facing peak C-grades from around section one-forty, he had now truly graduated beyond the grade and found himself before a true-blue B-grade. And, based on what he guessed, it wasn't necessarily a horrible variant either.

“Hey... Minaga...” Jake muttered.

**“You’re thinking about doing it, aren’t you?”**

“I was just wondering... are there any rewards from getting to a certain section without dying?” Jake asked. “Like, if I somehow died now, would it screw me over in any way?”

**“I can’t answer that. Oh, by the way, on an entirely unrelated note, did you know that B-grades aren’t really meant to ever appear in this C-grade version of the Challenge Dungeon? So, if you do ever happen to encounter one, surely it is indicative of you having gone far beyond the norm. Just food for thought,”** Minaga super subtly hinted.

Jake smiled at the response as he kept observing the B-grade for a little while, trying to get a feel for it.

He still had five lives or attempts remaining. Five resets, so to say. While it probably wasn’t necessarily the smartest, Jake believed he couldn’t let go of a chance like this. To face a B-grade in an actual battle without any genuine risk of death was a rare opportunity and would give him invaluable experience for when he would truly hunt one down.

Yeah, it definitely wasn’t just Jake really wanting to fight it. It was definitely a decision rooted in logic and reason.

“Wish me luck,” Jake smiled as he walked toward the shimmering wall, not bothering to make any real preparations. He was just testing the waters, after all.

**“I hope you die a horrible death that demotivates you so much you become unable to do any more sections. Oh, or maybe the experience makes you dead-set on revenge, making you spend all your other attempts going back here over and over again to exact vengeance upon the gatekeeper,”** Minaga said with a hint of hope in his voice.

“Both very realistic scenarios for sure,” Jake shook his head as he reached out his hand and touched the shimmering barrier. “Now let’s see what a B-grade can truly do.”

Minaga stayed silent as Jake focused. Passing through the wall, the entire world warped as the wall expanded rapidly. Jake soon found himself standing inside a massive chamber with the B-grade gatekeeper at the far end. He thought for a moment it didn’t know he was there until its attention firmly landed on him, making Jake temporarily freeze.

From several kilometers away, it just stared at him with two large beady eyes. Jake resolved himself as he pulled out his bow, ready to attack. Pulling out his bow apparently registered as an act of aggression, making the B-grade react instantly,

making Jake's danger sense immediately respond, Arcane Awakening even getting triggered at the stable 30% right off the bat.

Jumping to the side, Jake barely avoided two crescent metal blades stabbing out of two small slits in space, the B-grade at the far end having raised an arm. Surprised at Jake dodging, it let out a low growl that sent a shockwave of sound through the chamber. Jake felt Pride of the Malefic Viper get impacted as the mental attack hit, but he managed to stay unaffected and even dodge the follow-up as space once more warped around him as scythe-like blades pierced out.

Pulling out an arrow, Jake released a potshot toward the B-grade. It didn't even move to dodge but simply motioned as a blade appeared to block it. Jake smirked a bit to himself as the arrow flicked itself to the side, dodging the blade and continuing its way toward the B-grade that seemed genuinely surprised.

In the end, it chose to take the blow directly as it swatted at the arrow. Jake wanted to manipulate the arrow to dodge the blow, but he wasn't fast enough. The metal-covered claw made the arrow explode, dealing no damage at all. All he accomplished instead was to annoy the B-grade as it became even more offensive than before.

Using the same arm that it blocked the arrow with, it swung widely, releasing an odd wave of energy. Mana gathered around the energy of the wave as soon spinning metal scythes manifested in mid-air, with hundreds flying toward Jake less than a second later.

Jake reacted by flying into them, dodging every single one as he even got off another potshot that was once more easily blocked. His ability to dodge and even launch annoying small attacks only seemed to trigger the gatekeeper as it released another annoyed growl.

A silver-like aura appeared around the beast as it bent its legs. Jake instantly dismissed his bow and pulled out his katars just in time as his opponent shot toward him. Air and space were cut in its wake as it soon reached Jake, swinging down its massive glowing claw.

Minor cuts began appearing all over Jake just for being in the beast's presence and looking at the descending blow, he knew he had no leeway to hold back. Arcane Awakening activated at full power as the claw reached him, smashing into his body.

At least a body.

Curse energy dispersed as his Eternal Shadow took the hit, Jake having launched himself forward straight for the beast. Stabbing forward with Eternal Hunger, Jake got in a surprise hit as Penetrating Fang struck the beast in its stomach. The metal-like skin and fur offered incredible resistance, but Jake's stab was designed to penetrate armor, allowing him to get through.



A loud roar resounded as the beast clearly hadn't ever expected to get injured. Jake, with his hand still firmly stabbed into the beast, opened his eyes widely as he let go of his katars and jumped back as fast as he could. The entire body of the gatekeeper began to shimmer as every single one of its hairs seemed to turn into metal scythes, its aura and the white energy surrounding it rapidly growing in power.

However, even as he dodged back, his sense of danger still went strong. The beast let out a long, drawn-out growl as its body began to glow more and more, Jake making as much distance as he could. The sound of the growl slowly started to sound more... metallic and high-pitched as the gatekeeper's aura stopped spiking, and the silver light reached a crescendo.

In the very next second, its body exploded. Every single hair-scythe shot out and began to revolve around the B-grade in a tempest of silvery spinning blades. In the center, the light subsided as the B-grade slowly stood up, having entirely changed. Its formerly bulky body had grown from around five meters to more than ten and turned lithe and lanky, with all its limbs now just thin scythes. It looked more like a silver statue or mannequin than a beast at this point, with even its face entirely gone, making Jake doubt if it had ever been a beast, to begin with.

Jake took a defensive stance as a loud, high-pitched sound echoed in the room. His vision temporarily swayed, and he barely managed to dodge a scythe-like appendage that struck down where he had just been standing. The floor of the labyrinth exploded from the impact, sending stones flying everywhere as Jake scrambled.

Before he had the slightest chance to do anything, the monster was upon him again. The spinning scythes came in from all sides as the faceless and emotionless gatekeeper descended with speed far above what Jake could handle, and as the many attacks closed in, Jake felt pretty confident.

Not about winning, mind you.

*Yeah... maybe I shouldn't be facing B-grades quite yet.*

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## Chapter 800: Nevermore: Birds of a Feather

Jake returned to consciousness, standing within the checkpoint hallway before Labyrinth Section 151. He felt like he had only blacked out for a moment, but the phantom pain of having his head chopped cleanly into four pieces could still be felt.

He had known from the beginning it wouldn't be a fight he could win, and true to his prediction, it wasn't. The B-grade was far more powerful than Jake in every way, making it utterly impossible for him to keep up and land any meaningful blows. Especially after its transformation, Jake didn't stand a chance at all. He managed to stay alive for quite a long time, but whatever weak attacks he did land didn't even leave a scratch. The metal monstrosity was simply too durable for him to do anything.

The only time he managed to damage it was during Moment of , where he managed to disable one of its scythe-arms temporarily. It was a minor victory but a meaningful one. Jake had barely entered mid-tier C-grade, and he had already managed to injure a B-grade... and it wasn't even that weak of a B-grade variant. In fact, he would rate it solidly as a slightly above-average creature.

Of course, if it had been something like a True Dragon B-grade, Jake would have been annihilated near-instantly. The prefix "near" only being there because he still had Moment to keep him alive for an extra second or two.

Sighing, he did still find his loss a bit sad. "Oh well, I guess I still have a ways to go before I can fight B-grades."

**"You're, what, level 257? If you could fight B-grades straight on, I would have put in a complaint with the system itself to have you banned for being too overpowered. The fact you managed to even put up a bit of a fight and last that long is already plenty impressive. Also, what kind of overpowered skill do you have to help you close the gap? My dungeon tools to measure your power and stats read quite the spike the moment you decided to fight that B-grade... actually, don't answer that; the Viper is currently giving me very unpleasant looks."**

"It's from my secret skill called The Power of Friendship. It gave me stats because I knew you believed in me and that I could win," Jake joked with a completely serious look on his face. "Through the power of friendship, any obstacle can be overcome."

**"I know that's a joke, but those kinds of skills totally exist,"** Minaga pointed out.

Jake smiled, knowing that very well. Yip of Yore and, to some extent, Ell'Hakan were perfect examples of this. Their ability to get power from stories and the beliefs of others was ridiculous in Jake's mind, but did he really have much to say?

Big Game Hunter did something very similar, except it only worked when he faced foes of a higher level. He also knew it was this skill Minaga detected. It wasn't his highest rarity skill, but it was the signature skill of his class. No, his entire Path as a hunter. It had upgraded every single time he evolved it, and he was certain it would continue to do so.

Even now, it provided Jake with a lot of stats. It was like an extra free boosting skill, except it didn't have any of the drawbacks, actually made boosting skills even better as

it increased stats, and all it required was for him to fight higher-leveled foes. And that was the C-grade ancient rarity version of it.

What would a divine-rarity version of the skill look like? One wielded by a god? Could Jake truly say it would be any less ridiculous than whatever Yip of Yore was doing? Well, yeah, he could because his skill actually made sense to Jake, while Yip did some weird, complicated, and manipulative shit to get his power up, while Jake just had to be the underdog rising to the occasion.

Shaking his head to himself, Jake decided to stop dallying and get a move on and complete the section. He just had to redo what he had done before, with the only change being one number that had changed.

### **Attempts remaining: 4**

Sure, one could argue Jake had wasted a life by fighting the B-grade, but Jake believed the experience was worth it. If he hadn't done it, he would have wondered what it would have been like to fight it, so now he could just skip any B-grade gatekeepers without any regrets. His remaining four lives would be used as intended and give Jake a bit of leeway if he did fuck up and die to a trap or messed up his routing in a particular section. Something that was getting increasingly likely as he felt like he was trying to do some unsolved math mystery in every damn section.

Alas, it had to be done. And at least Jake didn't have to do it for this section as he had already done it once. With swift steps, Jake moved to the gate leading onto the section as he looked up and smiled.

"Hey, Minaga, can you keep giving me your power of friendship so I can overcome this Labyrinth Section that I already failed once?" Jake asked teasingly.

**"I think you should go fight that B-grade again. You nearly had it. I am sure you can win the second time around,"** Minaga tried to bait Jake into making a horrible decision.

Jake entered the gate as the timer started, and the section began. Shooting down one of the hallways, he answered. "Alas, your words earlier convinced me of my inadequacy. I shall henceforth avoid all foes."

**"No, no, you misunderstood me. I just meant that with more practice, you got this. It was totally weakened toward the end and nearly out of resources and stuff. Come on, give it a go,"**Minaga said, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

"Even if I tried again, I would only find death," Jake answered as he kept moving quickly, weaving around corners and jumping up and down floors as he proceeded through the cube labyrinth.

**“Alright, I digress. Maybe you won’t win on your second attempt... but surely, all good times three? You got five attempts. With that many, surely you can beat it! Heck, with nine lives, you managed to best a Primordial in battle. What is a mere B-grade gatekeeper to one such as you! Come on, do it for friendship! You just have to believe in me, who believes in you! Be confident! Believe in the power of friendship and go face that B-grade with every single attempt until you either win or leave with your dignity intact!”**

“Damn, that’s a long speech to convince me to go suicide four times to a B-grade, so I don’t clear any more of your labyrinth,” Jake said, soon closing in on the trap-filled hallway he did the first time he attempted this section.

**“What? Why would I ever do such a thing? These are groundless accusations. I’m innocent until proven guilty, and you have no evidence of such preposterous claims,”** Minaga responded in a huffed-up voice.

“Wait... oh, I know why you’re trying to stop me now. I get it, I get it...” Jake muttered as he would soon reach the hallway with the many traps. Another reason he had faced the B-grade in this section was due to how close it was to the entrance.

**“... alright, you got me. What kind of dumb theory have you conjured up now?”**

Jake purposefully avoided answering until he was in front of the trap hallway again. “Oh, I just figured that... ah, damn, I am here already, huh. I just gotta focus on this, so I will answer after, alright?”

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**“You waited on purpose,”** Minaga said in a bitter voice.

“Can’t talk right now, busy,” Jake grinned as he jumped into the trap hallway. Having already done it once more, Jake quickly made his way through, dodging everything way more smoothly the second time around. He didn’t even lose an arm.

**“Alright, let’s hear it. Come on,”** Minaga said. Jake, deciding to be generous and not make him wait any longer, deigned him an answer.

“Well, I just guessed you were trying to avoid a lawsuit for false advertisement because your Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth isn’t truly endless. You want to stop me from discovering this by making me quit now so I don’t discover your dirty secret,” Jake said with faux confidence.

**“Are we just doing conspiracy theories now?”**

“No, no, hear me out. It makes sense. Let me first clarify: all of these Labyrinth Sections are designed personally by you, right?”

**“Yes?”**

“So, with that being the case, you’re telling me you created infinite sections? No, of course not. That would quite literally be impossible to have done. Assuming you designed all of them, there must be a limited number, thus making it not endless, and your claim saying it is a dirty, dirty lie,” Jake argued flawlessly.

**“Ah, but there is a flaw in your theory. Even if there weren’t endless sections, it could still be considered relatively endless. If there are so many sections that it’s impossible to clear all of them in fifty years or if there are ones that just become straight-up impossible later on, it would effectively be considered endless, as no one can reach the end,”** Minaga countered.

“But then it wouldn’t be truly endless, now would it? What if someone with my Bloodline and a Transcendent skill that allowed them to effortlessly phase through walls appeared? They would be able to pass every section within minutes,” Jake kept up the argument, happy to waste some time.

Considering he wasn’t going to fight the B-grade again, he had to take a big detour of just running through hallways, moving walls, and dodging the occasional trap. Nothing super exciting, which made talking with Minaga and teasing him during this run a solid form of entertainment.

**“Funny you should mention it... there was actually someone like that in the eighty-fifth era. It was someone with a Bloodline, though, that could phase through things. She did pretty well in my labyrinth, but considering she didn’t know the way like you, she did struggle quite a bit. Ah, by the way, the only reason I am even sharing this is that she ended up dying quite a dumb death in S-grade when she tried to use her ability to break into somewhere she shouldn’t have and got a hit put out on her, the Court of Shadows promptly carrying it out. Did I mention she was a professional thief? Yeah, not a well-liked gal, that one,”** Minaga changed the topic away from false advertisement.

“Huh,” Jake muttered, accepting Minaga’s avoidance of consumer rights. “Say, got any more interesting stories about intriguing characters? Both good and bad.”

**“Okay, a funny one, then. There was once a monk from the Dao Sect who entered and somehow convinced himself this entire dungeon was just an illusion. A prison of the mind. He was certain that he needed to achieve enlightenment and elevate his third eye to see through my tomfoolery. Yeah, anyway, he ended up wasting all five attempts in the very first section, still convinced even as he left that he was just a simple step away from success.”**

“Doesn’t sound like the smartest cookie in the jar,” Jake chuckled.

**“Yo, don’t go around insulting gods from the Dao Sect like that,”** Minaga said in a joking tone, **“Much less one of the Daolords. Ah, but not the Soulfist one. Another monk. Can’t say which one, that would be breaking privacy rules.”**

“I am pretty sure you already broke those by sharing he was one of the Daolords. Kinda narrows it down to a handful, especially when you even exclude one. If I then also exclude the ones who became Daolords before you were around, it should be pretty easy to-“

**“Oh! I just remembered this weird rodent C-grade who managed to do the entire labyrinth by using a form of divination I had never encountered before. It worked off throwing random acorns on the walls and going by the sound, deciding where to go. I thought she was fucking with me for the longest time until it was confirmed this was an actual form of divination magic. I fixed it with my next mist upgrade,”**Minaga seamlessly changed the topic away from his own privacy violations. His second slight to consumer rights that day. UPDATE FROM *novel*✕fire✕net

Jake and Minaga continued their banter as Jake ran through the labyrinth, now having to avoid quite a few things. Fighting gatekeepers was confirmed out of the question, and even the trap corridors were something he had to reconsider doing. He believed he could still do them for a few sections more, but soon he would reach his limits.

From there, Jake just had to hope he wouldn’t meet a section where doing a gatekeeper or a trap corridor was mandatory. That, or one where avoiding these two, resulted in Jake simply not having enough time to make the run, even at full speed. He did hope to do at least a few more sections, though. Wouldn’t completing two hundred in total be a nice round number to end on? Yeah, Jake was sure Minaga would appreciate him doing at least that many.

**“You know what the worst part is right now?”** Minaga said after a few minutes of silence. **“At this very moment, you aren’t the only one barreling through my labyrinth near-effortlessly, making me question my current employment. It’s someone you know, too, but I am not saying who. Again, privacy rules and all that.”**

“Oh?” Jake asked, genuinely curious. Who else could it be that managed to “break” the labyrinth? Was it maybe Jacob? Nah, his divination was like the definition of standard, even if it was very powerful. Casper? No, it couldn’t be Casper. If it was him or any other dungeon-focused person, Minaga would be fine with it. Arnold? No... if it was Arnold, it was because he would solve those riddles instantly, something Minaga also wouldn’t complain about, as that would still be him completing the labyrinth in its intended fashion.

If it was someone he knew, it also included someone like Ell'Hakan, but he didn't think that guy had anything... wait... could she maybe...?

"It's Sylphie, isn't it?" Jake asked with a smile as he got an idea.

**"I should really stop giving too many hints..."**

In another version of Minaga's Endless Labyrinth, a bird was flying through the mist, flapping her wings pretty casually as she bee-lined for the exit of the section. At the same time, she also had a very engaging conversation with Minaga.

**"Again, can you properly explain what it means when you say you can still hear the wind?"**

"Ree."

**"There literally is no wind. It's entirely calm, zero meters a second."**

"Ree."

**"Alright, yeah, sure, there still is a smidgen of air-affinity mana in the air, but that is a requirement for the mist to have a medium to exist in. You need to fill the air with something, and what's better to fill the air with than air."**

"Ree."

**"That doesn't really answer anything, now does it? Is it some kind of intuition? Instinct of some kind? An odd form of divination? Also, if you could do this, why didn't you just show the way when you did my labyrinth floors?"**

"Ree."

**"What do you mean you wanted your uncle to also have fun? What even is that ability of yours? Wait... I got an idea... you are related to Sylphs, elementals that do not appear at C-grade. I do not have safeguards against their unique magic, even if most of it will be blocked by nullifying many general divination concepts, but if you rely on that, then maybe... say, for pure research purposes, can you tell me if the skill of yours is related to Sylphs?"**

"Ree."

**"I didn't ask if it was related to Sylphie, but the wind elementals known as Sylphs. You do know what Sylphs are, right? You definitely should. I literally gave you that Dreamy Embrace of the Benevolent Sylph mythical item."**

"Ree?"



**“Well, yes, I do believe that can be described as a tasty item, but that doesn’t answer anything...”**

**“Ree.”**

**“I am not giving you another damn mythical item for answering a question... couldn’t you just tell me? For the sake of scientific progress?”**

**“Ree?”**

**“... no, I don’t really know this guy called Arnold...”**

**“Ree?”**

**“Science isn’t the name of some club you join, but... actually, forget it. I am not going to get a straight answer no matter what I say. Jeez, you’re worse than that uncle of yours as what you have isn’t even a Bloodline...”**

**“Ree!” Sylphie screeched cheerfully.**

**“Oh... oh, so you say that what the wind says is related to your uncle? Wait, if your skill is a merging of the Sylph one and Records from his Bloodline... that would explain why it works so well, as it is a wholly unique skill never seen before, containing new and unexplored concepts... if I could figure out how it works, I could block it with my mist going forward. Alright, I may be ready to strike a deal.”**

**“Ree. Ree, ree, ree?” Sylphie entered negotiation mode.**

**“You drive a hard bargain, but compensation in the form of tasty things can be arranged.”**

**“Ree,” Sylphie responded cheerfully.**

**“... mythic rarity natural treasures are not just tasty things, but-“**

**“Ree?”**

**“Well, yes, I did agree they could be described as tasty, however-“**

**“Ree!”**

**“What do you mean I am arguing in bad faith!? How do you even know what that means!?”**

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