

The Primal Hunter

Chapter 801: Nevermore: The J***s Incident

“Oh, I recognize this one,” Casper said with a smile as he quickly deciphered the Magiscript on the wall and found the solution as he wrote it down in mid-air before absorbing what was effectively magic code. “A very novel application of the bound-zone script.”

“Glad that at least some people appreciate real art,” Minaga answered. **“Speaking of art. Thoughts on the traps so far? Always open to feedback.”**

Casper, knowing where to go after analyzing the clues provided, began running down one of the hallways as he kept scanning his surroundings, also making full use of all his dungeon-related skills. They provided him far more hints than if he didn't have them, and he had almost a sixth sense as to the layout of the labyrinth as he ran through it. “Hm, they are all very standard and understandable. There really isn't anything crazy or out of the ordinary, I mean. I assume this was a deliberate design choice?”

“Right on! Making the traps unnecessarily complicated will just lead to senseless deaths and lost attempts too fast, as people are taken by surprise. That isn't really the purpose of the labyrinth. Hence, it's better to stick with the classics. But, if I did want to add some more interesting traps, you got any ideas?”

“While I cannot know what you already implement later on... have you considered rolling boulders?” Casper asked curiously. Who didn't like rolling boulders? They were as classic as could be.

“Rolling boulders?” Minaga asked, sounding genuinely confused. **“Boulders dropping down from the ceiling? I think that is just a less efficient way of collapsing the ceiling or-“**

“No, no, not like that. I mean that right as you enter a hallway, a massive round boulder filling the entire hallway will drop down behind you and begin rolling toward you. This will force the challenger to rush far more than normal, and the boulder itself adds a great visual element and indicator of danger. Of course, some will be able to easily avoid the boulder with their skills... maybe set the boulder on fire or something so those who can turn intangible can't just let it pass it? You may also need to make some more alterations so people can't just block the boulder or something, but I am sure you can find a solution,” Casper theory-crafted. If he ever made his own trap-filled dungeon, he would surely have rolling boulders, even if he did admit they weren't the most efficient.

“That... does sound interesting. Though it does seem to still serve a very similar purpose to collapsing ceilings,” Minaga commented.

“Lasers and spikes serve the same function, too, but you have both. Spike pits and acid pits are also very much the same. However, even if they serve the same function, both are still great as they add diversity and variance to the Challenge Dungeon,” Casper kept insisting. “Also, ultimately... having a rolling boulder is just cool.”

Despite spending his time trying to convince Minaga to implement rolling boulder traps, Casper had made quite a bit of progress already in his section as he reached a trap hallway. Even if he discussed them a lot with Minaga, Casper didn't really do the trap rooms himself. At least, he didn't do them as intended.

Instead, he knelt right in front of the long kilometer-long hallway and placed his hands on the floor. A wave of energy went through the floor as Casper's mana poured in, and in the very next moment, every single trap triggered at once as fire, ice, spikes, lasers, and whatnot fired, with pits and pistons slamming down activated throughout. After everything was done, Casper stood up, cracked his neck, and walked through casually.

As a dungeon architect and trap specialist, he did have certain advantages. Of course, he had a very strong feeling his advantage was far worse than someone like Jake, even if he could “cheat” a lot. In either case, Casper had confidence in reaching section one hundred at least.

Primarily because he was already on Labyrinth Section 96. It just saved a lot of time still being able to pass through the trap hallways safely. He did have a strong feeling his method of triggering the traps would stop working at some point, though. Or he would just no longer be fast enough. He wasn't really that fast, after all, and he still took some time to properly navigate, taking quite a few wrong turns throughout.

“I will definitely take your feedback up for consideration,” Minaga answered after thinking a bit and giving Casper time to focus on clearing the trap room. **“Maybe ask for some more opinions.”**

Casper smiled and nodded as he picked up speed and began running down the hallway to make sure he could pass it in time. Doing at least one hundred sections was his goal, and based on what he knew, that should put him as one of the absolute top performers for this Challenge Dungeon.

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Jake completely ignored the way-too-fucking-complicated huge magic script at the beginning of the section as he shot into a hallway at full speed, not stopping for a second. Arcane Awakening activated at 30%, giving him even more speed as he approached a hallway with a few traps in it. Right as the traps triggered, Jake jumped to the side as a spear shot by him, the air pressure alone leaving bloody cuts on Jake's

torso and tearing flesh off his arm despite flying by him more than three meters to the side.

Continuing forward while ignoring his wounds, he soon triggered another trap. Dozens of lasers activated, filling the entire hallway and leaving no room for a human to get through, forcing Jake to block one of them. Eternal Hunger, with its form changed to resemble a shield with sharp edges to still be considered a weapon, appeared in Jake's hand as he blocked one of the lasers and kept running.

Even the mythical rarity weapon wasn't left unscathed, as a hole was slowly being burned into it. Gritting his teeth, Jake barely managed to reach the end of the hallway, where he had to jump up to another floor. Summoning his Eternal Shadow, Jake barely managed to delay the laser for a fraction of a second, proving just long enough for Jake to get through the ceiling and into the next hallway.

Eternal Hunger was still simmering with energy as a clear small hole had been burned into it, the weapon already mending itself. Considering not even the B-grade he fought could leave a single scratch on the weapon, he took that as proof Jake was somewhere he really shouldn't be.

Because he was pretty damn sure those lasers or that spear earlier could have killed even a True Dragon in one shot. A low-tier B-grade one, sure, but a True Dragon nevertheless. Then again, this probably shouldn't come as a surprise to Jake.

He was in Labyrinth Section 214, after all.

Jake's original goal of reaching two hundred sections had long been passed as Jake just kept going. He had briefly checked out one of the gatekeeper rooms as he passed by it on the previous floor, and while he couldn't tell the creature's exact level, Jake was pretty sure it was around mid-tier B-grade. That was a being above level 400... so, yeah, Jake didn't even have the instinct to give that fight a go. He was already pressured enough on time and attempts as things were.

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It was to the level where he had to use his boosting skill from the very beginning of a section to be fast enough. He had learned that when he didn't make it through in time in section one-hundred and ninety-eight, and with that loss and his other fuck-ups, he was down to his final attempt.

Attempts remaining: 1

His first life had naturally been lost against the B-grade. Another life had been lost when he learned he couldn't do the trap hallways at all anymore, a third life was lost when Jake thought that maybe he could still do a slightly smaller trap hallway, and a fourth

one was, as mentioned, lost when Jake simply didn't run fast enough due to his lack of boosting skill.

By now, there wasn't really much to discuss regarding his approach to each Labyrinth Section. Jake didn't even have time to make a route properly anymore, but he just had to follow his intuition in the first part as he fired out Pulses of Perception and created a mental map to navigate through. Everything that wasn't the smallest of traps had to be entirely avoided, and he also tried to stay away from teleporters whenever possible. He had encountered one in Labyrinth Section 200 that he got very bad vibes from, giving him the feeling that should he take it, Jake would get teleported right in front of a gatekeeper. Or into a water level. Both would be equally horrible. Actually, scratch that. He'd rather die to a B-grade than be stuck in a water level as the timer slowly expired.

Anyway, all it came down to was pure speed and pacing. Jake had five whole days to complete the section, and he would need every moment simply due to how massive it was. It was a true marathon where pacing and conserving resources were as important as simply being fast.

Jake was lucky he was doing this Challenge Dungeon after the Colosseum of Mortals. During the Colosseum, Jake had improved small aspects of his boosting skill, especially the parts where he only amplified certain parts of the body, and this sure came in handy now. He didn't really need to boost his ability to punch stuff or create bigger magical explosions when he was just running, so he only focused on pouring his energy into his legs.

This increased his longevity and reduced the stress on his body quite significantly. When he did begin to run out of steam and had to relax his legs, Jake summoned his wings and began flapping while even using his hands to blast himself down hallways for more speed. It looked ridiculous, but it worked.

The only truly sad part about the increased difficulty was his inability to have fun with Minaga. He had to dedicate all his mental energy to making sure he was going the right way, and he didn't want to risk messing up by focusing on coming up with a good quip to throw back at Minaga. No, he had to wait till he was done with the section and could relax and fully regenerate inside every checkpoint hallway.

Because, yes, he sure as hell needed these brief respites now, or he would have been utterly fucked.

Days passed as Jake kept making his way through the section. Toward the end, his entire body was sore, his legs were slightly bloody from overextension, and his resource pools were borderline empty. However, he could see the end before him as he jumped up and down several floors before he finally reached the gate. This chapter is updated by **novel•fire•net**

Placing his hand on it, a prompt popped up in front of him.

Labyrinth Section 214 clear time: 4 days, 22:41:55

“Nice,” Jake smiled to himself. He even had a bit over an hour to go, so it wasn’t even that bad of a time. He was spent, though, and he really needed a break. A twenty-four-hour nap would also be nice.

“Great, great...” Minaga muttered before he suddenly perked up. **“But, alas, this is where the journey ends!”**

“You say that with such certainty it’s kind of cute,” Jake said with a smile as the gate in front of him opened, and he prepared to take a nice break in the checkpoint hall-

You have entered Labyrinth Section 215 of Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth.

Time Remaining: 4 days, 23:59:59

Jake stared at the message and the Labyrinth Section that had appeared in front of him as he cursed out loud. “What the fuck is this?”

There was no checkpoint hallway. No break or slight reprieve. It was like on the early floors where you just went from one labyrinth into another... something Jake hadn’t seen for a hundred and fifty sections now.

“Well, it’s the next Labyrinth Section. Duh. Why complain? You feeling tired? Oh, poor you!” Minaga said teasingly.

“This is just cheap, man,” Jake said with annoyance.

“Oh, give me a break. You are already way, way past what you should be right now. So stop complaining and just take the damn win already,” Minaga said.

Jake did know this was probably the end of the road for him, but he still tried to scan the section with Pulse as he relaxed a little, trying to find a suitable route. However, after about an hour, it became clear this section was about the same length as the last one. Considering his borderline non-existent resources and spent body... yeah, there was no way.

“Still feels cheap,” Jake said after over an hour of silence.

“Says the obvious cheater,” Minaga shot back. **“Hopefully, the reward can make you stop complaining... though I will warn you that you kind of run into diminishing returns when you do *too* well at a Challenge Dungeon. Built-in system anti-cheat, if you will. And while you may complain about that, you should be happy. There are others who have been able to cheat in other Challenge Dungeons far more than this and could have theoretically gained nearly infinite scores.”**

Jake was about to complain anyway until he remembered something. He remembered Ell'Hakan in the Minaga City Floor and how he passed it instantly by entirely cheating the merchants there into thinking some random thing was worth a ridiculous amount. If he or someone else like him could do something akin to that elsewhere... yeah, this kind of anti-cheat was probably for the best.

“Glad you do see some sense,” Minaga said after he saw Jake wasn't going to continue complaining.

“I keep it internal,” Jake commented as he had chosen to just stay there and relax. He had five days to do this section and decided he might as well just chill and heal up during this time. Sure, chances are the dungeon would heal him when he exited, but he couldn't be sure. Also, he did kind of want to go and spend his last attempt by getting clapped by a mid-tier B-grade. That sounded like a fun way to go out.

“Seeing as we have some time, how about I pick your brain about something?”

“Sure,” Jake shrugged.

“So, wild thought, what would you say if I added a trap that is a large flaming rolling boulder that drops down behind you in a trap hallway, blocking off your path of retreat and forcing you to pass it quickly? Totally original idea, by the way, totally not stolen from someone else.”

Jake failed to hold back a smile as he chuckled and couldn't help himself. “I was surprised you didn't have it already, if I am being honest. Back on Earth, it was a very common trap that many rich people had in their houses to protect from home invaders, with many large organizations also using them. With great success, too.”

“I see, I see...” Minaga muttered, seemingly very skeptical of Jake bullshitting him.

“Ah, by the way, this kind of trap is called a Jones,” Jake finally said with a big smile.

“Hm...” Minaga answered tentatively, definitely seeming like he smelled something fishy.

“Say, Casper, what is the name of this kind of boulder trap?”

Casper considered for a second before he answered. “I don't think the multiverse has a name for it.”

“But what about back on Earth?”

“Oh,” Casper muttered. “I would reckon most just call it a rolling boulder trap.”

“I knew it!” Minaga exclaimed. **“Some asshole is trying to make me think it’s called a Jones or somethi-“**

“Yeah, that’s the official name,” Casper quickly interjected. “Most don’t know the official terminology, though. I just assumed you were asking about what the layman called it.”

“I... see... hm.”

Great movies, too, Casper thought, as he already had a very good idea who had been filling Minaga with crap... and he was more than happy to offer the assist.

Plus, it would be really fucking funny if Minaga actually ended up making that the official name.

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Chapter 802: Nevermore: All Good Labyrinths Must Come To An End

Arnold stared at the wall for a good while before he returned his attention to his tablet. Taking out a pen, he began to write on it as he slowly nodded, taking down notes and trying to solve the puzzle in front of him. Hours passed as he never moved, and after nearly half a day, he finally reached a satisfactory solution.

Raising the tablet, he pointed its camera toward the wall, and the magical scripts were recorded and translated according to the algorithm he had written. There were still a few minor flaws in the solution, but with repeated scans and a bigger data sample, those would quickly be hammered out.

Reading the clue and seeing the unclear outline of a path displayed on the tablet, he began to make his way down one of the long hallways while scanning all the walls for more clues along the way. After another hour or so, his data sample was sufficient, and he no longer had a need to collect more.

Summoning a mode of transportation, he got into the ball-shaped orb of metal and soon after shot down one of the hallways. Whenever he spotted signs of traps, he sent in a number of disposable drones to scout it out or clear a path while he entirely avoided any of the gatekeepers.

Like Jake, Arnold was also currently doing the Endless Labyrinth. However, his approach to solving it was far different from Jake's. He actually did it the intended way.

At the beginning of every new Labyrinth Section, there would be a unique cipher to that specific section. Solving this cipher will allow you to decrypt and understand later clues that could be found on the walls throughout.

Arnold was quite good at this, and while each section did have a unique cipher, some elements did repeat, allowing him to slowly improve his methodology and speed. His void-related abilities had little value inside of this labyrinth, outside of some of the trap rooms. It had also been good when he could still fight the gatekeepers, but after reaching Labyrinth Section 95 or so, he had solidly reached his limit when it came to direct confrontations. Also, even if he could fight, they would take too long, making it more efficient to take another path altogether.

After passing section one hundred, the difficulty increased once more. Another layer was added, and the cipher jumped severalfold in difficulty. It took Arnold nearly a full week to solve it, but at least he managed to do so and complete the section in time.

He also did the next few, but he lost an attempt on section one-hundred and six and another on one-hundred and seven as he simply wasn't fast enough. In fact, he only did these sections because he could spend one attempt solving the cipher and another actually navigating his way through the labyrinth.

Arnold lost his next attempt on one-hundred and eight, which he barely completed in time, even with the cipher being done on the first attempt. One-hundred and nine was even closer, but he had learned a bit and placed drones at any triggers to move around doors. His problem was that the range at which he could activate them was severely limited within the labyrinth due to the special mist. However, he could still use them when relatively close due to his void affinity having some ability to pierce the mist.

Alas, section one hundred and ten proved to be too much. The addition of more floors to the labyrinth marked a ridiculous increase in difficulty. Even if Arnold completed the cipher, he would barely have enough time to navigate the labyrinth. If he even had enough time. The man had no way of knowing how close he got to the exit as his final attempt was spent, Arnold failing to pass Labyrinth Section 110.

He was a bit disappointed. Not just because he had failed but because he would no longer be able to be presented with interesting ciphers to solve. Appearing in the white void, he did wonder how he did, with the system quickly providing him an answer.

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed Minaga's Endless Labyrinth while performing exceptionally and near-perfectly consistently. With your sharp mind and deep insight, you navigated the labyrinth as a true savant, making full use of the clues supplied as you solved every puzzle put before you. Your speed, tenacity, and deep analytical abilities allowed you to perform exceptionally well,

passing Labyrinth Section 109 successfully. A feat to be proud of. 82.201 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 20% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

While he had performed worse – as seen by fewer Nevermore Points earned – Arnold had enjoyed the labyrinth far more than the Test of Character. Solving magical and mathematical puzzles was simply much more engaging than social problems that had too many annoying and illogical aspects to consider.

He had enjoyed the puzzles so much that he envied anyone yet to do the Challenge Dungeon and their ability to solve all those interesting ciphers for the first time while improving their analytical abilities. It was an invaluable experience he couldn't imagine anyone not enjoying immensely.

"So people seriously just sit there and try to solve some damn math problem or whatever at the start of every Labyrinth Section?" Jake asked Minaga as he stared at the magical script in Labyrinth Section 215. No matter how much he stared at the damn thing, he didn't get shit. He even wondered if it could even be solved or was just some stupid scribbles to fuck with people.

"That is indeed how you are supposed to do things," Minaga answered. **"Well, one of the ways to do things. There are many solutions to the same problem, and ultimately, the challenge is to navigate through the labyrinth within the given time. Some have certain scouting methods that still work, others use summoned creatures to assist them – even if that is limited severely – while some bloody arseholes use their overpowered Bloodline to cheese the entire thing."**

"Why do I feel like that was directed towards me? Nah, it couldn't be. Anyway, I do wonder how someone like the Fallen King handles this place. He isn't exactly the fastest, and I don't think he has any scouting tools worth much," Jake shared thoughtfully.

"I'm not going to randomly share stuff. It's not gonna happen. I will not tell you how badly or well your party members are doing, especially not if my fellow Unique Lifeform is doing badly."

"So he is doing badly, huh," Jake nodded, not entirely surprised.

"I didn't say he was."

"You phrased it by putting emphasis on *if* he did badly. Not if he did well. I am guessing that means he is doing badly," Jake very correctly pointed out.

"That is to the level of just being pure guesswork based on a very shaky foundation of nothing," Minaga said in a rather deadpan tone.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m right. Which I am.”

Minaga stopped engaging with that conversational track as he remained quiet, Jake also enjoying the momentary silence. He had already napped and felt pretty well-rested, with the period of weakness from his boosting skill also gone. This was an entire day already “wasted,” and Jake knew he didn’t have any shot at beating the section.

But he still stayed to have one final moment of fun.

Standing up, Jake stretched as he looked upward. “Ready to feel catharsis as you see me get my ass kicked by a far more powerful B-grade?”

“Yeah... about that, one little piece of advice. Maybe you should reconsider doing that? While dying doesn’t lead to any physical demerits, you are still dying. There is a reason people don’t train too much in Challenge Dungeons with multiple lives. The mental toll dying has on the soul isn’t non-insignificant, and you may end up suffering for it,” Minaga said with what sounded like genuine concern.

“Says the Unique Lifeform who has had uncountable versions of yourself die,” Jake said with a smile as he got a bit more serious. “While I appreciate the concern, I am good. If I felt like there would be any true consequences, I wouldn’t go through with it, and no offense... I trust my own gut more on this matter than anyone else. Be they god or not.”

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“Fair enough. Then go ahead and enjoy dying a horrible death!” Minaga said with all his cheer back.

Jake didn’t have to be told twice and went to do just that. He casually made his way down a few dozen hallways before he finally reached a barrier. Curiously, he looked to see what kind of being would kill him and frowned a bit when he saw a human-looking figure standing on the other side.

[Silver Knight Gatekeeper – lvl ???]

It was a simple-looking knight, though Jake got the feeling there wasn’t any kind of enlightened being within that helmet. Instead, It was more like a golem or maybe a living armor kind of deal. The knight stood in front of the barrier it guarded with both hands resting atop the crossguards of its sword, patiently waiting for anyone to enter.

Without Jake’s instincts, he wouldn’t really have taken the knight for anything powerful. It looked like the kind of foe you could find in any grade, but its aura was unmistakable.

Here goes nothing, Jake smiled to himself as he placed a hand on the shimmering wall to enter the room. As he did so, the space expanded once more as an arena was created with Jake on one side and the knight on the other.

Jake shook his head as a bow appeared in his hand. Right as it did, the silver knight that had been standing entirely still slowly raised its head as silvery light filled its eyes. Its aura expanded as it grasped the sword and raised it right as Jake shot an arrow toward the B-grade while his sense of danger exploded with warning.

In the very next second, time slowed down. Jake hadn't even been able to see the swing properly before Moment of triggered as a faint silvery line reminiscent of a thread floated in front of his head, slowly moving toward him.

Dodging to the side, Jake shot another arrow after his first one had already been annihilated by the first swing, having been cut in half mid-flight. Right as time returned to normal, Jake dove to the side as his danger sense warned him again. In a quite impressive display, Jake dodged five more attacks before the knight's sword began to glow.

The B-grade held the sword with both hands and took a stance before it swung with its full might. Jake could only try and shake his head as he was very clear that there was no fucking way he was dodging that. A net of silvery strings of magic cut through the entire hall as Jake's body was cut into hundreds of pieces instantaneously, marking his end of the road in Minaga's Endless Labyrinth.

In the very next second, Jake opened his eyes again and found himself standing within a familiar white void. His heart was pounding, and sweat appeared on his brows, but he quickly calmed himself down as he muttered. "What level was that thing even..."

"Close to late-tier B-grade... and not even considered a weak variant," Minaga answered. **"Was it really worth you spending another full day for just a few seconds in front of a B-grade?"**

"It totally was. Also, should you really still be talking after the dungeon is completed?"

"Technically, you are still in my Challenge Dungeon, so I can. Besides, it's not like you can do anything about it."

Jake knew it wasn't worth trying to discuss such a thing with Minaga as he simply turned his attention to what else would come in this white void. Something that popped up only a few seconds later.

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed Minaga's Endless Labyrinth above any measurable expectations. With unquestionable speed and no hesitation, you have relied on your instincts and powerful natural talents to overcome Minaga's Endless Labyrinth with ease, conquering every section effortlessly. You only met the end of your journey far after the impossible had already been achieved, passing a ridiculous 214 Labyrinth Sections, long past where there was much more to earn. A near-irreplicable feat. 148.205 Nevermore

Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 25% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

In all honesty, Jake didn't see anything that surprised him here. His ultimate goal had always been that 25% bonus, and he had earned that... well, probably quite a while ago. Jake wasn't sure how many sections you had to pass to unlock it, but based on the amount of Nevermore Points he had earned, he had probably gone quite a bit beyond even the "impossible." By at least fifty sections.

Jake had earned a lot more Nevermore Points than even when he had beaten Valdemar. In fact, looking at the number of points, Jake got a theory that the maximum one could ever get was 150.000, where getting that number was actually impossible unless you performed absolutely perfectly. Like... you would have to beat Valdemar without ever struggling while having all ten lives available, possibly even while never buying any equipment or recovery potions throughout.

Comparing his feat here to the Colosseum of Mortals didn't really feel fair. Jake would say the Colosseum had been way fucking harder, but he reckoned most others in the multiverse would view getting this far in the labyrinth as far, far more difficult. Jake had only gotten this far because he was a cheat, and he knew it.

Either way, another 25% amplifier was nice to get under his belt. That meant he would get a 60% bonus from the Challenge Dungeons alone so far, with two to go. Looking at those numbers, Jake couldn't help but have a thought...

Could I get a 100% amplifier overall?

If 20% was considered the normal "perfect score" for each Challenge Dungeon, so if he got 20%, that would pretty much make it a clean sweep. It was a hard goal to reach, especially after that horrible Test of Character that only gave him 10%, but he wanted to give it a shot, if not for anything else but his own sense of vanity.

Shaking his head, Jake noted that he hadn't gotten any title despite being better here than the Colosseum. Probably because the title would have been of the same tier, so it just kept the old one. Considering that, Jake turned his attention to the final reward. After that Storybook Page from the Test of Character, Jake had high expectations... which made him unsure what to think as he received what looked like a small statue of Minaga, giving him a double thumbs up.

Reserving judgment, he Identified it.

[My Own Very Own Top-tier Minaga's Labyrinth (Unique)] – Is that a dungeon in your pocket, or is it just me? Finally, a solution to missing the wondrous Minaga has been found, as you now have the opportunity to place your very own Minaga's Labyrinth wherever your heart desires (conditions may apply). When placing the dungeon, you must choose a suitable location. The nature and design

of the dungeon may be modified upon placement with advice from the Minaga clone within. This Minaga's Labyrinth is of the top tier, allowing you to customize far more options while expanding the size of the dungeon significantly. As a top-tier Minaga's Labyrinth, sections within the labyrinth can cross grades. Note that the dungeon must be maintained after placement, and should it run out of power, it will disappear forever. As a top-tier variant of Minaga's Labyrinth, it does not have a built-in expiration date.

Requirements: Soulbound.

Jake, still standing within the white void and staring at the statue, couldn't help but get a thought as he spoke out loud.

"Say... Minaga... this reward..." Jake muttered. Find the newest release on *novel**fire**net*

"Yeah, isn't it great? It will allow you to--"

"Isn't this just a way for you to stash more clones of yourself spread across the multiverse to solidify your own immortality? And how many damn clones does it take to include a clone in every single one of these?" Jake questioned. "Actually, scratch both those questions... will this even work in the ninety-third universe as you effectively bring a clone there using this?"

"Short answer? Yes, it does work. Long answer? I can't bring the clone out of the dungeon, or it will go poof. Also, it isn't the best way to hide clones. Artificial dungeons have a lifespan unless they are transformed into true worlds, which will naturally make it so they are no longer considered dungeons either. Of course, you can maintain a dungeon with skilled enough dungeon engineers. I doubt you have the staff required to fix this one... unless I myself come and fix it," Minaga answered as he entirely needlessly lowered his voice as if whispering. **"That is a hint that I will use this dungeon as an excuse to come visit once the universe fully opens up."**

"I had kind of expected you to be a recurring character in my life... but if I am being honest, I am not sure how to feel about this reward. It isn't really as much a reward for a person, but their faction, assuming they have one," Jake voiced his thoughts.

"Kind of? But not really. Even if you don't have a faction, you could use this to get a Dungeon Pioneer title by being the first one to clear it or just design it to train yourself in some way. You could also just sell it to some major faction. Not gonna lie; most would pay top Credits for a Minaga's Labyrinth. Especially a top-tier one like this. Other variants will disappear no matter how well you maintain them, but the top-tier one can technically be around forever, making it far more valuable. Also, as a final note, don't you go around thinking these dungeons are given out easily. You need to have a damn-near-top performance to get one, as I

can't exactly make an infinite number," Minaga said, really trying to talk up his reward.

"You are fully aware I am just going to give this to my resident City Lord and manager back on Earth and have her figure out what to use it for, right?" Jake said with a grin.

"Well, hopefully, she can appreciate good craftsmanship..."

"I could also just do as I usually do and forget it in my spatial storage forever and never let it see the light of day..."

"Ha ha, funny joke," Minaga scoffed.

Jake just smiled as he prepared to leave the dungeon.

"Wait, you are joking, right... right? Why do I feel like you aren't joking? Yeah, you must be joking, who would-"

Before the distressed Unique Lifeform could say more, Jake accepted the prompt to leave as he disappeared from the white void, a pocket dungeon that may or may not be forgotten forever richer.

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

Chapter 803: Nevermore (Not Really): A Sandy World

A hooded young man walked through the busy streets, sticking with all the civilians who made sure to stay out of the way of the patrolling soldiers who occupied the middle of the road. They all invited respect, yet fear from everyone. It was not necessarily due to their own power but what they represented. Who they represented.

The orange skin of these people made them easily discernable from humans, even if there were many similarities. Many had tattoos that marked their caste and origin, too, many of which were prominently displayed. It was a society where one was born into their station in life with little hope of ever changing. The newest leader of the planet had enacted some change, allowing people to ascend by joining the army, but it was an arduous process that had only truly picked up speed after the system arrived.

Integration. That is what the common term was across the multiverse, but here, it was called the Celestial Prophecy. An event that was foreseen by their glorious and unquestionable leader. A being born under the Twin Maidens and the Golden Patriarch.

The names of the two moons and sun that shone brightly in the sky. Due to the nature of his birth, he was of the highest caste, selected by the heavens themselves, and given a title the moment his provenance was discovered.

The Celestial Child. Ell'Hakan, the son of the twin moons and the sun itself. A living god in the eyes of many.

Born of the universe as a blessing to the Nahoom, their savior and leader by birthright. Legends flourished, how he was born on the day of the twin eclipse, having simply appeared atop the highest mountain on the planet. Another legend said he fell from the heavens, bringing with him rain and the best year of harvest in recorded history. There were too many legends to count, but they all had one thing in common.

They were all absolute bullshit.

Yet the natives believed every single one of them. How could they not? The Celestial Child had only brought miracle after miracle, and the entire planet had never been as united and happy as now. Well... at least they thought they were happy. But to his eyes, he saw something else.

Everything was wrong. The threads hung in the air, invisible yet frayed. Broken, incomplete, tangled, miscolored... nothing was as it should be. Their emotions toward one another were not as they should be. The karmic connections were not formed genuinely.

William continued to walk through the city, staying as inconspicuous as possible. His body was covered from head to toe, and despite his appearance so suspect, no one looked twice as if he blended into the environment.

If anyone with detection skills were around, they could surely find the karma mage, but there wasn't anyone of note around. Most of the powerful people on the planet had left for Nevermore already, leaving only the bare minimum. None of which were a threat to William and his purpose for visiting.

He had already been on the planet for a few months now, and he planned on staying a little longer. Looking at the karmic threads that spanned the planet, he had noticed a few that were very out of place - ones he had to research more than others to try and find the truth he had been searching for.

The rest of the day passed as William left the city and walked to the outskirts slums. Large orange mountains surrounded the city, having served as a natural barrier for millennia from both invaders and the environment. Flying to the top of one of these mountains, he sat down and stared out at the vast nothingness beyond the mountains.

An endless desert of sand continued as far as he could see, with the occasional movement of monsters being the only disturbance to the tranquil world. Compared to

Earth, the Nahoom homeworld was simply far less dangerous, having apparently never spawned any creatures stronger than low-tier C-grade. It was also far smaller, being only about a third the size of current Earth, with most of its dangerous monsters could be found inside of the planet. Ell'Hakan had managed to conquer the world truly, having convinced every other nation to join him after the system arrived, with most having given in even before the initiation.

Before the system, things had been pretty bad, though. The environment was very dry, and the average temperature was quite a bit higher than on Earth. This meant something as basic as water was hard to come by, and large underground wells had to be dug for the people to survive. The entire planet was pretty much just a massive desert with only the occasional oasis here and there. It didn't have any true oceans, but just a few large rivers and lakes, with most of the ecosystem sustained due to many of the massive mountains spread across the planet getting covered in ice every year. Ah, and the poles also had ice, which was honestly a pretty common occurrence for habitable plants.

Turning away from the dunes and looking out over the city, William sighed as he saw the countless warped threads of karma once more. It was karmic power forged through false premises, lies, and delusion. All this falsehood was surrounded by golden buildings and grandeur as the massive capital city of the Nahoom homeworld stretched out before him. A city matching the largest Earth had ever seen, if not surpassing it, with tens of millions living there.

As he looked out over the city, he couldn't help but wonder how a place could even become like this. So whole, yet broken. There were so many things that were just wrong, and William wanted to get to the bottom of it. However, right as he thought this, he began to feel his body failing.

I guess it could only hold for that long, he thought as his arm began to crumble, and the very next second, his body fell apart into metal dust that was scattered by the wind.

Opening his eyes, William found himself back inside the cave, hidden away from the capital. His vessel had lasted quite a while this time around, William getting better at using the skill he had "taken" from his former dear Patron.

Being a Heretic had some benefits, the greatest of which was that William no longer found himself under the control of Eversmile. The bad part was that he couldn't get any teachings either, even if he could still get skills and the Primordial's Records. Sadly, even if he had technically broken free now, damage had still been done.

Taking out the Nevermore token from his spatial storage, he rubbed it a bit as he considered going but ultimately decided to delay. He had no reason to rush it. His trip to Nevermore would be less fruitful than most others due to Eversmile convincing him he had to go in D-grade. He would still go, though, if not just to escape from the Nahoom planet.

William had arrived there with the help of the space jellyfish that had originally helped bring Ell'Hakan to Earth and helped William get to Nevermore the first time around. It, too, had been blessed by Eversmile, but the Primordial had never communicated with it directly. Instead, William had relayed everything. After he turned his back on Eversmile, William still felt his connection to the jellyfish remain the same, making him believe it didn't know. This did indeed turn out to be the case, as it gladly helped him when he claimed it was on Eversmile's order. Of course, while the jellyfish was a damn good space mage, it could only teleport William to the Nahoom homeworld and not back again. Which is where the Nevermore teleportation token came in.

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

Shaking his head, William put back the Nevermore token. It wasn't time yet. He still had an objective on the planet to complete, and he had to be done before anyone who knew who he was or could locate him returned from Nevermore.

Waving his hand, metal spurns appeared, which he quickly condensed into a humanoid form. Closing his eyes, he formed a connection as the empty husk came to life; William connected to it through karma. The construct was almost like a living karmic void, having no connection to even the world around it. This made it far harder to detect, and those who did notice it wouldn't pay any attention. Forming any karmic bond with it was incredibly difficult, after all.

The karmic vessel exited the cave soon after, headed for the capital once more as he had some things he still wanted to check out there. Evidence he needed to find to use against Ell'Hakan when the time was right. After that, he had another major city to visit.

And this time, the mission was on his own terms... even if he had effectively been hired for the job. But at least it was by a fellow Earthling and not some god, even if they did probably contact him at the behest of one.

"But it's, like, super hard..." the giant worm complained as they wiggled slightly after appearing in the middle of the vastness of space, another being teleporting in the very next second.

"You already know how to open them. Now you just need better control of where you reappear when you use them," the god who, in Sandy's eyes, was cruelty itself answered.

"Opening one is easy! It's like digging in the sand. You just plop down, start wiggling, and you make a hole! But... yeah, it's a bit hard to know exactly where you end up making the exit hole again... especially when you can't see where you're going and stuff... so can't we just agree it's impossible and go have dinner?" Sandy tried very hard.

"I was told expressly that there would be no food before you at least try to achieve minor success," the still-evil god insisted. Sandy knew the horrible man had been hired by the many-headed hydra to teach Sandy super complicated space stuff that Sandy really didn't feel like Sandy needed to learn.

As for what Sandy had to learn? Well, stuff about wormholes, duh.

Being a worm, Sandy naturally learned how to make wormholes. Wormholes were, in the simplest of terms – according to the teacher, anyway – two spots getting connected through a hole in space. In between these two spots, Sandy would have to swim through very dense cosmic dust, but after getting out on the other side, the former sandworm would find themselves somewhere entirely new, far away from the original spot.

Sandy's problem was exactly with this last part... where the wormhole would go. Trying to navigate while inside the dense cosmic dust was very hard, as it felt like really resistant sand. Also, the cosmic dust slowly damaged Sandy, even with all their resistance, so the worm had a limited duration inside of the hole in space.

This was also a bit of a problem, as the distance passed inside the cosmic dust correlated directly with how long Sandy would move in the outside world. Sandy did have the speed and resistance part pretty much figured out, though. Getting out was also technically pretty easy, as when Sandy had to go out again, Sandy just had to "imagine" a hole opening and then swim through it. This hole would also appear in the true universe to serve as an exit.

But how was Sandy supposed to also know where this hole would bring Sandy when Sandy didn't know anything about where Sandy was in the real world? It wasn't like there was any real direction inside of the cosmic dust. Sandy could swim straight in one direction and somehow end up entirely opposite. It was very confusing.

"Okay... if I have to learn to get food, tell me the trick!" Sandy insisted after getting over their frustration.

"There are no tricks, only comprehension. Follow your instincts and your will," the god said. "You are a natural-born talent at this. It's within you. You have already learned how to bend space far more efficiently, and your control of the space affinity is improving at an astonishing rate. However, only you can truly learn the secrets of the cosmic dust you see, so only you can find your own Path to comprehend it fully."

Sandy wiggled, annoyed at the damn teacher telling them that again. Why could a hydra with so many heads not figure out that Sandy needed a teacher who could also feel and see the same cosmic dust? Cosmic dust was everywhere, like sand in a desert, so it shouldn't be that hard.

Yet, for some reason, apparently only Sandy could see it. Sandy's teacher claimed it was because the cosmic sand didn't necessarily exist but was just Sandy's conceptual comprehension of the concept of space materialized through will... or some other dumb stuff like that Sandy was pretty sure was just an excuse for being blind. And that came from Sandy, who didn't even have any eyes!

"Can we just go back to normal space magic stuff?" Sandy asked after a bit more of trying to do wormholes properly but failing repeatedly.

"If that is what the Chosen desires, it can be arranged. However, we shall still do so with the intent of improving your understanding of this cosmic dust," the god said as he waved his hand.

Sandy found themselves surrounded by a cube-like barrier the very next moment, getting entirely trapped. A second later, a second layer appeared, then a third and a fourth popped into existence. Each of them sealed off space in different ways to stop Sandy from wriggling through.

This kind of training Sandy could understand. The flow of cosmic dust was disrupted by the sealed space, but it wasn't perfect. The god purposefully left the kind of vulnerabilities C-grades and early B-grades would also fail to fully address, allowing Sandy to find more loopholes to wiggle through. Sometimes, Sandy could also just eat their way through a barrier altogether, but that tended to be pretty hard and a waste of energy compared to just finding a weakness and exploiting that.

The training continued for a few more days as Sandy made good progress as usual. It was not surprising, considering Sandy was a super genius. After that, it was time to do stomach training again, where the cosmic worm worked on their internal world. Both with the intent of expanding it and designing it to be more useful, but also just to learn more about how it all worked. Sandy also had to check in on all the people Sandy had eaten recently. There were lots of bad people in there who had tried to say Sandy couldn't take food that clearly belonged to Sandy by virtue of existing. They would be let out again once they had learned their lesson. Definitely.

Speaking of stomachs... UPDATE FROM **novel★fire★net**

"Starvation is a form of torture; did you know that?" Sandy asked as they had just finished another training session.

"I believe you have mentioned it a number of times, yes, with me always answering that as a C-grade, you cannot starve, not truly. Alas, your Path is related to consumption, so go ahead. We shall meet up again in a month's time," the god answered.

"Yay!" Sandy wriggled in excitement. The worm considered for a moment before deciding to head back to the Order branch located not that far away to get some food there before hunting down stashes of good stuff in the wild.

Deciding it was the fastest way, Sandy opened a wormhole back to the Order of the Malefic Viper branch as the worm just followed the tasty food. Wriggling through the dense cosmic dust within the wormhole, Sandy soon felt like food was close and dug their way out, appearing in the sky just outside of the branch.

However, before Sandy even had time to wriggle inside the large compound, their teacher popped up again, despite them just having agreed to meet up again in a month.

“What did you just do?” the god asked.

“I went to get food?” Sandy asked, confused. How could a god be that forgetful?

“Yes, through a wormhole. I planned on teleporting you with me, but you went by yourself and successfully appeared right outside of the branch... so how did you do it? How did you designate where you would appear outside of the condensed hyperspace of the wormhole?” the god asked. Sandy felt like the question was more there to make Sandy understand something than the god actually wanting to know. Which was a bit silly when the answer was so obvious.

“I just told you I went to where the food was,” Sandy wriggled in disbelief.

“But how did you know where the food was?”

“Pfft, any good worm worth their tail can find food!”

“So, did you smell the food somehow while within hyperspace? Some other form of detection? I want you to try and recall exactly what you felt when you knew when to exit the wormhole.”

Sandy tried to do just that and remember what they felt... with the answer being so obvious.

“I felt hungry.”

“You always feel hungry.”

“Exactly! Great talk, food time!”

With that, Sandy quickly escaped the clutches of the evil god that tried to stop them from eating tasty food. Sandy would definitely be putting in a complaint with the many-headed hydra for having a god teach them who didn’t even have the common courtesy to offer snacks during work hours.

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

Chapter 804: Nevermore: Wise Ideas

“While we cannot tell you what to do, sister, we can at the very least advise you... and I cannot help but question your decision,” the Dragonfly True Royal said as she looked at Vesperia. “You still have time to reconsider.”

Vesperia looked at her sister and sighed. “I feel like this would be best for me.”

Odonestra also sighed as she shook her head. “It is a risk you do not need to take. The Endless Empire can provide you all the protection you need. Our resources surpass what any other factions would possibly be able or willing to provide. Our unique treasures can only be found here... are you truly willing to forsake all that, even if it is only temporary?”

“I appreciate your concern; I truly do. And as you said, sister, I will stay here for at least a little longer,” Vesperia answered as she smiled. “But I can’t remain forever.”

This was far from the first time they had this discussion, as Vesperia had dropped a bombshell shortly after she had fully absorbed all the energies of the old artifacts of the former Vespernat True Royal. She declared that within five years, she would leave the heartlands of the Endless Empire once more and go somewhere the other True Royals truly didn’t want her to go. Somewhere, they couldn’t go.

The ninety-third universe.

Some had questioned if Vesperia could even go, but she knew instinctively she could. Despite being a True Royal, born in the first universe in a ritual deep within the Order of the Malefic Viper’s headquarters, she was a native of the new universe. At least, she kind of was.

She knew the egg she had hatched from was originally from a system event her Sire called a Treasure Hunt. Anything taken from there was naturally considered native to the new universe, even if the world of Yalsten in which it took place was technically from a far earlier universe.

Vesperia also had to admit that she liked the implications of her origin. That she was a treasure her Sire had brought back. It was an odd thought she didn’t share openly but one she very much cherished.

“Alas, I still do not understand why you find it so imperative to leave,” Odonestra said. “Especially to somewhere we cannot help protect you.”

"You not being able to go also means many other threats can't. And I will be at the side of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, as well as many other powerful figures of this new universe. I will be far from defenseless, and besides... I believe I can take care of myself against most threats I will face in a nascent universe. As long as I don't decide to venture somewhere unwise," Vesperia answered, trying to put her fellow True Royal's mind at ease.

It didn't work as well as she had hoped.

"The risk is still far too high... Vesperia... sister... you are the only True Royal of your Lineage. Even if there is only a minuscule chance you could die, it isn't worth the risk. You represent all of the Vespernat. Their entire future. Even if you wish to go, can't it be after you have matured into your powers more? Until you can leave some insurance behind? There are many potential partners out there who are already interested, too, so maybe go after you have left a possible successor? I know it may be a few more decades, but--"

"But nothing," Vesperia cut her off as she got a bit more serious. "While I perfectly understand your concern, I also know that staying here is not my Path. While this is my Hive... it's only one of them, and I have to return to the other. I have to get some level of independence. Even as I am saying it, I know how odd of a notion this is for a True Royal, but perhaps it is one of the things I inherited from my Sire."

Odonestra looked like she wanted to argue more as a figure popped into existence in the middle of the conversation. Instinctively, the other True Royal placed a barrier around Vesperia as this new figure attacked... with a barrel filled with confetti.

"Celebration time!" the Unique Lifeform turned divine menace said with a big grin. "Here with your unscheduled and unrequested update on Jake in Nevermore."

"We are having an important discussion," Odonestra said, looking at the All-God Legion without even trying to hide her annoyance.

"I know, I know. I was trying to listen in. It's pretty rude to make isolation barriers like that, but seeing as I am in a good mood, I'll let bygones be bygones. Say, does the Endless Empire have anyone at Nevermore right now? I am sure you know what's happening."

"We have allies from the United Tribes who are relaying information to us, and they have sent a representative that is on their way there right now," Odonestra answered. "And, yes, we are aware that there have recently been movements that include several Primordials."

"Do you know the cause of these movements?" Minaga asked hintingly.

"I would assume it is my Sire due to your excitement," Vesperia chimed in.

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner! Yep, Jake is once more the catalyst of chaos as he has initiated an impromptu Primordial reunion by being himself. As for how he did it...”

Minaga purposefully had a long dramatic pause as he stared at the two of them, Odonestra far less interested than Vesperia.

“No drumroll? Disappointing, should have brought my own. Anywho, Jake did a Challenge Dungeon and ended up beating up a low-level image of Valdemar within, making Valdemar curious and head over. Then Jake also had some interactions with another god’s image from the Pantheon of Life, making Nature’s Attendant and this god he interacted with also headed over. Considering the Viper was already there, others also decided that maybe something cool was going on and went to attend what is effectively just a watch party for Vilastromoz’ Chosen,” Minaga shared with a big grin on his face.

Odonestra frowned at the explanation as Vesperia just smiled. “It seems like my Sire is having an enjoyable time in Nevermore.”

“Oh, no, not at all. He just entered another Challenge Dungeon he really hates and is having a miserable experience, as far as I can tell. Like, he’s doing okay but definitely not having a good time.”

Vesperia was a bit worried hearing that but just nodded. She hoped he would find enjoyment somehow anyway, as she knew her Sire did better at things he enjoyed.

“Anyway! That’s what I came to share with the group! Oh, and also, I can kind of guess what you were arguing about, and I would advise you to just allow your little sister to follow her instincts or at least Jake’s instincts. Things somehow tend to work out well when that happens,” Minaga said as he looked at Odonestra before he did an exaggerated wave. “Toodaloo!”

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

With that, he disappeared again, leaving Vesperia with her sister. They looked at each other for a moment before Odonestra sighed. “Let us talk about this another time, alright? I never questioned the capabilities of your Sire... but he is ultimately still just a C-grade, no matter how much potential he shows.”

Vesperia nodded, unable to argue against that point. She continued her practice and nurturing of her nascent hive for several weeks until Minaga popped back in, having dragged Odonestra along again. At least Vesperia thought so for a moment, but it quickly became clear they had just arrived at the same time due to recent happenings.

“Update time! Jake finished the Challenge Dungeon he really didn’t like, and guess what happened next?” Minaga said with excitement.

"The sheer audacity of a mortal to do something like that, it's-" Odonestra muttered.

"Shh, let her guess," Minaga interrupted the True Royal as he looked expectantly at Vesperia.

"I would guess he did something unexpected again? Seeing as he didn't enjoy the Challenge Dungeon, I doubt it is due to his performance in there, and my sister's comment makes me believe it involves gods... so did he say something to the observing gods or otherwise end up interacting directly with them? Wait, was he perhaps summoned into the same place as several gods and acted as he usually acts?" Vesperia answered, having put together the limited clues provided and her knowledge of Jake and how she had seen him interact with the Malefic Viper.

"That's... incredibly accurate. Huh," Minaga muttered. "Well, glad to hear you skipped out on inheriting any of his intelligence! But yeah, that is exactly accurate. Not just that, he..."

Minaga continued to explain everything that had happened, Odonestra even engaging a bit in the conversation as she had been relayed what had happened from the United Tribes and even given a recording.

After she and Minaga left, Odonestra seemed a bit more positive and said she would have a meeting with the other True Royals to discuss things.

More time passed, and once more, the two gods decided to visit. Minaga was in a mixed mood this time around, and Odonestra looked a bit happier than usual.

"So, he did another Challenge Dungeon," Minaga muttered. "My Challenge Dungeon... and, well, he did as expected, I guess. Man, I doubt anyone is going to beat his record in my dungeon in this era unless some other monstrous bastard appears. Or he has any kids who get even more annoying variants of his Bloodline... no, I don't even wanna think about it."

He shuddered a bit at the end, clearly not keen on the thought.

"Also, your... wait, what is that Sylphian Hawk even to you? I know she refers to Jake as her uncle, and since he is your Sire... I guess half-sister, maybe? Maybe cousin? No idea. Anyway, it's not like she is much better, but at least she doesn't have a damn broken Bloodline and is a little disrupted still," Minaga continued talking, sounding a bit miffed.

Vesperia smiled, happy to hear that her Sire continued to do well. It was also fortunate that the Sylphian Hawk was doing well. She knew that the hawk called Sylphie was Jake's first creation using his unique abilities, and it was not at all surprising she also excelled. Based on what Vesperia had heard here and there, his second creation,

Sandy, was also doing well as the Chosen of the Boundless Hydra. Original content can be found at **novel★fire★net**

“Vesperia, I also had a meeting with the other True Royals,” Odonestra said. “And we agree that it would be beneficial for you and the Endless Empire to continue strengthening the bond with your Sire, so perhaps going to the new universe is a wise idea. We also have to factor in the fact that many special events and titles are available to those from the newly initiated universe, and it would truly be a waste for you not to also take part in these and reap the benefits.”

She had done a complete one-eighty, making Vesperia look at her surprised as Minaga teleported over and leaned in.

“Psst. I think they got a recording of when Jake beat Valdemar.... I can’t really blame them for getting a bit excited at that,” the Unique Lifeform said.

Vesperia shook her head, not sure what to say. It wasn’t as if the approval of her fellow True Royals was a requirement for her to go to the ninety-third universe, but their approval did take a weight off her shoulders.

“Also... when you go, would it be possible to bring along some items for us?” Odonestra asked. “We can discuss details at a later date, but we thought that-“

Still smiling, Vesperia just nodded along, not at all surprised and having entirely expected this. While the chances were low, why wouldn’t they give her Sire a bunch of eggs he could potentially end up turning into True Royals if he one day got the inspiration to play around with his special abilities?

Picking dungeons wasn’t an easy endeavor. Especially as Jake didn’t know which one to go with. He only had two dungeons to go and, quite frankly, way more time than he needed. Minaga’s Labyrinth had only taken a bit over a year despite Jake passing so many damn sections.

The primary reason for this was his speed simply being too high. Many of the earlier floors had far more time than Jake needed, and even when he had two weeks, he didn’t even take more than a day. When he did begin to have a hard time, the amount of time he had to do the section was also lowered, as if Minaga just wanted him out of there. Which, in fairness, he probably did.

Now, with Minaga’s Labyrinth completed, Jake no longer had an easy option. He didn’t know anything about the two other Challenge Dungeons, and while he had some guesses, it was ultimately still just guesswork. Yet, despite not knowing what he was walking into, Jake was confident in gaining a high evaluation and going for that overall +100% boost from all the Challenge Dungeons combined. Where did his confidence come from?

Well, primarily an overly inflated ego and pure arrogance.

Anyway, as Jake didn't know if he wanted to do the Endless Journey or the House of the Architect Challenge Dungeon, he decided to leave it up to chance. Standing back at the place where everyone entered the Challenge Dungeons, Jake counted how many entered which dungeon for the next ten minutes flat and would go with the one most people picked.

And that's how Jake ended up going to the House of the Architect as his second-to-last Challenge Dungeon. As usual, he went up to the door and placed his hand on it before accepting the prompt and getting whisked away.

In the very next second, he opened his eyes again and found himself standing in the middle of a large area. His sphere instantly spread out, and Jake instinctively released a Pulse of Perception as the inside of the Challenge Dungeon was laid bare.

Jake found himself inside a massive building, currently in the central hall. The entire thing was built like an atrium, and looking up, Jake could see the ceiling several kilometers above. As he was still standing there looking, a system message popped up.

Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!

You have entered the House of the Architect. A place for creators, inventors, researchers, artists, and all those who progress both their own Path and the Paths of others. It is somewhere you can let your creative spirit loose and design whatever your heart desires.

Your task is to create something that will impress the Architect. What you create is entirely up to you, and all materials required in your process and can be purchased using Merit Points. Merit Points can be earned by performing tasks within the House of the Architect or turning in creations you do not deem good enough to submit to the Architect herself.

Creations can include anything. Be they a crafted product, displaying an upgraded or newly created skill, a student you help improve, or even a simple book written with your thoughts. Anything can be submitted, and anything can be evaluated. As long as it is of your design. Should you find yourself doubting, simply ask one of the many attendants if your idea is acceptable.

Due to the nature of the House of the Architect, unique creations are evaluated incredibly highly. Submitting several Creations too similar to one another will result in a worse evaluation and leave the Architect unimpressed. Diversity is thus key if you wish to stand out and earn the highest overall evaluation possible. During this Challenge Dungeon, some items will be limited. WARNING: entire living beings with Truesouls cannot be submitted as Creations. Other restrictions

may also apply. Ask an attendant if you are unsure if your creations can be submitted.

Good luck, and may your Creations inspire awe.

Objective: Submit 10 Creations and submit them to the Architect for evaluation.

Current objective: Make a Creation and present it to the Architect.

Creation-submissions remaining: 10

Jake stared at the message for a while as a thought popped into his head.

I really bloody hope you can gain levels in this Challenge Dungeon...

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

Chapter 805: Nevermore: House of the Architect

Jake closely read the system message regarding the Challenge Dungeon, and outside of the thought that he really hoped he could level up in there, he had a few more opinions. However, overall, it wasn't that bad.

Firstly, it was actually pretty straightforward, if still incredibly broad. Sure, there was some confusion about how exactly these evaluations would work, but compared to that horrible hellhole of confusion known as the Test of Character Challenge Dungeon, you had something truly unique in this one:

People you could actually ask about stuff. From the vibe Jake got, it was even possible these attendants would be helpful and not just be like Minaga, who commented on stuff happening while providing nothing of substance more often than not.

Anyway, even without Jake asking anyone, it was obvious you were meant to make stuff in this dungeon. He would have to ask about more details, but he got the gist of it.

In some ways, the Challenge Dungeon reminded him a bit of Minaga's City Floor. There, one also had to do things to earn points, though here, you would use these Merit Points to buy stuff you needed in your creative endeavors.

Jake also knew that the system had limited his access to his inventory, but when he tried to open the spatial storage, he was fully able to. What's more, he would even take

out things like his weapons and other tools, such as his cauldrons. However, when he tried to take out some of the stored ingredients, he found himself unable to do so.

Alright, so you have to buy the raw materials, Jake quickly understood. It was probably for the best, though. It was the same thought as Minaga's City Floor again, where if rules were not in place, someone could just bring in expensive shit from the outside and breeze through.

However, like Minaga's City Floor, Jake also instantly got worried about one thing.

Ell'Hakan is going to get a free ride in this dungeon, Jake quickly concluded. Of course, he couldn't be entirely certain yet, as he had literally just arrived and was still unclear about many things, but he could totally see this being the case.

Not that Jake would let that bring him down. He was pretty skilled at creating stuff himself. Especially unique stuff, which the Architect valued higher than regular goods.

Concluding his initial thoughts, Jake turned his attention toward the actual building he found himself in. As mentioned before, it was a huge atrium-like construction with a sunroof far above. Hundreds of stories ascended upwards from the floor, with the middle of the hall filled with different exhibits. Glass boxes with odd items inside, entire skeletons of weird creatures, and even a few things straight out of some sci-fi could be found if one looked around. Floating up throughout the atrium were also several skeletons of flying creatures and even a spaceship-looking thing.

Through his sphere, he also saw how paintings hung on most walls, and looking to the side, he saw one of them depicting a landscape that seemed to be in constant flux. The painting itself warped with every second, going from filled with light to entirely dark in the very next moment. He also saw that the first to the seventh floor of the atrium was a large circular library that went the entire way around the round building.

Below him was a cellar that also seemed to extend downward for many kilometers. Down there, Jake wasn't quite sure what he saw. Several rooms were filled with what looked like prisoners of all kinds of races, cages with beasts, and even areas filled with water or elements that housed creatures or just plants and other odd baubles. Jake was a bit confused, considering that beings with True Souls could not be submitted as Creations, but it was entirely possible that not all these things were collectibles. It was also entirely possible some of them were for the creators to "make use of" when they worked on their Creations.

All in all, it looked like the home of some mad collector who just liked shiny, weird, and sometimes highly disturbing things. The building was also utterly massive, and that was without taking into account the fact that many of the rooms and floors were spatially expanded based on how things warped when Jake observed with his sphere.

When it came to other living beings who weren't trapped in cages, Jake saw quite a few mull around. However, they all stayed off to the sides, all wearing the same white robes with an insignia on the chest. It wasn't hard to figure out these were the attendants mentioned in the system message.

Jake decided that he would go ask one of the attendants first thing to clarify some things so as to not waste too much time... which was also when he noticed something else about this Challenge Dungeon.

No time limit.

He didn't have any deadlines to submit anything. At least nothing of the sort was mentioned yet. Nevertheless, Jake saw no reason to dally as he walked toward one of the many attendants who stood off to the side of the atrium, currently working on polishing a statue depicting some kind of scaled beast.

"Excuse me," Jake asked as he went over. "Are you available right now?"

Without really thinking about it, he treated the attendant as if they were the average store worker before the system.

The attendant, who was some kind of dragonkin, quickly turned toward him and smiled. "Of course. What can I help you with, Creator?"

"I was wondering if you could answer some clarifying questions regarding this place. Mostly on how the Architect will evaluate my creations," Jake asked politely.

"Most certainly," she nodded. "What do you wish to know?"

Jake decided to start with the first question on his mind. "Am I able to submit items I created outside of here for evaluation? Say, if I had made some kind of weapon in the past I believe the Architect will find impressive?"

"Unfortunately, the Architect only cares about what is created within their house," the attendant said as she shook her head. "As the Architect often says, what truly matters isn't only the final Creation but the method by which it was created. Every Creation is a journey that is documented by the building, and the creation process will also serve as part of the evaluation."

"I see," Jake nodded. "What if I make alterations to a current Creation and submit that? Would that be a possibility?" IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT novel.fire.net

"Yes, but only the alterations will be evaluated, not the full Creation," the attendant clarified. "The Architect cares much for the journey, and having missed part of it will

inevitably lead to a worsened evaluation, so unless the Creation and the alterations are truly impressive, getting a high evaluation will be difficult.”

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That was a bit of a bummer if Jake had to be honest. He would have loved to show off Eternal Hunger and even Eternal Shadow of , as you could submit even skills as creations. Oh, and also Moment of ... but maybe that was too similar to Eternal Shadow, as they both had tag? Actually, he should ask about that.

“When it is said that similar creations are penalized, what exactly does it mean?” Jake question. “Let’s say I submit two bottles, where one is a mana potion, and the other is a poison that destroys mana. Will they be viewed as similar?”

“Uniqueness comes in two forms. One is the Creation itself, and the other is the method by which it was created. To truly achieve great diversity in Creations provided, there should be a difference in both of these aspects, but either will count and be looked favorably upon. In your example, both the poison and potion have many similarities in their crafting process, but the Creations themselves do vary somewhat. Overall, I believe the Architect would view there to be acceptable, if still a bit low, diversity between such two Creations. I also have to point out that the Architect appreciates improvements as part of the journey, so simply making Creations you are fully familiar with will not gain bonus points for improvement to your crafting process during the final evaluation, but do not let it push you too far away from making what you are comfortable with. The quality of the final Creation and the complexity and skill required for the crafting process is still imperative to the evaluation,” the attendant gave a pretty in-depth answer. Way more so than Jake had expected.

Jake thought for a bit, and while making entirely new stuff he wasn’t familiar with would give him some bonus points for improving, he ultimately decided it was best to at least stick with things he was familiar with for the most part. Deciding that now was a great time to become a super plant cultivator was definitely not the play. But he still had some questions about the diversity part.

“What about if I create a weapon using transmutation and a powerful poison? Both use alchemy, but different schools of alchemy?” Jake tried to probe more.

“I cannot comment on specific examples, but I would guess that transmutation and concocting poisons have more differences than concocting poisons and brewing potions. However, I cannot comment on a specific case without knowing all the details. Also, I would warn that the nature of what is transmuted shall matter much. If you transmute something crafted by others, their Records will also be part of the final Creation, worsening your evaluation. Of course, this can be made up for with a wonderfully executed transmutation, and considering a better-crafted product by another will lead to a better final Creation and a higher skill requirement to successfully transmute, you may still consider doing it.”

Okay, that made sense, and once more, the answer was quite informative. It was definitely a breath of fresh air to have a Challenge Dungeon that didn't purposefully try to obscure information. Jake did have some more questions, but for now, he decided to ask just one.

"Final question. Will I get to keep any Creations I make when I leave here again?" Jake asked.

"Sadly, that is not for me to answer. Only the Architect can decide such things," the attendant shook her head. "But the intangible Creations can never be taken away from you. No skill can be taken, no enlightenment can be taken back, and no improvements gained will be lost."

He pretty much got a non-answer. Jake was already pretty damn sure the system would not outright take a skill from him, much less wipe his memory of the Challenge Dungeon and what he had achieved. That would make the entire place meaningless.

Now, if only he could also get experience in the Challenge Dungeon, he would be golden. He just had to figure out if he could... so...

"Actually, final, final question. Can I get experience points here?" Jake asked as he grabbed back the attention of the attendant, who was turning away to continue wiping down the already pristine statue.

"You can most certainly gain experience," the attendant answered. Jake got the feeling she didn't really answer, though.

"So I can level up?"

"You can level up your creative process and abilities as a creator for sure."

"So... that's a no," Jake muttered to himself. Why in the living hell did these Challenge Dungeons not give any experience? He also hadn't gained a single level in Minaga's Labyrinth, even if he did kill a few gatekeepers. Not that many, mind you, but it never said he got any experience when they died. Sure, that could have been because they were just summons bound to the barriers and that this one would give some, but alas, it wasn't gonna be that way.

Having gotten all the answers he needed for now, Jake decided to do something he rarely did as he sat down and began to formulate a plan for the Challenge Dungeon. He couldn't just rush through this and do everything purely based on his instincts this time around, but he had to actually use some brain power.

From what Jake had gathered, three things were important when it came to Jake's Creations. The first of which was naturally the requirement for there to be diversity. The

second one was the complexity and difficulty of the crafting process. Finally was the quality – likely expressed through rarity – of the final Creation.

Thinking about it, 10 Creations was kind of a lot, especially if you shouldn't submit similar things. Unsure exactly what he planned to do, Jake sat down and decided to write out a list of ten things he could make. However, he quickly ran into some problems as he tried to keep things relatively diverse, ending up with a list that, while it was useful, couldn't exactly be called a plan of action.

Looking down at the paper, he sighed as he read over the options he had impromptu come up with.

1. A poison, using either hemotoxins, neurotoxins, or necrotic poison, mixed with soul-based poison and plenty of Blood of the Malefic Viper. Potentially try a mix of all the different toxins for maximum effect.
2. Something transmutation-based.
3. Maybe elixir?
4. Grimoire
5. Use Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen for something?
6. Skill-related thing. Based on magic and mana.
7. Skill-related thing. Based on archery or melee combat and stamina.
8. Origin-related Creation. This may be done during one of the prior Creations.
9. Something weird Bloodline-related?
10. Ritual stuff.

So... yeah, things could be a bit more concrete, and Jake was sure he had missed something obvious. Jake wouldn't call himself super creative, as most of the unique Creations he made were something he kind of stumbled into. He hoped that could happen again inside this Challenge Dungeon, but if not, he would just have to make do with what he was confident in already making.

One very notable option Jake had put on there was the Grimoire one. When Jake had evolved to C-grade, he had also gained the ability to create Grimoires related to his path as a Heretic-Chosen Alchemist, and quite frankly, Jake had no idea what to use that skill for. At least not before now.

A damn Grimoire granting a profession or class related to a Path that the system called unique quite a few times had to give a lot of bonus points for diversity and uniqueness both, right? Jake had also never made one before, so he would get bonus points for learning something new. Finally, Jake also believed the final product would be of high quality, making the Grimoire one of his trump cards for this dungeon. He also considered if maybe he should use a bit of Jake Juice to spice it up but ultimately decided to put that plan on hold.

First of all, he was pretty much still out after his fight with Valdemar. He could feel a bit of it had recovered, but a few years just wasn't enough for him to get much back. Even if Jake had felt that after his visit to the divine streaming party, he had gained quite a bit from the level-ups, he was still pretty darn low.

Secondly, Jake believed he could make a pretty good Grimoire without using any of his unique energy. It also wasn't even certain it would improve the Grimoire much in the first place. If his Origin Energy made something "return to Origin," what effect would it have on something where Jake was already the Origin? That was an answer Jake didn't feel like wasting his limited energy on finding out.

Jake would still use his Origin Energy, mind you. Just somewhere else or maybe through some wholly unique creations. Who knows, maybe just a bit of the energy itself could be submitted as a Creation?

However, before he began to do any of that, one thing still bothered him. The attendant had not said Jake would necessarily get back all his Creations and be allowed to leave with them, which begged the question: where would they go?

Who would see them?

Because Jake wasn't sure if it was a good idea to hand over or even show things that included many of his deep-rooted secrets to the Wyrmgod. Especially not ones related to being a Heretic and whatnot.

So that was definitely something he had to ask this Architect about... though, of course, that was also another question in of itself.

Who exactly was this Architect?

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Chapter 806: Nevermore: Nevermore

Throughout Nevermore, Jake had encountered quite a few gods. He had been recorded both visually and in far other ways by the dungeon and system as he made his way through the floors and Challenge Dungeons. However, despite this, he still felt like much about him still wasn't shared. As if the system put up certain barriers of information not even the Wyrmgod could see.

Others had suspicions and theories, but they didn't know. Minaga's lack of fully knowing how Jake overcame his labyrinth was prime proof of this. The Wyrmgod asking Jake about Bloodline-related stuff when he was summoned to the streaming room also served as further proof that while Jake was analyzed from head to toe, some things weren't revealed.

But... what if Jake handed a sample filled with his Records? Especially if he made an item related to his Origin energy or his Path as a Heretic-Chosen? Surely, that could cause some problems, right? Even if the system had some rules within Nevermore, they could just take these items or samples outside and figure Jake out there.

Also, on a side note, Jake didn't understand how no one had called him out for being a Heretic yet. Jake had done all his usual Heretic stuff while in front of other gods and the Viper, but everyone just seemed fine and chill with it. Alright, sure, he could get no one calling him out publicly with his Patron right there, but they at least had to be thinking in their minds Jake was a damn Heretic, right?

Probably. Or maybe they thought Jake was just putting on an act or following the will of the Viper. In either case, confirming to them he was indeed a Heretic, even if he was also a Chosen, seemed like a stupid idea.

This begged the question of whether Jake had to hold back in his Challenge Dungeon out of fear that he would reveal something he really shouldn't. Of course, he would only need to do that if the items and information scanned during the crafting process were given to the Wyrmgod or others.

Right now, Jake felt the usual observation of the Wyrmgod, who was likely streaming all Jake was doing to the other gods present. With this, it could be confirmed that everything happening in this dungeon wasn't confidential.

Alas, Jake could not make a decision before he knew for sure what would happen with the items or the information he handed in for evaluation. So he did the only thing that made sense and went straight to the owner of the house to ask about just that.

At the very top of the atrium, on the highest floor, was a section Jake could not see at all due to it being cut off by spatial distortion. His guts told him that was where the Architect resided, and after confirming with an attendant, Jake flew straight up.

Up there, the entire pathway was empty. There weren't any attendants anywhere, and even the walls were bare of décor. The only thing was a single wooden door that Jake couldn't at all tell

what was behind. However, the nametag saying "Architect" was a subtle clue as to what may be behind it.

Flying over, he landed in front of it, and as he did, something odd happened. The door began to open by itself, and right as it did, the gaze of the Wyrmgod he felt on him disappeared, having seemingly been cut off. Jake was surprised as he looked through the newly opened door and saw a smallish hall where the only thing of note was someone sitting in the center.

Jake observed what looked vaguely like a human woman but clearly wasn't, staring right back at him. Her skin was an odd ashen gray, making her eyes stand out even more. One was golden like the sun, while the other remained black as the void itself. Her head was entirely bald, her bare head covered with an elaborate tattoo of some kind. She wore a tight-fitting suit, and in all honesty, Jake wouldn't have been able to pin her as a woman if not for the system message and attendants mentioning she was one due to her androgynous looks. In some ways, her looks reminded Jake a bit about the system entity he had seen, but that was probably because of what he felt from her gaze.

It put him on edge. He felt like she saw everything. Far more than she should be able to. Villy had the same look at times, but this woman... her gaze was something else. Like he could not keep a single secret in front of her.

"Welcome, Jake Thayne," she greeted him with a small bow of her head. "You have caused quite the stir, and seeing you now, I am beginning to understand why."

"Thank you for having me," Jake said while bowing slightly and walking into the room properly as the woman's eyes continued to pierce straight through him. "Are... are you the Architect?"

"That is the role I am playing right now, yes," she nodded. "A temporary title, if you will. Now, come, you are here to ask me questions, are you not?"

Jake slowly nodded as he tried really hard to get a read on the entity in front of him. Tried and failed. She felt wrong to his senses, and no matter how much he tried, he couldn't truly detect how strong she was. What's more... his Sphere of Perception didn't pick her up properly, and that had only happened with one other thing before, although it was to a lesser degree with this woman. Figuring out the Architect wasn't why he was there, though.

"I was wondering... what happens to the Creations I submit? Who will see the full analysis related to them?" Jake asked.

"Only I will. But, that is not truly what you want to ask, now is it? You are worried that secrets you wish to keep hidden will be revealed," the Architect said with a reassuring smile. "There is no need for such worry. Not even the Wyrmgod will truly be able to

know or see what happens here. I have enhanced his limitations beyond the usual for this Challenge Dungeon precisely due to your concerns.”

“You... enhanced them?” Jake asked as he suddenly had a realization. “Wait... are you...”

The Architect just smiled as she stood. “Usually, a conversation like this would never take place, but you are already a being who has had many secrets divulged to you. Minaga and the Wyrmgod have both been generous with what they divulged and keeping secrets from the Malefic Viper has never been an easy task. Seeing as you are his Chosen and one he gladly shares things with that mortals shouldn’t know, why can’t I be the same?”

“You’re a Bound God,” Jake said with certainty.

Bound Gods. Unnatural gods who appeared and were linked to something, the most known example being Bound Gods bound to World Wonders. However, Jake didn’t think Nevermore had one with the Wyrmgod being around. For this place to have a Bound God, too...

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“Insightful observation,” she said, looking at him. “A correct one, too. Allow me to properly introduce myself: I am Nevermore, though I reckon you already knew that. I also hope that answers many of your questions when it comes to my capabilities.”

Jake slowly nodded once more, having most of his doubts dispelled regarding that. Bound Gods had their power directly linked to whatever they were bound to, so it wasn’t even necessary to speculate how powerful Nevermore was. As a living dungeon, she was also linked directly to the system itself, which explained why Jake’s Sphere of Perception and senses acted a bit off around her. Being a Bound God indeed explained all that, but Jake still had some questions.

“I am a bit confused... I thought the Wyrmgod made Nevermore... you... actually, can I just call you the Architect?” Jake asked. “How exactly does that make sense with there also being a Bound God tied to this place?”

“Curious to a fault,” Nevermore shook her head. “Also, yes, feel free to refer to me as my current role. As for the answer to your question... well, things are complicated, and there are many things I will not share. All I will say is that my original form was that of a dungeon core and that without me, Nevermore wouldn’t be able to exist as it does.”

“So... the Wyrmgod somehow obtained you in dungeon core form, made Nevermore, which makes him the dungeon master, while you are the dungeon itself...” Jake muttered as his eyes opened wide and pointed at her. “You’re the living personification of dungeon-fuckery!”

The Architect just stared at him for a few moments before she laughed. "What a crude term. Yet, I cannot entirely argue it's inaccuracy. I also believe that realization should answer any questions you have regarding confidentiality?"

"For the most part," Jake said, a little embarrassed at his outburst. "My only real question left is if I can keep the things I make? Also, I reckoned I may as well ask this, but do I get experience in this Challenge Dungeon? And if not, why don't I? Not just in regards to this Challenge Dungeon, but all of them."

"If you keep what you created or not is a question I shall refrain from answering," the Architect said. "And you do not earn any experience in here, no. What you earn instead is plenty of Records to facilitate your later progress through C-grade. It is a way to build up your Records and exit each dungeon effectively with more potential than when you entered. To most, not getting experience here is purely positive, as getting levels isn't the hard part; it's raising their maximum potential and overcoming barriers. I do understand that for your situation, where Records are not a challenge, at least not yet, it is a negative. However, I guess that is just one of the drawbacks of being in an extraordinary position."

"I see," Jake muttered, understanding the logic even if he didn't like it. "Ah, speaking of Records, is there some cool meta-achievement for doing well in all five Challenge Dungeons?"

"I recall you saying those questions before were the last?" the Architect said, clearly not wanting to answer. Not that she had to, as Jake smiled, her silence and his guts giving him the answer.

There is a good chance there is one, got it. Oh well, now I have to perform great, or I will feel like I missed out, Jake thought as he prepared to excuse himself.

"I believe you got your answer, didn't you?" the Architect said, shaking her head. "Alas, it was probably a scenario I should have expected. The intuition and senses you possess are outside of anything Nevermore has experienced before. I fear this will have to be our only meeting outside of formal evaluations, as even with my link to the system, I am not considered outside of the scope of 's instincts."

Jake's smile faded at her final sentence as he furrowed his brows and looked at her closely.

"Didn't I already tell you? Your secrets lay bare before me," she said with her usual smile.

Frowning, Jake spoke calmly. "Some of them, at least. I get the feeling you can see my status and have some read on my abilities, but you are still limited, aren't you?"

“What makes you think that? The system is omniscient, and as its representative and a World Wonder, is it that surprising I may be too?”

“You feel different from the system itself,” Jake said, shrugging as he remembered that faceless being he had seen during the integration as well as the auction event. “You’re somewhere in between.”

“Words spoken with confidence that can only come from genuine belief in your words,” she said, sighing. “I am beginning to understand why Minaga finds you intriguing, yet frustrating, to deal with. You see and know things that are not there yet are nevertheless true. Truly perplexing.”

“I like to be perplexing,” Jake shrugged. “Keeps my enemies on their toes.”

“And your allies in a perpetual state of confusion.”

“I am doing my best indeed; thank you for noticing,” Jake grinned, joking around with the half-system World Wonder entity known as Nevermore. Yes, he was fully aware of the absurdity of this situation... but also its uniqueness.

“Truly a peculiar person,” the Architect said. “I have had countless mortals through here. Endless questions and inquiries, but your genuine casualness is a first. Many try to be casual, hiding their true thoughts and merely putting on a façade, but you truly are merely a human who lives according to his own instincts. The data and the Records your very existence provides, not to mention your journey through Nevermore, will prove incredibly valuable.”

“Glad to be of assistance, I guess,” Jake said politely, not sure how to feel about helping out Big Data over here.

“Sadly, I will have to cut our meeting here before it goes too long and you begin to prematurely uncover forbidden secrets of the multiverse,” the Architect joked a bit back.

“All good things must come to an end,” Jake nodded as he smiled. “Pleasure meeting you, and I’ll look forward to exploring all your house has to offer.”

“And I shall look forward to seeing all you create and submit to me,” she said, finishing the conversation off as Jake walked toward the door. After a few steps, Jake stopped right before he exited.

“Ah, one last thing,” Jake said as he stood at the door and turned to look at her. “I’d like to make my first submission for evaluation.”

“Oh?” the Architect said with what seemed like genuine surprise. “I do not believe you have created anything, though?”

"I did make something, and I just gave it to you. Unknowingly, you have just experienced my first submission. You and the system recorded it, true, but I was the primary creator," Jake said with a grin. "I would officially like to submit our entire encounter as my first Creation."

The Architect looked at him perplexed for a while as Jake looked straight back at her, holding her gaze.

"What? Didn't the rules say anything can be a Creation?"

"You're correct; there is nothing making it unsuitable, and part of the evaluation is already what the system gathers. It's just that this is genuinely a first," the Architect answered.

"So it's extra-unique? Wait, can something even be extra-unique? Unique already means something is... actually, never mind, the point is, yes, I am sure of my first submission. Why, do you think it's a bad idea? Pretty sure I can't take it back," Jake said, rambling a bit and semi-questioning if his spontaneous decision had been a really dumb one.

"It certainly is unique," the Architect said as her golden eye began glowing brighter than before. "Very well, your first submission has been accepted and evaluated."

"So, how do you rate my first Creation?" Jake asked curiously. "Do I get any immediate feedback?"

"No, you get an overall evaluation at the very end," she shook her head. "And I cannot give you any answers regarding how well something is evaluated."

"I got a feeling I wasn't being entirely moronic, though," Jake muttered, going with his gut as usual.

"And perhaps that is the only answer you need," she said with a smile. "Now, you do need to do one final thing: name your Creation. What do you wish to call your first Creation? Be aware even the name will be considered entirely confidential."

Jake considered only for a moment before he shrugged. This chapter is updated by *novel*  *met*

"Let's just call it Experience."

With those words, he left the office as the door shut behind him, Jake getting the rightful feeling that he couldn't simply enter it again before he had another Creation to officially submit. As he exited, he also briefly saw that his system menu had updated, his first submission, even if it had been a weird one, indeed having gone through.

Current objective: Make a second Creation and present it to the Architect.

Creation-submissions remaining: 9

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- Chapter 807: Nevermore: Merit Points

Chapter 807: Nevermore: Merit Points

Jake felt pretty good about having one submission down, with only nine more to go. His written plans were already entirely off just from him deciding to submit a damn conversation as a Creation, but Jake didn't regret it at all. In fact, he believed it was a great move.

He wasn't blind to his own uniqueness, and he got the feeling being unique counted even more than the attendant let on, but this wasn't the only reason he submitted the encounter. While Jake had gone over the things that mattered for Creations, it could all be boiled down to one thing: Records.

The Records infused into an object were the only true determiner. More quality Records would mean higher quality and rarity, with the Architect giving an even higher evaluation if it was solely your Records. However, the final product – its overall Records – still mattered. And where could Jake get more Records than from a Bound God with power that surpassed even Primordials? From a being that was the living personification of the most known World Wonder in the entire multiverse? Not that his own Records were anything to look down on either.

So, yeah. Jake was wholly satisfied with his first submission. Also, it was entirely different from anything else Jake could possibly submit, meaning that even if it ended up being a bit of a dud, it wouldn't drag down the overall evaluation much compared to if Jake had just submitted another kind of poison or some inferior product.

Having exited the room with the Architect, Jake also felt that the livestream was back on. He briefly looked up and waved as he went to check out some of the other interesting places in the House of the Architect. Being on the top floor, he decided to just go down and check what was on every floor. Or, at the very least, check what the signs there said.

Flying down one floor, Jake saw only a single door once more. Curious, Jake went close as he entered it, and the moment he did, he felt the livestream getting cut off again. Frowning, Jake felt space around him expand as he found himself standing in a nearly entirely white room with a single attendant right by the door and a number of portals floating all around him. In total, he counted nine portals.

“Welcome to the portal room, Creator. Is there anything I can help you with?” the male attendant, who looked like a butler with his slightly altered uniform, asked.

“Could you tell me a bit about this room?”

“Most certainly. The portal room allows you to travel to several worlds to acquire certain types of materials you may require. This includes people you may need for your creative processes or certain limited ingredients for your more regular crafts. Do be aware that these worlds are uniquely created by the Architect herself and will not have many of the usual ingredients you may experience from a natural world. Instead, they will only serve as catalysts or objectives for certain merit missions,” the attendant politely explained.

“When you say people, do you also mean people to potentially teach if I want to submit an improved student as a Creation?” Jake asked, also biting onto the last part about merit missions but putting off that topic for now. He would go visit the merit place later to figure out how all of that worked.

“Most certainly,” the attendant answered with a smile. “Do you want me to explain the properties of each world?”

Jake didn’t hesitate as he agreed, allowing the attendant to do his thing. It wasn’t a waste of time either. Jake learned that each world was widely different, with varying properties, cultures, and whatnot. One of the worlds he instantly wrote off as it was an entirely underwater world, making Jake question if the Architect knew how to design dungeons properly. It was a bit embarrassing, really, considering she literally was a dungeon. Then again, it wasn’t like he had to go there, so maybe he could consider it barely forgivable to have an optional water level.

As for the other eight worlds, Jake quickly narrowed it down to three he definitely had to visit. One was a vast planet that was pure wilderness, the other was a highly established metropolis, while the third was your regular medieval setting with different factions and whatnot. His plan for these worlds was to primarily look for people he could potentially teach.

Jake had never seen himself as much of a teacher, but considering the nature of this Challenge Dungeon and that he had not just a legendary teaching skill but was a human with his teaching-related race skills, Jake decided he should at least give it a shot. If not, he would learn not to waste time doing something like that later in his life.

Leaving the portal room, Jake checked out more floors and quickly got an understanding of the place. All the different floors had varying crafting rooms and themes. Entire floors were dedicated to alchemy, others to smithing, tailoring, engineering, and woodworking... the number of rooms was almost endless. Plus, Jake had a strong feeling that should someone with a *really* unique profession come along, the Architect would accommodate them and make a suitable room.

He also learned that whenever Jake entered one of these many rooms, the livestream would be cut off. Jake reckoned this was to stop even the Wyrmgod from gathering too much information, or maybe it was just the Architect being petty and wanting to show off that this was her Challenge Dungeon and for others to stop snooping. In either case, Jake liked knowing he could do whatever he wanted without worrying. He wasn't afraid of the Architect leaking anything, as she already knew far more than she should and hadn't shared it yet.

After checking out all the rooms, he went to the final thing he wanted to check out: the Merit Points Exchange. It was on the ground floor and prominently displayed. The exchange itself was a huge building, and walking inside, Jake saw hundreds of attendants who all looked busy at work. Jake felt pretty weird about it, considering he was the only one who would ever visit the place, and most of the work they did just seemed like they were trying to look busy.

Trying to ignore it, Jake went to the main counter within the exchange to talk to one of five attendants who manned the counter... again, why the hell were there five when this was a damn Challenge Dungeon only one person could enter at a time?

"Welcome to the Merit Points Exchange; how may I help you?" the attendant asked, mirroring the speech pattern of the one in the portal room.

"Could you give me some general information on..."

To skip over all the boring parts, the Merit Points Exchange was exactly as Jake predicted. You could get missions or turn in stuff to get Merit Points and then spend these Merit Points on ingredients for crafting. Jake also quickly realized the easiest way to "game" the exchange, though he was pretty damn sure his genius plan was just the way it was supposed to be used.

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If Jake bought, let's say, materials for ten concoctions, he would be able to sell back the products from these ten concoctions for more than he used the materials on. A lot more. In fact, they would even buy back failed products, which could lead to quite a nice feedback loop.

Jake could experiment and try to make a Creation using materials from the exchange, and then he could sell back his failed products for more Merit Points to purchase even more materials. So, while it seemed like Jake had to grind out Merit Points to be able to craft anything, it wasn't that bad.

Alas, he still has to get that initial batch of Merit Points to get the entire loop started. Looking through the different missions, he quickly found a few he could do within some of the portal rooms. Though they did all look very boring.

Merit Point Mission: Collect 500 Remonotous Fruits

Current Progress: Remonotous Fruits collected (0/500)

Reward: 750 Merit Points

This first one was just to go collect a bunch of fruits in that jungle world he had seen before in the portal room. The second mission he also prepared to pick up was one that took place in the medieval world, where he had to deliver a bunch of letters, with the third one in the metropolis perhaps the most uninspired of them all.

Merit Point Mission: Deliver 12 letters to their destination.

Current Progress: Letters delivered (0/12)

Reward: 500 Merit Points

And the third one... where he had to quite literally return lost pets. But at least this one rewarded more than the others.

Merit Point Mission: Return 5 lost pets to their respective owners.

Current Progress: Pets returned (0/5)

Reward: 1000 Merit Points

While they didn't give a lot of points, Jake wanted them to check out these two worlds anyway. He also ultimately needed some Merit Points. Also, on a side note, one could only select one mission for each world at a time, so that did suck a bit. Jake always liked it in games when he could pick up several quests in the same area and do them all at once. Made him feel like he was being clever and more efficient than the game expected, despite knowing deep down the developers designed it to be done that way.

"I want these three for now," Jake said to the attendant and handed him the three papers. Because, yes, despite there being a system menu, they also used paper.

“Very well,” the attendant said with his perfect customer service smile. “Are there any other missions you would like to accept, or would you like to spend your Merit Points?”

“Maybe I would if I had any,” Jake joked back, the friendly yet deadpan of the attendant not changing.

“The Creator currently possesses 5000 Merit Points,” the attendant just said instead, Jake needing a second to double-take he had heard right.

“Oh damn,” Jake said. “So you start with 5000 or something?”

“Each submission rewards Merit Points to allow the Creator to keep up their creative endeavors,” the attendant explained.

“Well, wouldn’t you know...” Jake smiled to himself, feeling like he had gamed the system even more than he first thought with that first submission.

“I would know indeed,” the attendant answered his rhetorical question, making Jake quickly decide to get away from the creepy, perfect-acting attendants. Despite not necessarily having to do the missions as he did have some points, Jake still decided to give them a go, as he wanted to explore those three worlds no matter what, and doing the missions anyway while in there just seemed like the efficient thing to do.

Starting with the jungle world, Jake went straight to the portal room and into this world. The moment he stepped through, he appeared standing atop a large cliff, staring down as an endless jungle appeared before him.

A system prompt popped up in front of him a second or so later, displaying his current mission for the world, which included a picture of the fruit he had to go collect a whole bunch of. Playing a bit with the system, Jake was surprised to see he had no way to bring up how many Merit Points he currently had, so that was a bit weird and annoying.

Jake also considered for a moment if these Merit Points would be transferred to Nevermore Points in the same way the Colosseum Points had. Yeah, that was definitely a question to ask one of those attendants once he got back, assuming they would even give him an answer.

Focusing on the world in front of him, Jake summoned his wings. Stretching them a bit, it felt good to fully spread them out and be able to do some long-distance flying. Jumping off the cliff, Jake took flight as he soared over the tall trees while observing the life beneath them.

He saw many different sorts of beasts everywhere, with plenty of plant lifeforms also sitting here and there. Looking at one of the many beasts, Jake identified it.

[Crystalheart Lynx – lvl 200]

It was barely C-grade, and as Jake Identified a few more, he realized all of them were level 200 with not a single exception. It was definitely like this by design, making the danger level practically non-existent. Jake had no plans on hunting these beasts down, as he simply had no reason to.

As he continued to scan the world around him, he noticed one thing that was very off. Sense of the Malefic Viper usually picked up a lot of things when Jake traveled in wilderness areas, but here it stayed entirely silent. This indicated there were no alchemical ingredients anywhere within his detection range, and as a Perception enthusiast, Jake had quite a high detection range.

Alright, so the attendant was right. No materials to collect here, Jake thought. Flying down, Jake landed on the ground so his boots could touch the undergrowth. Their passive ability to detect natural treasures activated as always but remained just as quiet as his Sense.

It was a bit of a bummer, as Jake had hoped there were some secret hidden items or something the attendant had purposefully not talked about. Alas, this did not appear to be the case. Check latest chapters at *novel•fire•net*

Continuing to fly around, Jake soon picked up a familiar fruit with a Pulse of Perception. Once he got over there, Jake saw several familiar trees that all had these fruits growing on them. Monkey-like monsters guarded the fruits, and when Jake Identified them, he was a bit surprised.

[Fruit-gulping Primate – lvl 242]

Level 242 was quite a bit higher than the usual level 200s wandering around. Not that it was any problem for Jake. Not wanting to bother with them, he flew down to collect the fruits. He flew straight up to one to pull it off its stem, but right as he did, the entire fruit exploded, covering him in juices.

“Fucking hell,” Jake cursed to himself as he saw through his sphere a monkey on the other of the tree successfully took a fruit off a tree, pissing Jake off even more.

Gritting his teeth, Jake got close to another fruit as a monkey not sitting far away spotted him and jumped to a branch nearby as it screeched at him.

Jake turned his head and looked it in the eye. “You sure you wanna do this?”

The monkey looked at him for a second before taking a step back as Jake stopped it. “Oh no, you started this.”

Seemingly realizing it was in trouble, the monkey began hollering loudly, and within a dozen seconds, Jake found himself surrounded by nearly a hundred angry-looking

monkeys. Yet none of them ever got within ten meters. Honestly, it was a pretty good situation for Jake.

“Five hundred fruits,” Jake said. “Give me five hundred, and I leave.”

“Uh? Uh uh!” the largest monkey said. Jake instantly got the gist of what it wanted to communicate. He also quickly confirmed this was the leader, making things a lot easier.

[Fruit-gulping Primate Alpha – lvl 250]

“This is not a negotiation,” Jake said as he looked at the monkey, faintly activating Gaze and Pride. “This is a business proposal where you have no leverage whatsoever.”

“Uh!” the monkey leader yelled loudly, and just as Jake thought it was about to attack, it reached over to a fruit next to it and plucked it off the tree in a weird fashion that made it not explode before holding it out in front of it toward Jake. “Uh?”

Jake summoned a string of mana to quickly snatch the fruit before putting it in his spatial storage as the quest progressed. “See? Isn’t this easier?”

The big monkey yelled, and about five minutes later, Jake flew off again, having done some great business. He had received five hundred fruits, and the monkeys had avoided dying premature deaths while receiving a free bonus of generational trauma toward winged humans.

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Chapter 808: Nevermore: How To Not Find a Pet

Jake had been to enough medieval worlds already, so he found the second mission quite boring. The letter delivery did allow him to explore quite a few places, but nothing really caught his eye. Level-wise, there was a good spread, ranging all the way from F-grade to around level 240 in C-grade.

Race-wise, the diversity was even better, as Jake saw pretty much everything one could imagine. All the way from goblins to high elves lived in the medieval world, with many races having their own small kingdoms. Oh, and when Jake meant small, he meant small. Each kingdom was a highly condensed area, with the open area between each only like a hundred meters, meaning Jake could easily jump from one village to another if he wanted to. All this, despite the “lore” of the world dictating they were actually in conflict.

His primary objective for being there was to try and find someone he thought it could be interesting to teach, but he ended up leaving disappointed. While it was true Jake genuinely had no idea what he was looking for when looking for a potential student, he still felt like he would know it when he saw someone.

After getting done delivering all the letters and leaving the world, he went to the final world he wanted to explore. This one truly was the most unique of them all, as it was a kind of world he had never experienced before. Going through the portal, Jake found himself standing on a terrace of sorts, overlooking a vast megacity.

Skyscrapers of metal, glass, and what looked like some kind of ceramic material towered into the sky, many of them several kilometers tall. Lights were everywhere, from billboards and whatnot, as flying vehicles traveled between these many large skyscrapers, all of them having docks for these ships to land in.

On other lanes, Jake saw people flying inside tunnels of light formed to dictate traffic. Closing his eyes for a moment, Jake sent out a Pulse of Perception and nearly felt overwhelmed by the result. For hundreds of kilometers in all directions, the city continued endlessly, with the number of living beings in the billions just within the area he could see. If this was an entire planet filled with such population density... trillions, no, tens of trillions, could be living there.

As he stood there and looked around, he thought it all looked impressive as hell, but after a closer inspection, he finally saw it.

Ah, there are the dystopian elements one would expect of a futuristic megacity, he thought as he saw the ground deep below all the massive skyscrapers. It was naturally the slums, a place for all the undesirables and poor people to be allocated. Down there, he also saw many factory-like constructions and deep holes in the ground that led into vast underground mines or other production-related facilities.

Looking upwards, he also saw what flew above even the skyscrapers. Large discs floated up there, some of which had only single massive mansions on them. These mansions made any personal residents Earth ever had look like a joke, as these compounds easily had buildings more than a kilometer wide, with so much luxury it had long surpassed the level of being moronic.

This entire world was truly unlike anything Jake had ever seen before, and while he was curious about the place, he also got some very bad vibes. Alas, he was there to do a mission. He had to find five lost pets and return them, which shouldn't take that long. The mission window even told him where he could find the first pet owner to talk to, which was naturally inside one of the big mansions floating above.

Flying up there, he wondered why this mission gave the most Merit Points out of all of them. It had to have something to do with the difficulty, right? Maybe the pets were actually semi-powerful C-grades or something. That, or creatures who were really good

at hiding. Either way, he would find out soon. Jake was quite good at finding stuff, after all.

Getting close to the first floating island, a magic barrier sprung up around it right as Jake approached. It was a pretty weak one, but Jake still stopped as he saw a figure flying up toward him. Based on a cursory scan, this was the strongest person in the mansion... not that it was saying much.

[Mansion Security Captain – lvl 212]

“Halt! What is the purpose of your unannounced visit? If you do not have any valid reason for-“

“Something about missing pets,” Jake cut off the captain.

“Ah, you’re here for that,” the guard said, sounding a bit relieved. “Let me bring you to the lady of the house.”

Being a really shitty security guard, the guy just believed Jake right off the bat and took out a token. Activating it, the guard made a hole in the barrier and invited Jake inside. Following the guard, Jake quickly made his way to the main building, where he saw hundreds of servants milling about doing stuff. They all bowed when they saw the security captain but mostly ignored Jake as if he didn’t exist, while those who did look his way did so with disgust in their eyes. Jake quickly had a guess as to why.

They all wore pristine clothes, while Jake walked in wearing his usual armor, a mask, and his good old boots. In their eyes, he probably looked poor, and based on how damn materialistic everyone seemed around here, Jake wasn’t surprised. He did kind of want to point out how Eternal Hunger was probably worth more than the entire world they were living in, but he restrained himself with the hope of just getting things over with.

Walking up the way-too-long staircase, Jake entered a large living room where a single woman was lounging on a couch as she watched a large screen that was playing some soap opera or something based on how damn dramatic it was. The source of this content is **novel**~

The woman was a human, similar to most of the beings on this planet. Jake had also seen other enlightened races, but most were humans, especially those of the richer echelon. She was level 201 and looked to be in her early forties, which indicated she had evolved very late in life or was at the later stages of her natural lifespan.

“I heard you’re the one who will bring me back my dearest,” the woman said as she saw Jake and quickly sat up.

“That’s me,” Jake said, rather deadpan, wondering what he had to retrieve. If he had to guess, it was probably gonna be some large fat cat named Mr. Snuggles or something else dumb and stereotypical like that.

“Good! Good! I have been waiting anxiously, and these useless security guards haven’t been any help! He’s been gone for nearly a week now, and I am simply beside myself with worry,” she said in an overly dramatic voice. “I have barely been able to rest at night when he isn’t there. I... I fear he may have fallen into the slums or something! Imagine what they might be doing to him down there, those savages.”

Jake thought she was a bit over the top, and he sure as hell didn’t like her, but he just sighed and wanted to get this over with so he could get his Merit Points. “Just give me a description of your pet.”

“Oh, of course!” she said with a smile as she took out what looked a lot like the type of tablets Arnold used. Though her was definitely much worse.

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“Here is a picture,” she said, having the security captain take the tablet from her and give it to Jake. Jake took it and looked at the picture on the tablet as his facial expression changed dramatically.

What the fuck?

Running down the narrow alleyway, the young man kept looking behind him as he knew he was being chased. He looked baffled as to how he had gotten found that fast but refused to give up. Continuing to run a bit longer, he soon found himself cornered, and the moment he turned around, he saw the masked figure already standing there.

“I know who you are and why you’re here, and I’m not going back!” the young man yelled as he backed up against the wall but still raised his gaze and met Jake’s eyes in defiance. “I would rather die than go back to that... that...”

“Bitch? Horrible piece of shit? Waste of human life?” Jake came with helpful suggestions as he observed the young man. “Come on, I am sure we can make up more.”

Jake looked at the young man, whose expression quickly changed from defiant to confused at what Jake was saying. At the same time, Jake also inspected the young man... or should he say the “lost pet.”

[Half-Elf – lvl 188]

“What... what are you trying to do!?” the half-elf questioned, as Jake saw he had taken out a hidden dagger behind his back. “I already told you I know who you are, and-“

"I know one of the servants sent down a message," Jake interrupted as he began to walk closer. "Not the most subtle form of communication. Pretty sure nobody else could pick up on it, but you really need some better magical encryption if you wanna communicate long-distance like that."

The young man made a decisive choice when Jake got within only a single step. He lowered his head as if he was giving up, only to quickly stab forward with the knife. An odd yet recognizable black energy revolved around the dagger as Jake caught the blade directly, the young man's eyes opening wide.

"You really do despise her, huh?" Jake said with a smile as he looked at the dagger and felt its energies try to invade his body. "No... you despise not just her but the entire system that allows someone like her to exist."

The energy Jake recognized from the dagger was one he had also used quite a bit himself. It was pure and dense curse energy, born from within the young man himself. Only a high level of natural talent in curse energy and a deep-seated negative emotion could give rise to something like that, not much differently from how Casper had originally realized he could also wield the power of curses.

In this half-elf's case, Jake felt the pure hatred within the curse energy being the source of his power.

"You... you..." the young man stammered. "Why would someone like you serve that disgusting molefucker."

"Disgusting molefucker? Never heard that one before," Jake muttered. "As for your question? I am not serving her. No, I believe I am about to do just the opposite."

The young man was thoroughly confused by now, as Jake had already made his decision. "Say, kid, you ever heard of alchemy?"

"Ye... yes?" he stammered out as his eyes darted to the knife Jake was still holding by the blade in his hand.

"Ever done any?"

"No..."

"Well, better late than ever," Jake grinned as he leaned forward. "You want revenge, right? On her and this world?"

Seemingly having had some time to steel himself and gather his thoughts, the young man didn't hesitate. "Of course!"

“Great!” Jake said as he tossed the dagger back to the half-elf. “Revenge is a great motivator, and I believe I can help you get it.”

To try to sound more convincing, Jake let his aura leak as he mixed in Pride of the Malefic Viper and a bit of his Bloodline to really seal the deal. He looked down at the young man as he grinned beneath his mask. “So, what do you say?”

It took the half-elf a moment before he clenched his fists. Dark smoke began to be emitted as his nails dug into his flesh, and he gritted his teeth. “If I can get revenge, I’ll do anything... you can do anything to me, even if you-“

“Wow, wow, wow, calm your horses,” Jake stopped him. “I’m talking about teaching you alchemy and controlling that special energy of yours.”

The poor guy looked confused again as Jake just sighed. “So, want to make me your teacher? I’ll help you get stronger and have your revenge, and in return, you’ll help me. How exactly this will help me you don’t need to know, but just think about it as me investing in you for future personal gain, yeah? Honestly, it’s a win-win situation. For anyone that isn’t your target of revenge, that is.”

Slowly, the young man nodded, and just like that, Jake had gotten his very first student.

Now, to backtrack a bit, Jake had been very close to just blowing up that entire sky mansion the second he saw the picture of a twenty-year-old-looking young man on the tablet as he quickly realized exactly what was going on with this entire “lost pet” situation.

However, he stopped himself and instead decided to figure out if there was more to the story. Which there was. The young man who had run away turned out to be involved with some rebel group or something down in the slums, but they were far too weak to do anything as things were now. Still, they tried, and one of their hopefuls was this young man as he was slowly getting close to C-grade.

The fact he could still level and potentially reach C-grade was proof he had some innate talent. When Jake detected the curse energy within him, he got intrigued, with the determination in his eyes and his ability to stay upright under Jake’s gaze sealing the deal. To summarize, the young man had determination, a decent level of talent, and he was even pretty close to C-grade. This meant that Jake had an idea already for a Creation to submit:

A student who evolved to a new, intriguing Path. What’s more, Jake could allow the young man to take revenge on a shitty “pet owner” along with the rest of the society that had led to the dystopian megacity. As he said to the young man, a win-win.

The only sad thing was that he had to give up on the Merit Point mission, but that wasn’t too bad. He could always pick up another, and finding a potential student was definitely

worth it. Finally, the earlier he got a student, the better it would also be, so Jake would have more time to make his Creation and didn't have to spend several years in the Challenge Dungeon.

Acting like a mysterious master, Jake brought the young man back to the same portal he had entered the world through. These worlds each had several portals spread throughout, with a system compass in a window provided to find them. When he reached the portal, the young man still looked confused as he couldn't see it at all. Jake was pretty damn sure he could still bring him through it, though, which was proven true a few seconds later.

"Where... where is this?" he asked when he appeared on the other side of the portal, standing in the large white room.

"Your home for the foreseeable future," Jake answered. "Not this room in specific, but this place."

Turning around, the young man looked straight at the portal they had entered the room from. "I... is that the gateway to my planet?"

"Right on," Jake smiled. "Can you see any other portals anywhere?"

The young man frowned. "No?"

"Hm, alright," Jake muttered. Maybe he had to take him through a portal at least once for him to be able to see it, or perhaps he could only see and interact with the portal, leading to his own world. "Either way, follow me. Also, what's your name?"

"Temlat," he answered.

"Alright, Temlat," Jake said. "How much do you know about the multiverse, if anything?"

"I... I know the basics?" Temlat said, clearly unsure as to what Jake was getting at.

"You ever heard of the Primordials?"

Temlat looked at Jake as if he was an idiot. "Of course? They're the twelve leaders of the multiverse and are all gods. I heard that other gods have begun to appear, too, but I am not sure if that's true. Even if it is, they wouldn't be Primordials."

"Hm. And what era do you think we are in?" Jake asked as he found the answer weird.

"I don't know?" the young man asked, confused.

"How many universes are there? Heard of a new one getting integrated?"

“Well, we live in the second universe, so there are two, I guess?” Temlat answered, looking progressively more confused with each of Jake’s questions.

Jake could also understand why as something quickly became clear... this young man was from the second era. Or at least he thought he was. It was entirely possible the Architect had taken a snapshot of a certain planet in the second universe to make the world, and in some ways, it even made sense. His Records would be vastly different from Jake’s own, making influencing him easier.

Plus, it being the second era, Jake saw a great opportunity.

“Then do you not know who I am?” Jake asked in a haughty voice.

Temlat looked Jake up and down as he shook his head. “No, sir... teacher. Am I supposed to?”

Jake took off his mask, covering his face in dark green scales as two black wings sprung from his back. At the same time, he didn’t hide his True Blessing as he stared down at the young man. “You stand before the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

He had done all these theatrics to try and get the young man to be receptive to his teachings... but maybe Jake had taken things a bit too far considering the poor young man’s reaction.

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Chapter 809: Nevermore: A Cursed Student-Teacher Relationship

So, Jake was used to quite a few reactions when he revealed he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Most reacted with fear, confusion, and then some level of reverence and respect. The majority of the time, it was not toward Jake but toward what he represented.

However, when it came to poor Temlat, he never got further than the fear stage. He froze entirely as his face went white, and he stared at Jake with wide-open eyes. His mouth opened and closed a few times as if he tried to say some words but failed at every turn. The reaction was way over the top compared to what Jake had expected, as he felt such intense fear from the young man. As if he expected Jake to do something far worse than just killing him at any moment.

That is when Jake realized a little something... in the ninety-third era, Villy was still a Primordial, sure, but he was also just one of many gods. Not to mention all the other pinnacle factions people knew of. Throughout the years, the number of gods multiplied and, due to this, got more and more involved with mortals as their factions spread and consumed more territory.

In the second era, it wasn't like this. Back then, there were only twelve "true" gods. The twelve Primordials. Jake had read a few old history tomes Villy had left in Jake's library back in the Order for fun, a few of which were written all the way back in the second era. The way they described the Primordials was far different, including the way they described the Malefic Viper himself.

You see... Villy was not exactly known to be a good guy back then. Not that he was now, but back in the day, it was far worse. It was during the days when the Viper was still doing everything to continue growing in power, destroying anything and anyone that got in his way. He was truly a villain of the multiverse, so for Jake to come and advertise himself as his Chosen was the same as saying he was some harbinger of doom and destruction.

Jake was a bit perplexed as to how he should approach this but decided to lean into Temlat's understanding of Jake. If he thought his teacher was some semi-divine being, that would just mean that when Jake convinced him to not be a doormat and make his own decisions and improvements, Jake would have accomplished a more impressive feat.

"Is that truly the limit of your desire for revenge? That the mere identity of someone can make you give up?" Jake said. "In that case, you truly aren't worthy of another moment of my time. You can go back where you came from and live your pitiful life and wallow in despair until your owner gets tired of you."

Temlat's eyes seemed to come to life a little bit as Jake continued.

"Or do you want me to kill you right here and now? Are you satisfied with this being the end of your Path? An opportunity squandered due to your own pathetic fear?"

"I..." he finally said. "I... I want to get stronger, but--"

"No, that sentence was already over. You want to get stronger. Then do that. Grasp every opportunity given and take all you can until one day, the targets of your revenge lay slain before you," Jake said in a loud voice. "So what do you want? To die a mere "pet" or to become someone no one will ever dare look down upon?"

"I am not a fucking pet," Temlat said in an almost growling voice.

"I take that as a yes?" Jake asked.

Without any hesitation, Temlat kneeled down and went as far as to press his forehead to the ground. "Master, please-"

"Ah, don't call me that; it still gives me the creeps," Jake said, remembering Meira. "Just call me teacher, Mr. Thayne, Lord Thayne, or something like that. Or you can just call me Jake, but I have a feeling you aren't going to do that."

"Then, Lord Thayne... please help me become stronger! Help me get my revenge! If you do so, I'll do anything to pay you back!" Temlat said with proper determination in his voice.

"See, that wasn't so hard," Jake smiled satisfied. "I don't want something from you right quite yet, and right now, all you need to focus on is becoming someone who can actually be of help to anyone, including yourself. Now, come on, follow me."

Finally getting out of the portal room, Jake let Temlat take in the environment of the House of the Architect as he walked slowly. Say what you will, but the extravagant place filled with servants and expensive-looking decor did look like somewhere the Chosen of a Primordial could reside, especially to someone like Temlat, who seemed to have the understanding that someone like Jake, who was only mid-tier C-grade, was a borderline godlike existence.

"So, you said you didn't know much about alchemy, right?" Jake asked as he decided to just walk all the way to the floor with alchemy stuff on it. Mainly to give Temlat some time to adapt and to give Jake some time to ask his questions.

"I know about alchemy... but..." Temlat said as he sounded a bit anxious.

"But you know fuck-all? Got it," Jake nodded. It was pretty much as expected. It was easy to see how nervous the young man was, as Jake reassured him. "That's good. It means you're a clean slate without any bad habits."

"Yes, Lord Thayne!" he quickly said, perking up.

"Next question. How much do you know about curse energy?" Jake asked.

"Not much," he confessed as he held out a hand, the darkish energy gathering. "It's like my feelings somehow made it happen, and the system gave me a skill, and it helped me level up fast... it all just happened one day. That bitch was satisfied with me getting stronger, and I managed to convince her I was doing it because of her, which gave me more freedom. Enough freedom to try and run away once my collar was off."

"Wait, she actually made you wear a collar?" Jake asked. What's worse, Jake had a bad feeling it wasn't even meant to be in the consensual, kinky way. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS](#)
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“Yes...” Temlat, the curse energy began to materialize around him as Jake saw his apparent anger. “If I tried to run away, the pain was... too much. I still tried once, but if I had not returned, I know it would have taken my life.”

Jake slowly nodded at the explanation. “Well, whoever the fuck made those collars also sounds like someone you ought to pay a visit in the future, eh?”

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Continuing their way down, Jake began to discuss some basic things and even got Temlat to feel comfortable enough to ask questions. Having a casual demeanor seemed to work well, and with every passing moment, Temlat’s nervousness lessened.

Soon enough, they reached the alchemy room of the House of the Architect. Alright, calling it a room really didn’t do it justice. It was more like a massive complex of halls, each with different functions, and every single one of them filled with tools of different kinds. There were even several rooms clearly designed for people to work with ritual circles.

The place also had living quarters and space for Jake to leave some books, so he quickly got Temlat settled. Spending a few hours, Jake sorted through some books and had Temlat go through them. Jake had considered for a while what exactly to teach Temlat and quickly concluded that normal alchemy wasn’t going to cut it. No, he would throw him into the deep end instantly. He would try to let Temlat harness his innate ability to create and use curse energy rather than learn how to make potions or anything like that.

A few books with more general alchemy theory and history were still left there, along with a large number of miscellaneous stuff Jake decided on in case the young man found it interesting. If Temlat found something he really liked, it would be way easier to teach him.

Also, during their conversations, Jake learned Temlat was nearly three hundred years old. This was not going to stop Jake from mentally referring to him as a young man. As a mid-tier C-grade, Jake was definitely more mature because he had a higher level; that’s just how the multiverse works. At least, that’s how he decided things were in this particular instance. It also wouldn’t be a good look if Jake admitted to being younger than his student.

After Temlat had gotten a bit more comfortable in his new living quarters, Jake headed back toward the Merit Exchange as he felt quite good about things so far. Having a student this early was definitely going to be a great boon, even if Jake still felt a bit unsure about how he was supposed to go about this entire teaching business.

Jake's plans for Temlat were pretty straightforward. He would teach the young man alchemy and give him access to many of the books Jake had brought with him from the library back in the Order of the Malefic Viper to make him mainly self-study.

If he got lucky, the young man should quickly be able to progress and learn this new craft. Considering Jake's influence, the plan was then for Temlat to evolve to a C-grade with a new class and profession, both partly related to Jake. If all went well, the power Temlat got would even allow him to take revenge on the woman who made him a pet.

It was definitely a bit of a gamble, and much could go wrong, but Jake felt like Temlat was his best bet.

With the young half-elf occupied, Jake quickly went and turned in his two completed Merit Point missions while abandoning the one he had "failed."

Using some of his points, Jake picked up some ingredients he was familiar with. The way the store worked was a bit unique in that there was no browsing of goods or anything like that. Instead, the Creator had to request certain materials, with the exchange then acquiring them and giving a price.

This made it easy to get what you wanted but also added a requirement for the Creators to know their stuff when it came to ingredients. Jake was even happier than before that he had brought half a library's worth of books so he could look up material names if he ever got in trouble and needed something.

Ah, Jake did try to trick one of the attendants into selling him things based on properties, but Jake sadly had to know the name of the ingredient. Even if Jake described something to perfection, the attendant would say that they lacked information on the goods Jake wanted them to acquire. It was a bit frustrating, but Jake did at least know quite a few good ingredients from all his time spent at the Order.

With a good stack of ingredients in hand, Jake finally got to crafting, having decided to start out with concocting some poisons. First of all, because he wanted to submit a good poison for evaluation, and secondly, to get more Merit Points from selling back what he made.

He had a few plans in mind for the poison in question, and he would definitely need some ingredients he didn't already know the name of, but that was where the books came in.

Jake had also decided that one of the things he would make was a ritual circle. He would make one similar to what he used when he gave birth to Vesperia, though naturally without any Jake Juice in the mix. In fact, Jake wanted to make an improved and even more efficient version. Perhaps one suited for another kind of creature than an ectognamorph. Maybe he could even do something curse-related...

Both of these objectives would take a lot of time and resources, but Jake made them a priority. One reason why he wanted to do two semi-familiar things was also due to his new little student nearby, who he had a feeling would need a lot of guidance in the early days as he learned basic alchemical theory. Again, Jake would not turn him into a “real” alchemist, but just a highly specialized one who worked with curses and maybe a bit of poison to mix his curse energy into...

It was totally not because Jake also wanted to research infusing curse energy into poisons himself. Nope, that was definitely not something he would ever do.

This is how Jake’s initial time in the House of the Architect slowly began passing. Jake quickly realized he was horrible at teaching anything, primarily on the grounds that he also didn’t know exactly how things worked himself due to his instinctual approach to everything. However, this is where Temlat specializing in curses was advantageous.

Controlling curse energy was all about emotions. It was instinct and not knowledge that had to guide you. Even someone like Casper couldn’t logic his way to curse energy. He still had to nurture negative emotions in spades to keep himself powerful. However, as a trapper, he didn’t have to be emotional during fights. He just had to have been during his preparation phase. Ah, and then he had Lyra, his ghost girlfriend, who also helped him quite a bit and gave him access to blight energy.

Temlat had none of that. He was just an angry young man who hated the world, and Jake chose to nurture that. Very directly, too. Curse energy had the ability to affect other sources of curse energy, and Jake had a great source in Eternal Hunger. It was actually pretty normal for curses in the wild to fuse into amalgamations if more formed in the same area. The curse energy from Yalsten that Jake had absorbed was a great example of this.

That curse had come from countless beings and their resentment. This didn’t mean that they all agreed on who or even always what they resented, just that they all held a grudge. Over time, a common hatred would then be formed, with it eventually turning into simple resentment – one of the most common forms of curses.

Resentment was not a Sin Curse, though. Sin Curses were the highest level of curses by default and couldn’t be easily formed in the wild. They were pure in concept and had singular goals that didn’t lend well to curses born of people dying. Hunger, which Jake wielded, was a Sin curse that was actually considered pretty rare despite being such a common emotion. It encapsulated a singular desire to simply devour everything insatiably.

Temlat wielded a curse of hatred. Hatred was closely related to the Sin Curse of wrath but was still a bit off. Hatred had the problem that it needed something to hate. It could be resolved once everything you hated was exterminated. No, for something to be a Sin Curse, it had to be something far more basic, far more unfocused on a goal, but just the emotion itself. Wrath was just anger and hatred toward everything. Just an emotion of

wanting to destroy and make others suffer until there was nothing left. And endless Path of destruction.

Considering Jake had a higher-ranked curse than Temlat, he decided to “feed” Temlat’s curse. He worked in a ritual that could contain some of his own curse energy for Temlat to experience it and be empowered by it. To have his curse of hatred be strengthened by his hunger for revenge.

This is how a few months passed as Jake trained and made Temlat stronger as Jake also progressed slowly. He had studied a lot related to the kind of poison he wanted to make, and all of the recent focus on curse energy had inspired him.

In fact, he believed he had gotten quite an interesting and novel idea for a new kind of poison he had never even seen mentioned in any of the books related to both curses and poisons.

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Chapter 810: Nevermore: To Study the Curse

Curse energy was a great tool for combat. However, when it came to using it to craft while doing alchemy, things were very different.

The energy was actually pretty damn hard to store outside of your body, something Jake already knew and now had to find a way to work around. Jake had a talk with Casper back during Minaga’s City Floor, where the Risen shared that he primarily used wooden stakes due to innate concepts within the element. Wood was great at storing energy of different kinds, as trees in the multiverse tended to be very diverse. You could find trees capable of housing anything dependent on their environment. This included curse energy.

To be fair, most plants were very adaptable, but wood was one of the only things that retained most of these properties even after the tree itself had been cut down. It was also part of the reason why Yalsten had even fallen. If it hadn’t been a giant tree that granted that world its unique properties but had instead been some special kind of star or big rock, the chances of the curse taking hold would have been far lower. The fact it was a tree also helped it survive for as long as it did, even if the curse was eventually reduced to a single root.

Curse energy also didn’t mix well with anything; something had run into this many times with his own magic. Jake’s Sin Curse especially did not do well with any other form of

energy. One could even say that Jake's destructive arcane energy and his curse energy were exact opposites.

One wanted to simply destroy everything, while the other wanted to devour it. When these two met, the result would be mutual destruction until there was nothing left of either. However, the story was different with his stable arcane energy. As long as Jake kept the hungering curse energy and destructive arcane energy apart by just a small sealed barrier of stable arcane energy, they would ignore each other. Read complete version only at *novel•fire•net*

It was a bit odd that the curse energy didn't even try to eat his stable arcane energy, but he just chalked that up to another special trait of his arcane affinity. Maybe the energy just wasn't tasty or something, or maybe it was because the barrier registered as something physical and not energy. Honestly, who knows? Probably Villy, but Jake digressed.

Due to the difficulty of using it, he only actually had a single skill that actively used curse energy. Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang made use of Jake's ability to seal in the curse energy with a coating of arcane mana that he would then stab into stuff. It was as simple as could be, really.

Either way, Jake's problem with curse energy was that it inherently wanted to eat everything, so if he tried to mix it into a concoction, surprise, surprise, it would try to eat the concoction. This is what was called a bad thing in the alchemical world. Even if the curse energy was far from powerful enough to consume the rest of the concoction, all Jake would have accomplished was to destroy a part of what he was trying to make.

In all honesty, Jake had no way around this. The only place where Jake could mix poison and curse energy was during combat. Eternal Hunger didn't passively give off the curse energy when not in use – it was simply too greedy to do something like that – which meant Jake could coat it with poison with no problem. The curse energy would then activate to attack foes he stabbed or cut, ignoring the poison it was with to feast on something far tastier.

Jake's idea for a unique poison came from a simple question: what if Eternal Hunger didn't ignore the poison? More specifically, what if he wanted the curse energy to eat it? What if he made a type of poison specifically made to be eaten by his curse energy to empower it?

Mind you, methods to empower curses weren't new, far from it. There were many catalysts or liquids Jake could make to empower curse energy; Jake had even been offered a skill to create cursed items that he could then later use to empower his curse energy.

But this wasn't what Jake was thinking about. No, he wanted it still to be a poison. To accomplish this, Jake looked into another branch of alchemy that he didn't study much but was considered a side-branch of ethtoxins – soul poison. Some poisons existed out

there that didn't deal any damage or even registered as harmful at any point, some of which even made the person you infected more powerful... but at the cost of grave consequences once the poison ran out.

One could almost compare it to doping someone forcefully. What's more, this always came with effects that infected the mental state of the target. Something that made them more bold, reckless, and overconfident. The effects wouldn't be overly powerful, and the poison was considered very hard to make, but he had found it intriguing, even if something was a bit weird.

Jake wondered why he had never really run into this type of poison before until he read a book that explained its fatal flaw: it only worked against idiots. Not just idiots when talking about intelligence, but beings that didn't even have any "instinctive wisdom" either. Even elementals who were just beings of pure mana would notice something was wrong.

Considering the poison didn't register as a poison and had subtle effects by design, anyone who didn't suck could quickly purge it when they noticed it and rely on their Willpower to get rid of any mental manipulation in the meantime. This made the poison hard to craft and hard to use, making it subpar due to this alone. When you did use it, it very rarely worked, and even when it did work, it made your target a bit stronger for a period of time before it would then be weakened, making it an overall shitty poison.

All in all, it was one of those types of poison many had researched but never really used. It was more a branch that some alchemists recommended looking into to make better flasks using some of the concepts to also benefit from some Malefic Viper poison-related skills. Because, yes, poison flasks were also a thing... but that was a topic for a whole other time.

Anyway, this type of poison that sucked to use against people gave Jake an idea. What if he made a poison that effectively boosted the curse energy? Curse energy was odd in that it kind of "lived," if that made sense, so Jake was pretty confident he could affect it. He also didn't care about any of the subtlety or the potential consequences of using too much of a steroid. The curse energy just had to go wild and eat whatever it struck anyway, and if it did so more ravenously and uncontrolled than before, all the better.

However... there was one huge problem with crafting this kind of poison. It included a lot of ingredients classified as psychedelics – which could also be used to make flasks or potions to help one hallucinate and gain enlightenment – and these kinds of ingredients tended to have one thing in common. One terrible thing.

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"Violet Cap Sporeduster of at least rare rarity, Mindcap of epic rarity, Rainbow-Spotted Satyr Mushroom of rare rarity, Illusiary Puffball of rare rarity, and finally a bag of

moss cap and moss mix. Rare-rarity, please,” Jake asked the Merit Exchange worker, holding back any vomit.

That’s right... pretty much every single ingredient was mushrooms. Even the goddamn moss was mixed with small mushrooms that grew on and inside of it. To make matters even worse, Jake would have to eat many of those disgusting shrooms for Palate of the Malefic Viper.

Oh, and also, all of these were psilocybin mushrooms, or what Jake before the system would have called magic mushrooms. They didn’t really affect Jake much in their raw form due to his Palate, but some of their effects did leak through as they didn’t register as necessarily being detrimental. Jake wondered why the hell an effect that made everything take on a rainbow sheen or made him feel like his feet were twice as big as before didn’t register as detrimental, but who the hell was he to question the Legacy skill of a Primordial?

Oh wait, he was Jake, so of course he would question it.

”Sometimes I do wonder to myself if there is any particular reason why psychedelic mushrooms don’t register as purely poisonous to Palate of the Malefic Viper? Oh, wait, is it related to how alcohol also has some effect despite clearly being a toxin? Could it possibly be that the Malefic One, in his infinite wisdom, purposefully wanted to still leave himself an opening to get both drunk and high? No, that possibly cannot be it,” Jake spoke out loud while getting back to the alchemy room.

It was naturally purely coincidental he spoke to himself while in the only area the livestream was live, and he was pretty sure the Malefic Viper was listening. Coincidental, for sure.

Another reason why Jake chose this kind of poison was naturally due to how different it was from anything he usually made. This would add a lot to the ”journey” part of the craft, and due to how different this kind of poison was, it opened up the possibility of Jake also submitting a more normal poison without much penalty if he ended up not making anything he thought was better.

Speaking of unique, Temlat was doing pretty damn well if Jake said so himself. He had brought the young man back from the dystopian megacity about a month prior, and by now, most of his nervousness had bled away and been replaced by a singular focus on getting stronger.

Jake had kept tempering him with his own curse energy over this period and had seen it slowly feed the young man’s curse of hatred. Based on his talks with the guy, his progress was beyond anything he had ever seen before.

To try to boost his progress further, Jake had also considered giving him a Blessing but ultimately decided not to. First of all, Temlat didn’t really exist. He was effectively just a

copy of someone who died trillions of years ago, so Jake wasn't sure he even could bless him. Secondly, even if Jake could, he wasn't sure he wanted to, as it risked exposing Jake could bless someone without the Viper's approval. There was also that it was a bit of a dickmove to do it without the Viper saying it was okay in the first place. Oh, and finally, say Jake did give him a Blessing, wouldn't that just contaminate the Records Jake wanted to impart? Wouldn't the Records of a Primordial replace many of his own and make it much less Jake's Creation, worsening the final evaluation? Probably, which is why Jake stuck to just helping his student the usual way.

Progress-wise, Temlat had only gained a single level this month, but Jake was all good with that. The young man had instead improved many of his skills, and based on how fast the potency of his curse energy grew, Jake didn't doubt he would be able to level up fast when necessary.

In the alchemy department, Jake's little student had even made a bit of progress. Jake had expected him to have a profession related to being a "pet," which he did kind of have, but it wasn't what Jake expected. The one he had was pretty much a double-agent kind of deal and gave him a bunch of skills to try and deceive people while keeping himself hidden. The profession was also related to curses, so that was a win for sure. Plus, there were a few skills in there he worked on turning more alchemy-like.

One skill he had that was already useable was one to condense curse fragments. It was pretty much a worse version of the skill Jake had been offering to make curse marbles, but it was a start. As for how he would use his curse energy, Jake wouldn't dictate. He was very much a hands-off teacher and just believed in creating the best environment for Temlat to figure shit out himself while helping him improve his fundamental power. Ah, but he did do some teacher-like things, like answering questions as best as he could.

"I don't get this part of the ritual circle," Temlat asked as he brought a book related to rituals that could utilize curse energy. "The lines don't seem to connect at all with the other segments..."

Jake studied the book for a bit as he recognized the "issue" Temlat spoke of. "It's because the connection will be established by the liquid you need to pour into the formation indents here, here and here. Blood is recommended, but as you don't have the Legacy skill of the Malefic Viper, you need to figure out a way to make your own useful."

"Can I use someone else's blood?"

"Sure, but they need to be strong enough for their blood to support the rest of the formation, and I reckon you need to infuse them with a lot of curse energy beforehand. Oh, and they need to be kept alive throughout," Jake gladly answered. "If they die and their Truesoul disperses, so will their Records and the power in their blood. So at least keep the Truesoul around."

"How would I do that?" Temlat asked curiously.

"There are many ways to delay someone's soul from dispersing. In your case, modifying the ritual circle a bit to include focal points to seal in the creatures you want the blood from is probably recommended. That way, their soul will disperse the moment the ritual circle is done doing its job," Jake said as he sent out a string of mana and took a book from one of the big piles Jake had thrown there. "Here, check this one out; it talks about it."

"Thank you, Lord Thayne," Temlat said in a respectful voice. "I will be sure to make you proud and hopefully make me worthy of being your student."

"Just keep up the good work, yeah?" Jake smiled, pretty satisfied so far, just happy that Temlat seemed very interested in something.

"Also, Lord Thayne, I am allowed to study all the books here, right?" Temlat asked. "Nothing is off-limits?"

"Of course," Jake shrugged. "That's why I brought them. Why, do you have any more questions regarding anything? While I am not sure what's in all the books, I have read quite a few of them."

"No... no, I simply wanted to make sure," Temlat said as he bowed. "I shall return to my studies."

"Don't forget resistance training later," Jake said, seeing the young man shiver at the mention of it.

Resistance training was, of course, Jake's signature presence-resistance training regiment. He knew from helping Caleb train his shadow assassins that just a little bit of resistance training did wonders, and from the looks of it, Temlat was also helped tremendously. It helped him manage his own energy better and keep his head calm even when wielding amounts of curse energy, which some would argue was too much for him.

Watching Temlat walk off after looking for a few books, Jake couldn't help but feel like things were really going smoothly.

Sadly, Jake did run into having to do a few more Merit Point missions. He learned that the things Temlat worked on couldn't be refunded to the exchange, and Jake had been experimenting a bit too much, losing more than he had earned. But he made something positive out of it as he scouted out all the other worlds properly.

He also took the opportunity to confirm that he could bring Temlat through portals to other worlds, which confirmed Jake's theory that once the young man had gone through a portal, he could use it from that point onward. This proved to be really advantageous

when Jake discovered one of the worlds turned out to be a great place to level for someone like Temlat.

Something Jake, of course, made the young man do so he could get a grasp of Temlat's power level, and, well... let's just say Jake would also have to throw some combat lessons in there.

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Chapter 811: Nevermore: Classic Training

"You gotta dodge," Jake said telepathically as Temlat was attacked by the centaur-like creature. *"Stop trying to block everything or trade blows. That only ever works against those weaker than yourself."*

Jake floated above the clouds nearly a hundred kilometers up in the air as he observed this battle as he tried to stop himself from face-palming.

Below, Temlat held his usual dagger coated with curse energy as he yelled while attacking. His style was hyper-aggressive, which Jake was fine with, as long as the young man didn't act like he had a Transcendent making him immortal like the Necromancer from the Colosseum of Mortals.

Swinging his dagger, he released waves of dense curse energy that sought to tear apart anything it touched. Temlat was still only level 189, and the centaur he faced was 185, but despite the level disparity, the young man found himself pushed back as his opponent swung his halberd like a skilled warrior. His swings were wide, giving Jake's little student no space to get close and attack, forcing him to only make his pretty weak ranged attacks.

When Temlat did try to get close, he found himself with a nasty cut or got blasted back as the centaur wielded some wind magic. From an outside perspective, Temlat was clearly on the losing side... but to Jake, that wasn't the case. Assuming the young half-elf didn't act like an idiot.

"You wield curses; you're not some brawler. Curses are not known for their immediate destructive power but are slower and far more insidious. Reign in your own anger and let it loose with purpose and intent to infect your foe. Remember, time is on your side in a fight like this. You just need to last long enough for the curse to do its thing," Jake sent telepathically once there was a slight break in the fight after the centaur retreated to make some distance.

Temlat listened to Jake for once and restrained himself as he summoned two bolts of black fire. This was something Jake had noticed early on he was capable of, something even Jake wasn't really sure how to do. Temlat had a class in E-grade that revolved around fire magic, as that school tended to be the most useful in production jobs and whatnot. When he evolved and his curse energy manifested, the young man learned to let his curse energy take the form of flames, even keeping some of the inherent concepts of the fire affinity. It was a good combo with his curse of hatred, as both fire and a budding Wrath Sin Curse had a lot to do with destruction, which made it a shame Temlat didn't focus more on this direction compared to becoming a good knife fighter.

Throwing two black fireballs, Temlat managed to take the centaur by surprise as it only had time to dodge one, and when it swung to destroy the second, it exploded and bathed its body in black flames. Screaming loudly, the centaur stumbled, but the flames quickly subsided as they seemed to merge with its body.

"Learn when it is your time to land decisive blows. Right now, it's a slow back and forth, but you need to act without hesitation when you see that one all-important opening. To you, that opening is something you create by yourself as the curse energy accumulates, but you still need to determine when the curse energy is sufficient to end the fight once and for all. If you move too early, you risk your foe eliminating all the curse energy before you win the fight, while if you move too late, you just waste time and resources. So choose your moment of ignition carefully, but not cowardly."

A constant stream of black flames shot out from Temlat toward the centaur as the creature in vain tried to block with its halberd and wind magic but found itself still afflicted by the curse energy. Its swings got more and more furious as its otherwise calm demeanor changed until finally, the centaur yelled loudly as it charged, eyes red with anger.

It had lost its marbles and no longer acted like an expert fighter but just a dumb beast. The curse energy had thoroughly taken hold of its mind, inflicting it with an uncontrollable surge of anger. Temlat managed to take advantage well as he retreated constantly, and even if he still got hit way more than he should have, he managed to hold on long enough until it was time to land the killing blow.

The centaur had just finished a furious flurry of swings as Temlat simply raised his hand and pointed. Right as he did, black veins appeared all over the centaur's body as black flames erupted. The curse energy turned against its own temporary vessel with hatred as it consumed the centaur's body whole. Its arms were hued black before turning to ash as the halberd fell to the ground. Its legs gave out, making it fall to the ground, and all its flesh turned black and wooden before slowly disintegrating.

Yet, despite all this, the centaur kept trying to crawl toward Temlat with only anger in its eyes. There was no sense of self-preservation or instinct to survive, only a singular will to destroy whatever was before its eyes. Even as its eyes turned to black orbs that cracked soon after, its gaze had been full of hate.

Temlat, seeing his foe had died, fell to the ground exhausted as he took out one of the healing potions Jake had handed him before going out on this particular training mission. Jake, standing up in the air and looking down, had a mixed look on his face as he sighed.

“Well, that was kind of shit... but I guess he won,” Jake muttered to himself. That amount of curse energy had been crazy overkill, but hopefully, Temlat would get better with time.

Jake was not an expert when it came to combat, even if he was an expert fighter. He had a fighting style that worked for him, and while it had proven highly effective, it only worked for Jake due to his Bloodline. So even if Jake tried to teach someone his own fighting style, it would prove detrimental compared to learning more standard styles. Jake’s style relied pretty much solely on his Bloodline-empowered instincts, and anyone who didn’t have it would be unable to follow his expert advice of “just dodge everything and stab when you feel like it.”

Also, he wasn’t like the Sword Saint, who could explain in-depth how and why something the old man did worked for him and, more accurately, could point out what would work for others. Jake couldn’t look at someone swinging a sword and instantly point out how the way they placed their index finger was slightly wrong or how they needed to shift their center of gravity when swinging. The best Jake could do was tell someone they were doing something wrong and give some basic advice. All of this is to say Jake sucked at teaching others how to fight.

However, Jake did know one method of teaching combat that was approved multiversally by every single faction: practical experience. Nothing was better at teaching someone how to fight than live combat. Sure, live combat also carried the risk of the person getting trained dying due to some fuck-up, so most factions wanted to at least have their members reach a good baseline before it was time for life-and-death battles.

With Temlat, Jake would teach him how to fight the same way Jake had been taught. He would throw the young man into life-and-death fights right from the get-go and hope he made it. Temlat knew a bit about how to fight from the streets already, but he still sucked ass, to put it nicely.

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The planet Jake had found, which he deemed suitable for Temlat’s practice, was one filled with large plains and different humanoid and semi-humanoid creatures. Their levels were nice and varied, and considering it was a planet that was constantly at war, their combatants were all pretty skilled. Skilled enough to be better than Temlat, for sure.

In pure power, Temlat actually had a good shot against even the peak D-grades. His stat gains hadn't been horrible from the looks of it, and his class was already pretty good even before Jake took him in as a student, with the profession also acceptable. After Jake had helped him make his curse stronger, he now had a pretty good advantage against equal-leveled opponents stat-wise.

Jake, using One Step, teleported down from up in the air within a few steps before he appeared in front of Temlat. The young man quickly gathered himself and kneeled. "I apologize for my horrible display."

"Don't apologize, but improve. Your foes will not care how sorry you are, and the targets of your hatred will not hesitate either just because you aren't powerful or skilled enough to carry out your revenge. These centaurs are nothing compared to even the guards of the woman who kept you as a pet. And I am not talking about the C-grades like the captain, but the D-grades ones," Jake said in a pretty harsh tone.

"I will do my best," he quickly answered.

"And I ask of nothing more," Jake said in an attempt to not be all stick and no carrot. "You are already improving rapidly, far more rapidly than any of those you wish to kill. With time, you will catch up and end them. C-grade shall be your turning point, and upon evolving, I believe you should become capable of holding your own in the power department. However, when it comes to pure skill and learning how to use your curse energy, you still have a long way to go, which is why we're here."

"What does Lord Thayne want me to do?" Temlat asked.

"Remember where the portal we entered from was?" Jake questioned.

"I... it was that way," the young man said as he pointed in a direction. Jake couldn't really fault him for being disorientated, as Jake had brought him there using One Step and his wings, but at least he had the general direction right.

"So you know the way back," Jake smiled under his mask. "So, meet me back at the lab." New NOVEL chapters are published on [novel·fire·net](http://novel.fire.net)

"...I... what?" Temlat asked, confused enough to forget being courteous.

"Make your own way back alive. That's what I want you to do."

"That's..." the young half-elf muttered as he steeled himself. "I shall do my utmost."

"Great," Jake said as he took out a bag of healing potions and placed them down on the ground. "Good luck then, and remember not to die."

With those words, Jake turned around and flew into the air, quickly getting away from the still-kneeling young half-elf. He flew high up and kept observing him as Temlat slowly gathered himself while picking up all the potions. Jake kept observing for an hour or so more as his little student seemed to realize Jake was serious and began making his way back slowly and carefully. He seemed to plan on sneaking back, but Jake knew that wasn't going to work.

There was a large centaur encampment directly in the way, and if he wanted to make it to the portal, he had to make it past it. As he was currently, Temlat wouldn't have a chance, so he would have to use his head and abilities or be stuck in this world forever.

This entire scenario would also serve as a good way for Temlat to get more life experience and see more things. He had been stuck in that megacity his entire life, and seeing new things like this and experiencing an entirely new world filled with greenery had to be healthy, right? Ignoring the murderous centaur running around in the area, of course.

Jake was fully aware this training method was harsh, but he had never claimed to be a gentle teacher. He just did what he thought was best and the most efficient while using rather elementary training methods. And, let's be fair, throwing a student into the wilderness and asking them to survive was as classic a training method as they came.

Naturally, there was a chance Temlat would die, but it was a risk Jake was willing to take. Temlat had also said he would do anything to make his goal possible, and Jake genuinely believed this was a good method. If he made it back alive, he would do so notably improved, while if he died, it would suck. Ultimately, though, should he die, perhaps Temlat was just never meant to get strong.

After being satisfied with Temlat's initial approach to this trial, Jake headed back to the House of the Architect building to keep working on his own stuff. It was probably rude to admit, but Jake felt a sense of relief from not having to think about Temlat for a little while as the young man did his trial. Or, well, didn't do his trial, but hopefully, he would return safe, sound, and less incompetent in the staying-alive department.

With no one around to disturb him, Jake would dedicate his entire focus to his special curse-nurturing poison. He would make the best damn curse-feed the Architect had ever seen.

As Jake began his focused crafting session, other top contenders for the Leaderboards also began to make their way into the House of the Architect. Compared to all the prior Challenge Dungeons, this one stood out for requiring something none of the others did: creativity and the ability to make something.

One thing many top geniuses had in common was a singular focus on a specific Path. Even if someone was enlightened and had a profession, this profession was often

chosen with the express purpose of making them more powerful in combat. Moreover, what they could make with their profession was also focused.

Azal the Ghost King was a brilliant example of this. He was an expert combatant who had only lost in the Colosseum of Mortals when he faced Valdemar and had even managed to get his recognition, netting him a 20% point amplifier. He also did well in the Test of Character, with even Minaga's Labyrinth going well. The Labyrinth was primarily due to his profession.

He was something known as a Spirit Architect. Whenever someone died, their Truesoul would return to the system, but some energy would always linger behind from the broken soul. This energy could take many forms, including curse energy, affinity-filled energy based on who died, or just mana in its purest form, turning the area into a blessed land for monsters.

However, sometimes, spirits were also formed. Monsters that fed on the energy released. These ghosts were not truly something related to the person, even if they could sometimes possess emotions and even fragmented memories of the deceased.

Azal had the ability to collect these spirits within himself. Not only that, he could manipulate them and even merge different spirits. These spirits could then be used in different formations, controlled as summon-like creatures, or consumed directly to empower himself by effectively letting them possess him or his equipment. His blade was tailor-made to be possessed and was a blade he constantly empowered by merging souls into it. Everything he did was with the purpose of getting more powerful.

It was inarguable that Azal had a high-tier profession. One worthy of a top genius of the multiverse. But it was also limited. It dealt only with spirits, and even if there were many ways to use them, Azal had never had to or wanted to learn more nuanced disciplines. He had supporters to do all that, so why would he need to learn how to, for example, craft a piece of equipment or even a catalyst for a spirit to inhabit? The only weapon he ever worked on himself was his Soulbound sword, which he had successfully gotten to mythical rarity through constant feeding and maintenance. It was also a blade directly bound to his profession and was his primary method of housing spirits outside of a hidden internal space in his body.

Anyway, the answer to whether Azal would need to learn more nuanced crafts was that he didn't when he had the entire support system of the Risen behind him. Which became a weakness when he entered the House of the Architect.

Even if he could make a few good Creations, the fact you had to make ten became the big limiter for him and many others. At some point, it also became a question of efficiency. Would it be worth it for him to spend years trying to get a slightly higher score or to try to clear one more floor once he was done with the Challenge Dungeons? To many, Azal included, the answer was clear.

This turned the House of the Architect into what many considered a place to quickly get done with. You would just do what you could and accept the result before moving on to more important matters. Even if you spent a few extra years, that potential 5% extra Nevermore Points wouldn't be worth it to learn something entirely new. Getting to 10% was entirely possible, but anything more than that just became too hard.

Besides, it wasn't like there was any reward for getting a high score in all the Challenge Dungeons, right? And even if there was, who would be crazy enough to go for it?

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Chapter 812: Nevermore: To Feed Thy Curse

So, Jake actually ran into a bit of a problem with his experimentation. Testing out the effectiveness of his poison and curse shouldn't be that hard, right? Except who was Jake supposed to test it out on? The defenseless prisoners down in the cellar of the House of the Architect? Random beasts or low-level monsters in one of the worlds? No, all the options were shit, and not just because it would leave a bad taste in Jake's mouth, but because he wanted to give Eternal Hunger something tasty. Something it actually wanted to eat.

Weak creatures didn't strike the cursed weapon's fancy, and Jake wanted a poison that would really help turn the curse energy ravenous when it mattered. There was also the problem that Jake needed similar targets to compare results. Most alchemists achieved this by testing on live targets that they then healed up again, this often even being people who could give feedback on the torture they had to endure – a fate Meira nearly suffered as a slave.

Yeah, Jake wasn't going to randomly become a torturer. He also wasn't even sure it would work. The entire point was to turn his curse energy uncontrollable, so it was a foregone conclusion that Jake wouldn't be in full control. Due to that, he had no way of ensuring he wouldn't accidentally kill his target. If he did that, any experimentation would be wasted as he needed to start over with a new test subject, which seemed needlessly cruel.

He then considered if he could just use himself, but no matter what he did, his curse energy didn't hurt him. It was probably because he wasn't just the user of the curse energy but also the source. Even if the Sin Curse was hungry beyond anything, it still didn't make any moves to devour Jake himself, which was kind of a new discovery in itself. He did wonder why this was for a while until he quickly reached the conclusion that it was due to Sim-Jake having merged with the curse.

Records of his other self existed within the curse energy, and the curse energy would never try to devour itself. In the same vein, it would now not try to ever devour Jake. At least, that was his best guess. It could also be that Sim-Jake has blessed the Sin Curse with faint instinctual self-preservation that made it aware that killing Jake would also result in it killing itself.

It had to be noted here that Jake was very different compared to Casper and Temlat as a curse user. Both of them created their own curse energy using their souls and resources, while Jake just wielded a weapon with a powerful curse. He didn't have any inherent curse energy but happened to have sealed and bound an insurmountable amount of curse energy within his own Soulspace. This was also why Jake couldn't do something like summon curse bolts or whatever by just transforming his energy. If he wanted to do something like that, he would have to channel the energy from the Soulspace.

This also resulted in Jake theoretically having a finite amount of curse energy. The word theoretically being used in this case as Eternal Hunger was pretty damn good at keeping itself fed and even fattening itself up through Jake's actions.

Anyway, to return from the sidetrack, the reality was that his own katar didn't want to eat him, requiring Jake to find another unfortunate victim to experiment on.

That is when Jake got a brilliant idea. He needed people to experiment on who would be receptive and not fight back during the experiments while not suffering at the same time. It would have to be someone pretty much immortal and highly helpful. This was usually not a thing – outside of perhaps Eron if Jake could convince him - but here in the House of the Architect, Jake had the perfect candidates.

"Excuse me, could you help me with something?" Jake asked as he went up to one of the many attendants walking around doing nothing in the House of the Architect.

"Most certainly," the attendant responded with a smile. "How can I assist you?"

"Would you be able to be my test subject regarding a Creation I am working on? Ah, for clarity, I will need you to have near-infinite health points and be immortal during the experimentation while giving me feedback on the results of my tests. Oh, finally, can you make yourself level... let's just say 320?" Jake asked.

"I will do my utmost, but I must warn you that any energy extracted from my body will not be useable as part of any Creations," the attendant answered without a moment of hesitation to Jake's ridiculous request.

"Oh, that's fine; I just want to test the potency of a mix between a curse and a poison," Jake said casually.

"I see. I must add further that when it comes to feedback, I will only be able to answer any questions and not volunteer information," the attendant further elaborated. "More restrictions may also apply. Is this acceptable to the Creator? If not, there are plenty of potential test subjects in the worlds through the portals and the lower floors of the House."

"The terms are just fine," Jake said with a nod. "Ah, finally, can you turn off your own perception of pain to not make this an unpleasant experience?"

"I can if that is what the Creator wants," the attendant nodded, being very helpful.

Just like that, Jake recruited the best test subject one could imagine and quickly got experimenting. The attendant quickly followed him to the lab, where he took off his robe and wore only a pair of pants to allow Jake to see the visual response of his attacks better.

Jake entered a hardcore session of constant experimentation from here on out, with the attendant gladly helping whenever he could. Having already prepared a few potential mixes before he went to grab his test subject, Jake got started right away.

Eternal Hunger in hand, Jake started out by doing a few baseline tests by punching the attendant in the stomach while activating the curse energy in the mythical weapon. His katar easily penetrated flesh and drew blood from the male human attendant, yet the man didn't even react, even as he had a bloody hole in his stomach.

Pulling Eternal Hunger back out, Jake saw the curse do its thing for a little while as it absorbed some of the attendant's life energy. Alas, Jake felt that only a few seconds later, this energy dispersed, having not truly benefitted the weapon or Jake in any way. So that was one exploit out the window.

Jake continued his test a few hundred more times as he had the attendant compare the effectiveness of each attack, and Jake noted down the baseline "damage number" as 100. Each hit Jake made dealt between 97-103 damage on this scale. This number was after Jake factored out the damage done from the stab alone by also doing a few stabs with Eternal Hunger while he suppressed the curse energy entirely. As for how he got this number? Well, he just asked how many health points the attendant lost. Pretty simple, actually.

He also only needed a few of these stabs to establish he could hit pretty much in the exact same way several times in a row if he so wished. Jake had brilliant control and had a good feel – clearly due to his wonderful Perception - for precisely how hard he was hitting every time, which made this a lot easier.

Anyway, with a baseline down, it was time to test some of Jake's poison. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON **novel★fire★net**

Taking out Eternal Hunger again, he coated it in the poison he had created prior. It seemed to nearly instantly evaporate, but it, in fact, stuck to the weapon as it seemed to almost merge with it. With the weapon in hand, Jake went over to the attendant and got ready.

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“Prepare yourself,” Jake said.

“Very well.”

Without waiting further, Jake stabbed forward as he stirred the curse and made it come to life. The katar penetrated the attendant’s stomach easily before Jake pulled it out and observed the results. He counted down how long it took for the curse to be eliminated by the attendant’s vital energy and got a feel for the damage as he looked at the man.

After some quick calculations and asking him how much health he lost, Jake frowned. “A 91, huh? But the curse energy dispersed in nearly half the time...”

So, Jake had weakened the curse, probably by making it consume some of its energy to eat the poison, but he had also made it work with twice its usual speed. Curses were usually slow burns, much like poisons. They took time to properly take effect. Jake’s Eternal Hunger curse was a bit different as it was usually pretty fast-acting, especially due to most working to eliminate it immediately, making it devour some vital energy quickly before running out of steam.

However, this time, the curse worked even faster. Which was, in all honesty, not something Jake was really interested in. Sure, if it worked faster, it was fine, but not at the loss of potency. So, back to the drawing board.

A week later, Jake was stabbing the attendant again as he once more evaluated the results.

“A 134? Good on paper, but...” Jake muttered. This time, the problem was the exact opposite. The curse energy had acted slow as fuck, so even if it had done more damage overall, its damage per second was far, far lower, having taken nearly four times as long. Moreover, the curse had somehow gotten even less aggressive compared to before and only really bothered to eat the vital energy that got close to it.

Jake once more sat down to think as he went back to testing different things. He ended up making many more concoctions over the next few days, most of which he could sell back for a Merit Point profit after he tested some from each batch. He got different results, some of which were purely positive and kind of did what he wanted, but he still wasn’t satisfied.

He couldn't figure out what he was missing and even began looking in the books to see if there was some crucial ingredient that could help him, but nothing came up.

Suddenly, one day, Jake was reading a book about more effectively using cursed items. It wasn't even directly related to what Jake was doing, but as he read the book, he had an epiphany. He realized he had been looking at the problem all wrong.

"Why am I just trying to make the existing curse energy more potent. I should draw out more," Jake muttered.

The book talked about how one would often use "bait" to activate certain cursed items to draw out their energy more easily, which got Jake thinking... why didn't he do that? If there was something he had a lot of, it was curse energy. In fact, the amount Jake accumulated had only grown since Yalsten as Eternal Hunger devoured more than it used when he used it.

Even now, it held enough pure curse energy to flood at least an entire solar system, which was, needless to say, far more than Jake could ever use or control as a C-grade. It was a bit like how he walked around with a drop of blood from the Malefic Viper that could probably poison a god to death if Jake had any way of using the power and Records within.

Jake quickly adapted his plans after getting this new idea related to using bait. He used some of the ingredients it suggested, which, luckily enough, turned out to primarily be a slightly modified version of the usual healing potion. Jake was very lucky in many ways, as the Sin Curse of Hunger was considered the simplest of them all due to how it wanted to eat pretty much anything.

Only three days later, Jake made his first uncommon rarity version of this poison and quickly tested it with his very helpful assistant.

Coating Eternal Hunger with this new poison, Jake prepared to stab the man the same way as always as he drew out some of the curse energy. As he did so, it was like more energy hidden inside wanted to come along, making it far easier for Jake to pour out more than before as extremely dark-red mist began to seep out of the weapon as the poison coating turned blacker and more reddish sheen. Jake could tell the energy was mixing, but the curse hadn't pounced yet. Feeling the energy, he gladly let the curse have at it as he stabbed forward and drew blood.

Once more, the attendant didn't really react, even as the weapon embedded itself in his stomach. Jake felt the coating rapidly being consumed, especially when the energy of the attendant was thrown into the mix. Black veins spread from the attendant wounds as Jake pulled back his weapon and felt the results with Sense of the Malefic Viper and his other senses as best as he could.

The curse energy ended up taking about the same time to be consumed as when he didn't use any coating at all, but the result was far better.

"168," Jake said happily. Other alchemists would probably have found his happiness odd, though, as the cost of this increased power was Jake having used more than three times the usual curse energy to only inflict around seventy percent more damage. The efficiency had gone way down, but Jake was still happy as he would gladly spend curse energy like some trust fund kid in a toy store if it meant he could do more damage faster.

Finding himself on the right track, Jake began to refine his concoction over the next week and a half. All in all, it didn't end up being as complicated as he had feared, and in a pretty quick fashion, he created a product he was satisfied with.

[Cursed Stimulant of Hunger (Rare)] – A poison created with the express purpose of feeding a cursed item related to the Sin Curse of Hunger, allowing it to indulge in gluttony uncontrollably. Whenever this poison comes into contact with curse energy related to the Sin Curse of Hunger, it shall be rapidly consumed to attract and draw out more curse energy from nearby mediums and serve as a stimulant for the curse by turning it far more volatile and consume significantly more curse energy in the process.

It was an entirely new poison, unlike anything Jake had ever created before. He kind of liked how it framed the fact it consumed more energy as one of the "benefits" of the poison, which was kind of correct. This was ultimately still a poison that worked against the Sin Curse of Hunger in particular, and if Jake fought some creature relying on the Sin Curse, it would not want to be hit by the poison at all. Of course, the volatility did make it deal far more damage in the same time span, but the increased cost and lack of control would rarely, if ever, be worth it. Unless they were Jake. And as for how much more damage it dealt now?

"242," Jake concluded after his final tests with a huge grin.

Nearly one and a half times the damage with each stab from the curse energy. It was about as good as he could ever expect.

When it came to downsides, it now consumed roughly eleven times more curse energy than regular. For a one-hundred and forty percent increase, this was even more inefficient than the uncommon rarity versions Jake made, but he didn't care.

He did consider improving it further, but he realized that diminishing returns were kicking in hard. Maybe he could push it to 260 or 265, but at that point, it would consume sixteen to eighteen times more curse energy. No, he would have to make some hardcore qualitative improvements if he wanted to make a better version, and that just wasn't worth it. Thus, he would simply be satisfied with this one.

Sure, it was only a rare rarity poison, but Jake genuinely believed this was a good item to submit. Rarity wasn't everything, after all, and this item had a good "story" related to its crafting process, especially the part where he had an attendant help him. So, to conclude, one more Creation down, eight to go.

Ah, and speaking of another Creation-in-progress, it had been about two months since Jake sent Temlat on his training mission. Jake had only gone once to check about three weeks ago to see if the guy was still alive, and he most definitely was. Based on how the centaur camp was on high alert and definitely on edge, he seemed to be creating some trouble, even if he had yet to get through.

The only reason why Jake waited that long to check in was because he felt like Temlat was still alive. Even now, he still felt the young man still kicking, and if he trusted anything, it was his guts. In fact, he got the feeling the young man would soon be back, and just in time for Jake having finished his poison.

Now, there was one last thing to address... how good would this poison be in actual combat? Well, to put it nicely, it was completely and utterly useless when he could use any of his other poisons, as quite frankly, a good dose of necrotic poison did far more damage than even a double-damage dose of Eternal Hunger's curse. One could argue the life-stealing effect of the curse would make up for this, but not really. There was also the problem that all the poison got consumed in just a single stab, requiring him to reapply it all the time.

So, to conclude, it kinda sucked from a practical standpoint. However, that didn't mean it would continue to be that way, and Jake was certain he would find use of this kind of poison in the future... who knows, maybe he could even use some of what he learned when it was time to play with rituals later on in the Challenge Dungeon.

But for now, it was time to go and turn in his second Creation to the Architect.

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Chapter 813: Nevermore: The Prodigal Son Returns

"So, you're not angry I had one of your employees act like a test dummy for several weeks? Imagine how many perfectly pristine statues he could have looked like he was cleaning during that time!" Jake joked as he stood in front of the Bound God after having presented his second Creation.

“Calling them my employees is not entirely accurate, now is it? They are merely summoned creatures, created to serve a simple function and give ambiance to the House of the Architect,” the Architect answered as she was already done putting away Jake’s poison.

“Can I, you know, get a little hint of how good this Creation was? I know it isn’t as unique as the first one, but just a tiny bit of direction would be great,” Jake said with a smile.

“No,” the Architect outright denied him. “Now, be on your way before you try to glean any more information than you should.” This update is available on *novel**fire**net*

“No thoughts on any of my current projects? Anything to say regarding my little student? He’s an interesting lad, don’t you thi-“

Jake still had his mouth open when he appeared standing in front of the entrance to the Architect’s room, the door shut. He stood there for a moment before shaking his head. The Bound God was really stingy when it came to giving out tips or even allowing Jake to be in her presence. It sucked a bit, as Jake would have loved to have “gleaned some things he shouldn’t,” as she said.

Returning back to the alchemy lab, Jake wondered what his next project should be. He had worked on poisons for a good while now and considered if he should go in an entirely different direction. Referring back to his list, Jake put on his thinking cap.

He considered looking into making an elixir or perhaps a ritual. He also had the skill improvements to think about... so much to do and so much time if he was fine fucking over his party members by spending several years within this Challenge Dungeon. Something Jake obviously wouldn’t do, which was part of the reason he had submitted a rare poison and not tried to make something more impressive.

Considering Temlat should also soon be back – assuming he survived – Jake went with just reading some books on something he knew he would want to craft no matter what. So, walking to the stacks of books he had left so Temlat could take what he wanted, he began to go through them. He had noticed how Temlat had brought a few books with him, but Jake didn’t really care. Jake would get them back at some point anyway, and even if his student died, he could just go retrieve them himself.

After looking through the stacks a bit, Jake finally found one that looked promising as a starter: **Grimoire Creation: To Forge a Legacy.**

It was a bloody huge tome that Jake picked up and began to slowly go through. Even if he had a skill that gave him some instinctive knowledge, it never hurt to also study a bit on the subject. He also saw a few more books on the subject when he picked this one up, so he definitely had plenty of reading material for a good while.

Five or so days went by before an attendant walked into the alchemy room, giving Jake a big smile on his lips. Putting the book away and getting up from the bed he had been lying in, Jake walked out of the lab and toward the portal room, where he knew a certain someone had just arrived. He had asked the attendants to inform him when someone arrived through one of the portals, and it appeared someone just had.

Entering the portal room, Jake saw a young man lying on the ground, breathing heavily. Blood colored the otherwise pristine white floor as it dropped from several wounds, both new and old. Temlat was looking bloody exhausted, and a dense air hung around him, infused with his cursed energy, and without even having to check, Jake knew the young half-elf had made quite some progress.

[Half-elf – lvl 194]

Temlat had already maxed out his profession before following Jake, meaning he had gained levels solely from leveling his class. Ten or so class levels, it appeared, all in the span of two and a half months or so. Great progress, especially at late-tier D-grade, which proved he hadn't been slacking off.

"Still alive, huh?" Jake said, smiling beneath his mask as he walked over.

The young half-elf groaned as he sat up and looked at Jake. "I am."

His gaze held a level of defiance and indignation Jake found endearing. What's more, Jake detected a minor hint of hatred that stemmed not just from the fact he was surrounded by the curse energy but a small grudge against Jake for having put him through this kind of hellish training. At least Jake assumed that was the reason.

"Are you angry with me?" Jake said as he stood over the sitting Temlat. "Do you think this method was too harsh? Too risky? Do you despise me because you nearly died more than a few times?"

Temlat didn't answer, but his silence was good enough of a response. "Articulate why you feel this. Explain to me your indignation."

Jake's student remained silent for a while before he finally answered. "You just threw me away to fend for myself."

"I am perfectly aware of that," Jake said without arguing. "But so what?"

"You... you barely taught me anything and then just left me there to die... what did you even do? How are you even teaching me? I... if I died, everything up till now would have been for nothing!" Temlat practically yelled as he gritted his teeth, clearly having built up quite the resentment over these last couple of months.

“Remember what you asked of me when I took you in as a student. You want me to make you strong, and that is exactly what I am doing. Do you think power comes without risk? Do you think anyone truly powerful hasn’t risked their life innumerable times throughout their Path? What exactly did you expect when you accepted my offer? That we would sit in a lab for a few years, and you would emerge an expert capable of fulfilling all your desires without ever having to risk your life?” Jake said in an admonishing tone.

“But if I died, I-“

“Being dead is a preferential alternative to being weak,” Jake cut him off. “You always have the choice of going back to your old life. Your former owner didn’t look like she would ever risk your life if you could even call what you had back then a life. Besides, wasn’t it you who said it? That you would rather die than go back? You may have just said it in the heat of the moment, but I took that seriously.”

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Temlat just stared back at Jake with a mixed expression on his face. Jake got the feeling he wasn’t sure what to say, taking the lead instead. He was meant to be the grown-up in this relationship, after all.

“I am merely sticking to my promise of helping you get strong, so you stick to your promise of doing whatever you can to do just that. I am not interested in seeing you die, but I will expect you to take risks that could result in your death if you mess up. The key part of this being that you would need to mess up. As long as you do your best and don’t get incredibly unlucky, you will eventually reach your goals and get your revenge, alright?” Jake asked.

Temlat slowly nodded, making Jake smile. “Now go on back to your room and rest up. Come find me when you are back in peak condition and feel ready to continue. Ah, but don’t dally too much; you don’t want me to be the one coming to find you.”

“Thank you... Lord Thayne,” the young half-elf said as he stood up and began walking slowly back toward the alchemy lab. The hatred in his eyes had lessened, and his anger was replaced with introspection. He would have plenty of time to ponder while limping back and recovering in a bed.

Could Jake have given him a health potion? Sure. The young man had clearly run out, but Jake purposefully chose not to. He wasn’t just being harsh to be an asshole either but relied on the only person whose teaching style he did know, and the half-elf being in some pain wouldn’t hurt him in the long run.

Jake, having no experience with teaching, chose to just go with the teaching style the Viper used. Which was the one where he wanted Temlat to mostly figure out stuff himself while helping him in some areas, such as progressing his curse energy. He

would do this while instilling the mentality of the law of the jungle that both Jake and the Viper subscribed to, making Temlat understand that he shouldn't just feel like he wanted to get stronger. He should feel like he *had* to get stronger and like it was the most important goal in life. Because without power, he would never be able to do what he wanted, and to stagnate and stop progressing was no different from lying down and dying.

He had no way of knowing if this was the best approach, but it seemed to be working out so far. Besides, if he taught like the Viper would, he would play his role as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper way better.

Looking at the portal to the world with the centaurs in, Jake entered to take a look at the carnage Temlat had left behind. Appearing on the other side, Jake's Sphere of Perception instantly spread out, making Jake frown and turn around as a figure was standing there.

It was a centaur a bit larger than any of the others Jake had seen, and it was even wearing armor. It had a few cuts on its body and a single arrow sticking out of its side, wielding a halberd filled with blood. A faint curse energy could be felt from the centaur himself, but way more came from his weapon. Using Identify, Jake checked the creature's level while also releasing a Pulse of Perception to see the surrounding area.

[Centaurian Warlord – lvl 203]

Below the risen stone platform they were standing on, a sprawling centaur village had once been. Now, it was filled with corpses and had a dark aura hanging all over it, while the survivors mourned or were filled with hateful looks. What's more, nearly all of the centaurs looked like they hadn't been killed by Temlat but by each other. From the many who were cleaved cleanly in two, the Centaurian Warlord in front of him had clearly done his fair share of killing himself.

"You... who are you?" the centaur said in an angry voice. "Where did the half-human go?"

"He went home," Jake answered casually as he studied the centaur closely. "As for who I am... his teacher, I guess?"

Jake's answer instantly got a rise out of the Centaur Warlord as it's body exploded with a mix of wind and earth-affinity mana as it pointed its weapon toward Jake. "Then you die!"

Despite the clear aggression, Jake didn't make any moves as the Centaur Warlord got into a position to charge. The anger he felt from the centaur was extremely powerful, but in all honesty, who could excuse the C-grade? He had just been confronted with someone claiming to be the teacher of the person who had ruined his home.

The curse energy was doing very little to amplify the anger that was already there. One didn't need to be cursed to lose all rationality, and it appeared that Temlat's actions had been enough to push this Warlord over the edge, even if he didn't affect the C-grade with curse energy.

Jake looked as the C-grade centaur charged, but he didn't bother to move. Instead, he just looked at it as his eyes glowed. Instantly, a feeling that far surpassed that of anger overtook the Centaur Warlord. The one emotion that trumped all: fear. A sense of fear so overwhelming it made the centaur's survival instinct kick in instantly as all attempts to attack were abandoned, and the C-grade jumped back, shivering, too scared to even try and continue his retreat.

"I will not apologize for what he did, but neither will I offer any form of recompense," Jake said with a sigh. "So let the matter end here. Ah, but one warning... if he does come back, be better prepared the next time. Assuming your job was to protect this place, you failed miserably and only got yourself to blame that someone so much weaker than you could wreak this level of havoc."

With those words, Jake turned around and walked back through the portal again. He no doubt looked like some divine being in the eyes of the centaur as he managed to disappear entirely out of nowhere, considering it couldn't see the portal.

Back in the portal room, Jake could admit he had pretty mixed feelings after seeing the devastation Temlat had managed to wreak. From the looks of it, he had spent most of the time he was in the world slowly picking off centaurs while somehow spreading his curse throughout the village.

Even if he had failed to kill anything with the curse, he had managed to fuel their emotions of anger above a boiling point. Most of them had killed each other in what quickly became a self-fueled circle of violence and hatred. Someone may have done something wrong, making another lash out in anger and attack. What was meant to just be a punch of rage escalated as the one who got punched felt righteous fury from someone daring to strike them. From there, a brawl would turn into a fight that eventually resulted in death.

Relatives or friends of the killed would have their anger toward the killer empowered, making them seek out revenge, and from there, a near-unstoppable cycle would be formed. The curse energy would fuel itself through all the hate and spread autonomously as long as the original source – Temlat – still existed.

This was one part of the reason why curses were so feared. They were hard to understand, could be fueled merely by emotions, and were often hard to detect for those inflicted. Especially considering how the curse would alter the mental state of those affected, making their ability to address their own out-of-character actions severely inhibited.

Jake's guess for how this particular centaur conflict ended was through the C-grade coming back and putting a stop to everything. As a C-grade, the Warlord would have been able to resist the curse created by a D-grade and keep a clear head long enough to address the carnage. It had clearly taken a few deaths as the Warlord was a fighter and not someone with the ability to heal or dispel the curse, but after a bit of killing, it seemed like he had calmed the situation down enough.

Sighing, Jake walked back to the lab, and once he entered, he saw the sleeping half-elf inside his room through the sphere. He looked peaceful despite having just led to the deaths of nearly a thousand. His actions had clearly been exhausting, and he hadn't even changed out of his ruined clothes before flopping down on the bed.

"He's getting more powerful for sure. I guess that was the goal all along, so I shouldn't really be complaining; he is progressing fast," Jake muttered to himself. His only real problem now was that he had no idea what Temlat would ultimately turn into.

Which was one-hundred percent a problem for future Jake to address.

For now, he had tomes to study and a Grimoire to make. Who knew? Maybe he could even get some other forms of crafting in there and bang out some quick Creations... though he should probably keep an eye on Temlat in the meanwhile and make sure he didn't lose himself completely to the curse he was nurturing. There definitely weren't going to be any more portal adventures in the next little while.

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Chapter 814: Nevermore: A More Holistic Approach

Jake had wanted to just focus on making a Grimoire. He truly had. The problem was that he couldn't just do as he usually did and experiment until he pumped something good out for one simple reason he had kind of forgotten, even if it was expressly mentioned in the skill description. It was only when Jake tried to craft one he brought up the skill description again and was reminded.

[Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)] – Expand your Path and allow others to walk in your footsteps. Allows the Heretic-Chosen to craft a Grimoire related to his Path, allowing another of the enlightened races to consume it, granting them either a class or profession. The nature of the Grimoire depends on a multitude of factors, including crafting ingredients, the will of the creator, and several unknowns. Requirements to use the Grimoire vary. A cooldown period is required between each crafting attempt, and a longer cooldown is triggered after a

successful Grimoire craft. Due to your unique Path, every Grimoire created will be more potent by default and receive additional Records based on all your stats.

A cooldown period. Yeah, that one definitely threw a spanner into the works. To make matters worse, the failed Grimoire Jake had tried to make while experimenting just turned into ash, wasting all of the materials. Materials that were in no way cheap at the Merit Point Exchange, as stronger Paths required better base ingredients, and Jake felt fairly confident the reason he failed the first time around was due to his attempt to cheap out.

The cooldown period wasn't even short. It was an entire damn month, even if Jake failed, making him wonder if it wouldn't be over a year when he succeeded. The only good thing was that the Records Jake tried to pour into the Grimoire were fully refunded even when he failed the crafting attempt, so nothing besides the ingredients was wasted.

On that note, Jake read in the books that the good thing about Grimoires was that the Records gained from crafting one always equaled out with those poured into it, meaning one never truly lost anything. It could still easily turn into a bad investment as making a Grimoire wasn't cheap, and some jackass could get and waste the evolution granted, but luckily that wasn't of any concern to Jake, considering he would just give the final product to the Architect.

Anyway, with the longer cooldown, should he succeed, he would likely only have one real shot, though, so he had to be careful.

With Grimoire-crafting temporarily shelved due to cooldown-related delays, Jake focused on other projects he also needed to get done. One of them was naturally the entire Temlat matter, but things had gone a lot more smoothly there than Jake had initially anticipated. He had sought out Jake only three days after he got back with a significantly better demeanor than before.

After some rest and reflection, he even seemed thankful for the experience in the centaur world. He had learned he had abilities he didn't even know about and applications of curse energy he hadn't ever considered. Jake wanted to hear more as he got Temlat to explain what had happened inside of the centaur world more in-depth and what the young half-elf had discovered.

"I always thought of my curse energy as just another kind of energy to kill with, a way to improve my destructive power. That it was the essence of my own hatred toward others... but I never really considered how much it can affect others outside of combat. I did know it made my opponent more reckless when we fought, but they obviously knew that was due to the curse and would work to eliminate it once the fight was over," Temlat explained as Jake encouraged him to continue.

“But... one day, in that world, I killed a centaur hunter who spotted and tried to hunt me down. We ended up fighting, and I won in the end, killing him. Right after, I heard its allies nearby and ran to hide just in time for them to find the corpse of their friend. I saw their rage and anger as they picked up the corpse and brought it back to a small temporary camp they had made nearby. That is when I noticed the curse energy on the corpse still seeping out and influencing the centaurs and their own anger. What’s more, none of them made any efforts to eliminate it, almost as if they didn’t even notice.

“Following them to their temporary camp, I saw them have heated discussions. I don’t know what they were saying, but I felt something I hadn’t ever imagined. My curse energy within them was growing despite me doing nothing. They fueled it all by themselves. I knew that if I did something, they would notice, so I just kept watching. A few hours later, the hunters decided to head back to their main encampment, and on their way, they encountered a pretty powerful beast. Even if they won, you could see how frustrated they were with one another. Every minor mistake was scrutinized, and by the time they returned home, they clearly hated each other.

“I couldn’t follow them all the way into their settlement... but I could still feel their curse energy even from far away. So, I kept observing for two days until the curse within one of the three disappeared. I was afraid they had discovered the curse and would all soon be cured... until I found the cursed one’s corpse being buried outside of the encampment along with two others whom I felt very faint traces of the curse also on. That is when I began to understand the true power of my curse. Of my power.”

Temlat told his story with excitement that was almost childlike. He was proud of what he had done, and even if it wasn’t Jake’s style, he wasn’t going to judge Temlat for how he achieved things. He did things the best he could, and it was indisputable that Temlat would have never had a chance against the centaur settlement in a direct confrontation.

Jake kept listening as Temlat kept explaining how he managed to spread the curse slowly through the encampment by killing some of their hunters and even once threw a head into the encampment filled with even more curse energy. Not to mention all the times he threw in normal fireballs and set fire to their houses just to make them even more mad.

It took him around three weeks before he had the settlement fully on edge. Their hatred of this unknown enemy who killed their kin and even sometimes burned down their homes was truly staggering, and he didn’t plan on giving them any outlet. Temlat had fully waged a psychological war fueled by curse energy until, one day, it boiled over.

Temlat saw his chance and “ignited” much of the curse energy in the camp all at once during what he viewed as a huge and very heated town square meeting. Maybe some of them noticed something was wrong and identified the curse, but they didn’t have time as others went berserk. A brawl broke out that soon escalated into a deadly fight where dozens died.

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The violence only spread from there, and Temlat took this chance to try to sneak through the settlement and get to the platform on top of a small rocky hill sitting in the middle where he knew the portal was located.

On the way, he set fire to things to mask his presence even more, but things hadn't worked out as he expected. The C-grade Centaur Warlord, who had otherwise barely shown itself, came out at that very moment to quell the conflict and, in the process, quickly identified Temlat as the source of everything.

Jake's student had to run with all his might. He flew up to the rocky platform as the Centaur Warlord chased, and those around it attacked with ranged weapons. That was partly how Temlat had gotten so injured, as he was hit by several things in those final moments, and with the halberd practically touching his back, he had stumbled through the portal.

That was also why he had been so on edge when Jake walked in. He had nearly just died and was – for lack of a better word – in shock. However, that didn't mean the feelings he had poured out during their talk were any less genuine.

After hearing Temlat's story, Jake didn't really have any advice. He realized that Temlat had reached his own conclusions when it came to a different kind of Path he wanted to take. Rather than someone who used his curse energy as a destructive force with his black flames, he wanted to be far more of a schemer. A far more classical curse user, if you may. This was a Path Jake was definitely not qualified to give any advice on, so he could only encourage his student to do whatever he deemed best while still helping him to nurture and make his curse more powerful. Because no matter the Path, the curse Temlat nurtured was still the core.

Jake did have one piece of advice he wanted to give, though.

"Right now, your only goal is revenge, right? I believe it is time to also think beyond that. What happens when you're done exacting your vengeance? What will you do, and what will you become when that happens? What person do you want to be, and what Path do you want to take? While your curse is the source of your power, do not let it be the only thing that defines and controls your actions. In the end, it is nothing but a tool for you to use, not the other way around," Jake said, trying to give some actual advice that he honestly wasn't sure was good or bad.

He just had the feeling that Temlat would gladly shoot himself through the chest to hit the ones he hated in the head. And while that could work, Jake wasn't sure that kind of approach was best. This was also why Jake insisted on keeping up his presence-resistance training, as that helped Temlat remain "grounded," even as his curse grew in power.

"I will keep your words in mind, Lord Thayne," Temlat bowed. "Also... I have a question... are there poisons or something like that I can use to better spread my curses?"

Jake considered for a while. The short answer was yes, as the curse energy Temlat had would be totally useable even in poisons, unlike Jake's, as long as he made the mix right. The problem was that Jake doubted the half-elf could make anything useful even if he had a couple of years. He didn't have any alchemy experience, after all, and with usual poisons, you were kind of forced to start from the bottom.

That is when Jake remembered one book he had stumbled upon when doing his own research. However, he quickly discarded it after reading in the introduction that his Sin Curse wouldn't be compatible with most of the methods discussed within. Looking at the stack of books nearby, Jake sent out a string of mana, picked it up where he remembered he had left it, and checked the cover.

An Introduction To Curse Proliferation: Methods Based On Practical Demonstrations of the Malefic One.

It was a damn long cover, with the author bragging he had attended one of the many times Villy liked to show off way back in the day. Jake did remember that the book mentioned that the Sin Curse of Wrath was compatible with the methods discussed in the book, so it should be useable for Temlat even if he didn't have a Sin Curse quite yet.

"Check this one out," Jake said as he handed Temlat the book, and he pointed to a stack of books off to the side of the big pile. "There are about thirty more by the same author right there, so if this one is a hit, probably check those out."

"Thank you, Lord Thayne," Temlat said politely as he accepted the book gracefully and quickly went to study it.

Jake watched him leave with a smile, wondering if he would figure out the methods within. It would be very interesting if he did... because Jake really wanted to see if Temlat could actually use plague theory as a way to spread his curse.

What?

He had read the introduction that clearly mentioned plagues as one of the primary methods, and Jake was curious, so who could blame him. Making plagues himself seemed like a bad idea, but he did want to see someone study it, and what place was better than a Challenge Dungeon where, no matter the result, there wouldn't be any permanent consequences? Was he potentially creating a living natural disaster that could kill countless people? Sure, but at least the living disaster would be strong, and considering that was what his student had asked him to help with, Jake would consider it a job well done even if Temlat turned into someone who would be on a multiversal watch-list.

Speaking of doing a job well... Temlat's approach to that entire training mission hadn't actually been what Jake expected. He had instead expected Temlat to take a far stealthier approach. The young half-elf already had pretty good stealth skills, and it seemed like an opportune time to improve those if he had to sneak past the centaurs.

Jake's original intention was to help Temlat become a good assassin of sorts. To give him the skills to sneak in and kill those he wished dead. Things had changed now where Temlat had taken a more, let's just say, holistic approach to spreading his curse energy, but Jake still thought his stealth idea was good.

Which had got him wondering... why the hell did Jake suck so much at being stealthy himself? Shit, his skill was still only rare, even after all this time, and as he opened the description and read it over, he felt a bit conflicted.

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[Arcane Stealth (Rare)] – An upgraded version of the Expert Stealth skill, retaining all benefits while infusing in additional abilities related to your arcane affinity. You find it easier than ever to blend into the environment, making your presence, mana, and nearly all traces of your existence hidden as you wait for your prey to be vulnerable. You have enhanced your stealth capabilities through magic, allowing you to mask your physical shape to become one with the environment, even to the sense of touch and most magical scans. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility, Perception, Willpower, and Intelligence while successfully remaining undetected.

In truth, it wasn't like the effects of the skill were bad. It was a good skill that did its job, and it saved Jake's ass when he used it to hide from the Termite King, but it was definitely a skill that was due for an upgrade.

Jake had been putting off upgrading it for far too long as he simply never found a good chance while doing Nevermore with a party of five. There weren't many good excuses to sneak around solo, and more often than not, being sneaky had no big benefits.

However, what time was better than now? He wanted to submit improved skills as Creations, and he believed Arcane Stealth was a prime candidate. He even had a few good ideas for good stealth skills, and one upgrade path especially tickled his fancy. Funnily enough, it had even been told to him by a person who also happened to tickle his fancy: Artemis.

As a more "traditional" hunter, she also had many traditional skills, and during their practice sessions, she often complained about how Jake so easily saw through it when she tried to use the concepts of her stealth skill to hide. These were definitely concepts Jake quite liked when he heard about them because they relied on something that mega-tickled Jake's fancy... the one and only Perception stat.

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Chapter 815: Nevermore: Spectrum of Perception

To be stealthy.

An ancient art learned by many teenagers with wary parents and creaky floorboards to remain undetected as they were up to no good. That, or because they just needed to go to the bathroom really late in the night and didn't want to wake anyone up.

However, this was but one part of the stealth: the art of avoiding sound. Others were stealthy by melding into the environment through camouflage or even found ways to hide their heat signatures or other traces of their existence.

There were countless methods in the multiverse to remain undetected, with Jake's current method akin to being able to summon a fake boulder he could hide within, which also helped mask his presence and energy. It was far from perfect, and moving around while using it wasn't advised, but so far, it had kind of gotten the job done.

However, now, it was high time to improve it, and he may as well learn from the best while doing so.

In the multiverse, Jake knew of two beings who had reached the ultimate peak of stealthiness. One of them was naturally Umbra, the leader of the Court of Shadows. Her ability to remain undetected until the moment she decided to strike was unparalleled as she could hide within the shadows themselves only to emerge when she so desired. Her form of stealth was the most classical sort, but there was one person in the multiverse who surpassed her when it came to remaining undetected.

Because another branch of stealth was one where you could be seen, but no one truly noticed you. Where you could stand next to your target on the street without them looking twice your way. The being who had reached the apex of this was, needless to say, Eversmile, the ultimate shapeshifter. He could take any form and become anyone or anything he wanted. His form wasn't just limited to people, as far as Jake had been told, but he could even mimic objects or non-humanoid races.

So, if one apex emerged out of nowhere, the other emerged from right next to you unexpectedly. These two methods were often recognized as the main branches: obscuration and blending in. Jake was currently doing a bit of both – which most stealth methods did – but he did both kind of poorly.

Jake wanted to still do a bit of both with his improved method, primarily because he wanted to try and learn what Artemis had talked about. At least he wanted to integrate concepts of what she explained, even if it was pretty damn complicated. He did have their entire discussion committed to memory, though, as he recalled what she said during what Jake would call a great discussion on progression methods, while others would probably define it as pillow talk.

“My method of stealth is a lot more simple than what you described,” Artemis had explained. “The Path of the Hunter is naturally intertwined with the world around us. It is one of the most natural Paths to anyone in the system, and anyone who fights and kills partly steps into the Path of the Hunter at least a few times in their lives. Hunters are merely the name we use instead of predators for those of the enlightened races, and many civilizations even call those who fight monsters hunters by default, no matter what weapon or form of combat they use.”

The basis for the entire stealth method Artemis used was to be a natural hunter. A part of an ecosystem. At least, that is the mentality Artemis had when she first learned and improved the skill.

“My form of stealth leans into becoming one with the environment in a more literal sense. Feel the natural mana around you, feel the presence of the world itself, and breathe it in. Let it fill you and become one with everything. Perceive the world as you let it perceive you, and through that, you will know how to hide at the end of Perception. Seek the very edge of where you recognize your own form within the world and obscure what little remains of you that remain as you blend in. If you do this, you will be able to move without hesitation and act entirely normal, as you will simply disappear from everyone’s spectrum of what they perceive. You will never be perfect in this; no one is, but if they cannot perceive the world as well as you do, finding you will prove difficult. Well, unless they have a cheat-like Bloodline,” Artemis had further elaborated.

Jake had probed further and had kind of formed his own interpretation using more pre-system terms. Jake would liken this kind of method to changing how you appear on the color spectrum. The human eye, before the system, was unable to see things like ultraviolet light but had a limited spectrum. The same was true for what one could hear, and Jake wouldn’t be surprised if the same had been true for smells and pretty much everything else.

With the system, the spectrum had expanded. Magical elements were introduced; one could see and feel mana, and Jake could see things he never would have been able to before. With his Perception alone, he could easily peer through things like naturally-formed mist or clouds despite it being completely impossible to see through before the system, and with time, he knew he would even be able to see through things like non-magically reinforced walls.

Where this spectrum being expanded truly mattered was in the realm of concepts. It was one of the reasons why someone like Arnold also had Perception as his highest stat, as it allowed him to perceive things others couldn’t. Jake was the same, and as an

example, he had only recognized and gained his arcane affinity because his growing Perception allowed him to notice it.

This spectrum continued to expand even now, and while Perception was far from the only criterion to “see” concepts and become able to understand them, it was definitely an essential factor. Not to say everyone needed it to reach the peak, as someone like the Sword Saint was so in tune with the concepts that mattered to him, it wasn’t as much about perceiving them as it was simply “living” them, if that made sense.

All of this is to say that Perception allowed you to detect and see more on the spectrum of the world. This spectrum was eternally expanding without any end. Jake’s Bloodline allowed him to see everything within the physical spectrum with his Sphere, and as it existed outside of the system, it wasn’t limited. Of course, it wasn’t entirely accurate to say that he saw everything as if he actually could; his brain would explode from perceiving concepts even Primordials couldn’t comprehend. It was more right to say he saw everything he already knew could exist, with perhaps a bit more shown here and there.

Also... upon reflection, what had happened in the final moments of Jake fighting Valdemar probably included expanding this spectrum far more than he could usually handle, which was also why Jake couldn’t remember everything he had felt back then anymore. He had touched upon things that simply didn’t exist to him yet.

Anyway, to get back on the topic of creating a stealth skill, the method Artemis used was to “see” yourself on this spectrum of the world and then become one with it. To move yourself on the spectrum from where even a level 0 could see you to somewhere no one would know you were there, even if you stood right next to and breathed them down the neck. Simply because they wouldn’t be capable of registering you even existed. Jake would liken it to himself from the visual spectrum of light into the ultraviolet in pre-system terms and move every sound he made into the ultrasonic, with the same being done for every other trace of his existence.

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Of course, this was Artemis’ method, and Jake had the feeling he wouldn’t be able to replicate something like this perfectly. In fact, he was pretty damn sure he wouldn’t be able to, as that sounded like at least a Mythical C-grade skill that would effectively make Jake entirely undetectable to anyone who had less Perception than himself.

What’s more, Artemis said that her stealth skill even worked in combat to help keep her hidden, even if the effect was lessened while fighting due to how much energy one had to give off that inadvertently disrupted and warped the natural world around her. Not that it mattered, as this was definitely out of Jake’s realm of possibility.

However, he did believe he could move himself in the physical realm of Perception. He had plenty of experience observing that, after all, and could even make use of some of

what he learned from his Bloodline. As for the rest of the stealth capabilities? That would have to be mimicked using other means. Primarily, his arcane energy, where he already had some good ideas and a stealth skill already with that ability.

It had to be reiterated once more that Jake had thought about how to improve his stealth for a long time and just never got the opportunity. That is where all his ideas for using arcane energy came from. Artemis had just given him even more good ideas to put on top, and now, in this House of the Architect, Jake would throw them all together.

What's more, he wanted to build a skill that could serve as a foundation for more upgrades. One that he could potentially even train on together with Artemis if they ever got the chance to further improve it.

This is how Jake's next period of intense practice began. He would spend his time working on the stealth skill at the House or doing practical testing while also completing some Merit Point Missions, which would fund his Grimoire experimentation once a month or so. In between, he would sometimes help out Temlat and make sure he was also making progress.

After only the first two weeks, Jake already had his first little bit of progress as he implemented some improvements to the stealth skill he had long been considering, which resulted in a nice little notification.

***Skill Upgraded*: [Arcane Stealth (Rare)] --> [Improved Arcane Stealth (Rare)]**

It was small and nice indeed. The skill stayed within the same rarity, which indicated it had been a pretty low-level C-grade rare skill after Jake evolved. Which made sense, considering the skill had avoided getting downgraded a rank after he evolved. This upgrade had brought it back to be considered a pretty good C-grade rare skill, but it was naturally far from enough. All Jake had really done was tighten up what the skill already did and improve all aspects of it using all he had learned since he made the skill while still in D-grade.

Only another one and a half months later, Jake had failed another two Grimoire crafts – primarily because he wanted a good one and felt both wouldn't turn out well – but had also made plenty of progress when it came to improving his stealth skill.

He infused more stability into the mana constructs around him, making him appear more like a physical thing and not a person than ever before. When he stood still, he became nearly indiscernible from his surroundings when he camouflaged the mana around him, and even if he moved and used energy within this construct, it couldn't be detected on the outside. It became as if he had placed a dome around himself, hiding him away from the world. The concept of Jake's original Arcane Stealth skill had been taken to an extreme, and the system recognized it.

***Skill Upgraded*: [Improved Arcane Stealth (Rare)] --> [Supreme Arcane Stealth (Epic)]**

Now, this is where the truly hard part began. Jake's newly acquired Supreme Arcane Stealth was a good skill in its own right, but it had severe drawbacks. First of all, he couldn't really move when it was fully activated. He had to maintain the construct around him to stay hidden, and if he did move, it would look as if some big rock or something was gliding around.

This led to another problem: the skill could only really be used in places where there were other things to mimic. He could use it on an open field and try to just make it entirely transparent, but it wouldn't work nearly as well as, say, within a forest. Plus, he would still have the problem of being unable to move around, as even if it was transparent, it would still affect the world around him and leave faint distortion.

To conclude, Jake's original upgrade path for Arcane Stealth was severely limited by design. It was essentially a "camping" skill for Jake to sit still and wait for his moment to attack while even hiding him when he charged up his often devastating opening strike.

It did this extremely well, but its limitations did mean getting it above epic rarity wasn't likely. This is where the concepts Artemis spoke of came in.

Jake simply wasn't skilled enough to "move" everything on the spectrum of Perception like Artemis talked about. However, he was confident in moving himself when it came purely to the visual realm. He kind of already did something similar when he made his arcane construct invisible, as concepts would bleed through, but this time, he wanted to do it fully.

This in itself would usually not result in a good stealth skill. Hiding from sight was, in general, not considered super difficult; the truly hard part was hiding everything else. Your energy signature, presence, mana, internal energy you gave off, traces you leave behind, and so forth.

However, for Jake in particular, he was confident in sealing in those things. That is what his entire Arcane Stealth path was all about, after all.

His plan was to merge these two concepts. On the one hand, he would make himself one with the world when it came to the visual realm, and on the other, he would hide everything about himself using his stable arcane energy that didn't exist in the physical realm.

This was not as good of a technique as what Artemis talked about, as Jake wouldn't truly "make himself one with the world" as she talked about, where everything that was "Jake" would merge with the environment. Even so, it would allow Jake to do things he couldn't before. It would allow him to move around even while using his stealth skill, and sneak to a better position to attack from.

Jake wanted to retain the functionality of effectively creating a camping dome when he wanted to attack, as it was very difficult to hide the level of energy he gave off otherwise. This did mean that Jake couldn't use skills that required too much energy while using the stealth skill he wanted to make, but that was a sacrifice he had to make. He wasn't going for perfection the first time around, after all.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. Jake was getting close with his Grimoire project but still wasn't satisfied and purposefully failed every craft so far, even if he could have succeeded. In the stealth department, things were also moving along, but this final step on the upgrade path was by far the hardest, as Jake had to integrate a new and pretty high-level concept. There was progress, though.

One day, Jake was meditating on a bed in one of the many rooms in the lab area as he worked on his stealth skill. He breathed deeply as he tried to mimic his environment and "move" himself on the spectrum as he had done many times before. Once more, he felt a faint shift, and opening his eyes, things appeared distorted for a fraction of a moment until everything returned to normal once more. Jake kept focusing as he tried to remember this feeling, not even knowing if he had succeeded with anything that mattered.

Just then, a figure peeked into the room. Temlat walked by the door with a book as he looked in, and Jake was just about to greet him when his student frowned. He looked around and seemed to focus a bit on where Jake was sitting as he muttered. "Weird, I'm sure Lord Thayne was in here..."

Right as he turned around to leave, Jake spoke up: "I am here."

When he did, Temlat whipped his head and looked straight at Jake, clearly capable of seeing him. *Alright, when I announce myself like this, the effect drops as others become aware of my existence... got it.*

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"Lord Thayne, did you just arrive, or?" Temlat asked, confused.

"Just working on something," Jake smiled. "Can you tell me, when you entered the room, did you know I was here?"

"I felt your presence, but I couldn't see you, so I just figured you had just left," Temlat answered honestly. "Am I interrupting? I can come back later."

"No, it's fine, I think I am ready to move on to the next step of my experiment. Now, did you have a question?"

As he looked at his student, he got a nice idea. Wouldn't his little student be the perfect test subject for Jake while he improved? You know, sneak around and see if Temlat

could find him and try to mess with him a bit... purely for research purposes, of course. Definitely not something Jake would ever take pleasure in.

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Chapter 816: Nevermore: Nearly Halfway

Multi-tasking wasn't something Jake would consider himself good at, but what he was pretty decent at was switching his hyperfocus between different subjects one at a time. This did result in Jake often forgetting a few of his current projects, but in the House of the Architect, Jake found a cheat:

Attendants.

They were like super-assistants who didn't actually wanna assist with anything unless explicitly asked and couldn't do anything that required any skill. However, what they did do was work as perfect alarm clocks that Jake could ask to come tell him whenever he had to switch to another project. They could even follow semi-complex requests, such as not disturbing Jake if he was in meditation but waiting till he was out if he asked for that.

What he primarily used these attendants for these days was to remind him once the cooldown period for crafting Grimoires was soon over. He had them tell him five or so days before every new attempt so Jake could switch and research a bit more on the topic while also making sure he had all the necessary ingredients for when it was crafting time. There were also quite a few things to consider when it came to crafting Grimoires, as it wasn't as if there was just one type to craft.

Now, for a bit of clarification. Jake had come across three Grimoires in the past, all of them Akashic Tomes. Akashic Tomes were pretty much just a high-level version of Grimoires that granted a specific class or profession. They were highly focused Records on doing just that, and while that was certainly powerful, it didn't mean they were superior to other forms of Grimoires.

They did vary a bit from usual Grimoires, though. There existed several ways to make Grimoires, and one wasn't entirely in control of which one was chosen during the crafting process and the primary difference came from the cost and skill required to do different kinds. As an example, If one was incredibly skilled and invested enough time, an Akashic Tome could be made like any other Grimoire; however, many instead ended up making them the "easy" way.

The easy way, in this case, being the one where you added too much of the core ingredient: your own Records. As Akashic Tomes were nearly always an attempt to make direct copies of prior professions or classes to pass down, one could cheat the crafting process by just pouring in more Records. Sadly, this did result in one not getting the full "refund" for a successful craft. Yet, despite this, Akashic Tomes were by far the most popular type of Grimoire out there, and for a simple reason:

They were sometimes the only option. Also, in many cases, the person who made them didn't care about this extra cost. They were people who had already given up on progressing and just wanted to leave a successor, or people who were approaching the end of their lifespan and wanted their Path to survive even after their death.

Crafting other forms of Grimoires took either a lot of research and dedication or a skill specifically suited for it, such as the one Jake got. Grimoire-making skills weren't actually that rare, but many of them sucked and still only made Akashic Tomes the only real option. Many theorized the effectiveness of the Grimoire-crafting skill correlated to how much the system wanted to propagate a Path, which meant rarer Paths got better versions. So, needless to say, Jake got quite a good version.

These people with lesser crafting skills or no crafting skills for Grimoires at all would thus use the easy crafting method by nearly entirely using their own Records to make Akashic Tomes. This was how the vast majority of Grimoires were created, as Grimoire-crafting was difficult in the multiverse, especially if you wanted to make decent ones. Additionally, the system loved distributing these more than regular Grimoires, improving the chance of finding a good successor.

Jake had considered trying to create an Akashic Tome but found himself unsure how to do that properly and instead decided to go for a far more general one, the risks associated with Akashic Tomes also playing a role in putting him off them. These general Grimoires were simply collections of Records regarding a certain Path for someone to consume just before evolving. The incredible influx of Records would, in nearly all cases, lead to huge impacts during the evolution, allowing the user to choose a new class or profession related to the Records associated with the Grimoire.

Also, it had to be emphasized it was class *or* profession. When crafting a Grimoire, you had to focus the Records on one Path, which in Jake's case was the profession, primarily because he used a profession skill to create the Grimoire. Trying to do both class and profession would end up just being useless, even if Jake read it was technically possible. Just ill-advised.

Either way, Jake wanted to go for a high-level, regular, profession-focused Grimoire. If he was satisfied with just an okay Grimoire, he could have made one months ago, but he may as well make a decent one, right?

Now, it was just a question of what would come first: his new stealth skill or the Grimoire. In between working on these two and some other things, time quickly passed,

with Jake especially enjoying messing with innocent beings within the different worlds to test his stealth skill. Temlat also didn't escape unscathed, as Jake often attempted to quickly hide before he entered a room Jake was in. This proved to be really valuable training, as hiding from someone who knew you were there and hiding from those completely unaware were very different.

Ultimately, the winner ended up being the Grimoire. Jake hadn't even expected it to be the case, but on that day, he had just really gotten in the groove while crafting the book. To clarify, yes, one did have to make an actual physical book. The ingredients one needed to craft a Grimoire were very much expected, with there being three primary ingredients: the book itself, the Records, and the ink.

Funnily enough, the book didn't actually matter much; it was the content. One could often buy books that could be used for Grimoires cheap, and the Merit Point Exchange did sell them. The ink was a whole other story. Jake had decided to mix the ink himself as the method wasn't that different from alchemy, so he just bought the herbs, rocks, and this odd liquid mana of sorts and mixed it all together to create this odd multi-colored ink that looked a bit like oil spilled on water.

One would expect this ink would then be used to draw magic circles or something like that on the inside of the book's pages. This was what many of Jake's drawings looked like, but it wasn't like it was a requirement. In truth, it didn't matter what one drew on the inside; all that mattered was that the crafter was the one who drew it, as one had to infuse energy and Records during the entire process. Jake chose to make different symbols he remembered from alchemy as he believed that represented his Path as an alchemist, but he also made different motifs here and there. Perhaps there was even a beer bottle or two mixed in on some of the pages as Jake poured in memories of his journey so far along with his Records.

Jake had expected to purposefully discard the book toward the end of the craft but stopped himself. Everything just felt right this time along, and as Jake finished the last stroke, he didn't have any complaints. This was where he could either choose to summon his Alchemical Flame to burn the book and start over or commit... and this time, he committed. With a sigh, Jake grasped both sides of the book and slammed it shut as a faint shockwave of energy was released and the book sealed shut.

The entire thing locked up as the pages seemed to merge, and the book was filled with energy that turned it into more than just a simple collection of pages. Its durability skyrocketed as it began floating by itself in front of Jake, and the entire aura of the room changed.

In the next moment, It felt as if something descended from the system itself as runes Jake couldn't recognize formed on the cover of the book as a title was written with a motif also forming on the cover just beneath this title. The runes and new drawing hummed for several seconds before everything fell silent, and the book began falling to

the ground. Jake quickly caught it and stared at the overly large tome right as a system notification came.

You have successfully crafted [Originator's Grimoire of the Heretic-Blessed (Unique)] – A new kind of creation has been made.

The book was leatherbound with the title written on top and the motif of what looked like two mountains standing side by side with humanoid figures standing atop both. Symbolizing equality between the two or something, Jake guessed. After checking the cover, he continued with excitement and checked out the description of his newly made item.

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[Originator's Grimoire of the Heretic-Blessed (Unique)] – Grants the opportunity to potentially unlock a Heretic-Blessed profession if compatible. Must be consumed within 1 day (24 hours) of evolving a profession at maximum, or all effects are lost.

Requirements: Lvl 99-199 in any profession. Compatible user.

Alright, Jake had to admit that the description wasn't overly exciting and looked as basic as it could be. Then again, it looked nearly exactly like the Akashic Tomes Jake had encountered before, with the only new addition here being the requirement to use the Grimoire within 24 hours of evolving. The others naturally didn't have that, as they would directly just cause an evolution to happen if you could use them. This one, not so much.

Consuming an Akashic Tome would always trigger an evolution, even if one used the Grimoire in the middle of a grade, such as at level 140 or something. Jake's Grimoire could also trigger an evolution at any level, but it was only a chance, not a guarantee. This was why most people or factions saved Grimoires to be used right before natural evolutions and not in the middle of grades, as if one didn't trigger the evolution mid-grade, the Grimoire would be wasted.

However, despite the basic description, Jake wasn't disappointed. In fact, he was incredibly pleased when he saw the "Originator's" tag in the book title. It had been just the thing he was going for, and seeing it there made him confident it would be a damn good submission.

As the name implied, the Originator tag signified the item was made by someone who Originated the Path. In Jake's case, he was the one who Pioneered the Heretic-Chosen Path, which the Heretic-Blessed Path seemed to be a lesser version of. He could admit he was a bit perplexed no one had been Heretic-Blessed before, but maybe no one just ever been able to make a proper Path out of it. Who knows, and honestly, who cares... Jake being the first was only a good thing for him.

This prefix, signifying it was made by the Originator, added more Records than usual, and just to get the tag, you needed a certain level of Records for it to be recognized. In the uniqueness department, it also couldn't get any better, as what was more unique than a unique Path never really seen before, crafted by its progenitor? So, yeah, to conclude, it was a damn good creation Jake was proud of and felt certain it would add a lot of bonus points.

With the Grimoire in the bag, the next project to complete was his stealth skill, which was taking longer than he would have hoped. It was that final snag of "moving" himself on the visual spectrum that really messed him up every time. He was making some progress, though.

When sitting still, he had gotten really good at hiding himself completely, to the level where Temlat had no way to find him. He even fooled the C-grades in the different worlds enough to be able to stand in the middle of a group of them without anyone knowing he was there.

His only minor problem was that this was only while he was still. He couldn't move, or the gig would be up instantly. There really wasn't any sudden moment of insight or anything Jake lacked to understand what he had to do at this point. All he could do was practice as the idea of the upgraded skill began to ever so slowly materialize.

Jake went from having to stand entirely still to being able to take single steps without anyone noticing. It progressed to several steps quickly from there before Jake could walk without any problems. It did take a lot of focus to do, though, and he had to make sure he didn't give himself away.

The primary problem was that whenever Jake moved, he used stamina, which would inadvertently release some energy. This energy could then be picked up by pretty much anyone, as it included Jake's energy signature.

If Jake wanted to be able to run around and even use some skills, he couldn't let anything leak at all. Any kind of distortion ruined his shifting on the visual spectrum, but Jake believed he was getting close to achieving his goal as the days passed. Close enough that as he made his progress, yet another skill upgrade had appeared when Jake pushed for it.

***Skill Upgraded*: [Superior Arcane Stealth (Epic)] --> [Superior Arcane Hunter's Stealth (Ancient)]**

This upgrade added traces of the concept Jake wanted to bring forth. It was a skill that would allow Jake to stay entirely hidden as long as he didn't exert himself too much. He could walk and run casually in the middle of a crowd, and even if he slightly bumped into someone, as long as others were nearby, they wouldn't notice.

It was as if Jake didn't exist in their minds until they recognized he did. The problem with this method of stealth was that the moment you were seen, getting into stealth mode again was incredibly difficult. It was akin to how someone could look at a picture for an hour without noticing anything was wrong with it, but the second someone pointed out a minor error, you couldn't unsee it. This was sadly just one of the downsides of this stealth method, but compared to some others, it was incredibly minor. Plus, Jake already had some budding ideas as to how he could exploit the concept... but all of that wasn't for this upgrade but something far down the line.

For now, his only goal was to make the kind of stealth skill Jake had wanted for a long time. He had one more upgrade to go, and this one would likely be the biggest as it was the one that would bring everything together.

Weeks turned to months and soon nine entire months had passed since Jake first entered the House of the Architect.

On one fateful day that would be remembered in the kingdom for centuries to come, Jake found himself walking in the capital city of the medieval world's largest faction as he approached a castle. A transparent and extremely thin barrier of stable arcane mana covered his entire body, making his form look slightly see-through and shimmering, reminiscent of those cloaking devices in games pre-system. He definitely looked out of place with his cloak and mask and shimmering form, yet no one seemed to notice him.

He didn't exist to anyone, as he even grabbed a fruit from one of the many stalls and tossed a few coins of the local currency into the till. The moment he had the fruit in hand, it was affected by his stable arcane barrier, too, promptly disappearing. If anyone had been looking, they likely wouldn't even have registered what had happened.

Walking up the stairs to the castle, Jake easily slipped by the many guards who didn't even glance at him. Opening the gate to get inside wasn't something Jake had confidence in doing undetected, though, so he had to take a small break. However, he did notice that the detection magic circle didn't pick him up at all, so that was nice to see.

A minute or so later, the gate opened as a guest arrived, and Jake slipped inside and went toward the throne room. Today would be the day he would succeed. It had to. Jake was running out of major faction's capital cities to do this kind of thing in.

Reaching the throne room, it was smack-full, just as expected. Jake had chosen this day on purpose as he knew it would be full, which would give him more test subjects. The throne room had a classic design, with a king and queen sitting on thrones up a few steps, with ministers and such lining the sides of the throne room. The middle was entirely clear, which made this a brilliant place to test something else Jake would bake into the skill.

At the entrance to the long throne room, Jake took a deep breath as he tested the first thing that *had* to work. Taking a step forward, everything around him distorted as Jake used One Step and appeared twenty meters ahead, only seven or eight meters from the king and queen. The two royals were both around level 230, with the highest-leveled individual in the room – and the entire kingdom – a level 239 general.

As he used the skill, Jake focused on stabilizing his arcane barrier and keeping himself hidden. After the teleport, Jake stood extremely still as he observed everyone around him, but no one had noticed anything, not even the king, who seemed to be looking around where Jake had just appeared.

So far, so good, Jake thought with relief. He had done this before, and he had a feeling he would have gotten an upgrade already if he mentally pushed for it the first time he succeeded... but Jake wanted more.

Standing there in the middle of the throne room with dozens of C-grades nearby, Jake took out his bow. His eyes opened wide as he focused with all his might. The stable arcane barrier that hugged his body began to slowly shimmer as it moved. It began expanding as a bubble was formed with Jake in the center. It soon had a radius of nearly five meters as Jake stopped, finding himself safely within the stable arcane sphere.

No one had noticed him yet... it was time for the final test.

Feeling a bit nervous and strained mentally, Jake lifted his bow and nocked an arrow. The barrier around him remained stable as Jake kept focusing on keeping it hidden as he took a final deep breath.

Here goes nothing.

Arcane Awakening activated with full power as Jake's entire body erupted with burning arcane energy. The nocked arrow and bow also began burning with energy as Arcane Powershot was charged, Jake aiming his bow directly at the king sitting on his throne.

Yet, despite all this... no one even glanced his way as the king whispered something to his wife, and they both laughed.

Jake smiled in unison with them as the system recognized his efforts the moment he mentally pushed for the upgrade and consolidated his insights. Updates are released by
move!♦fire♦net

***Skill Upgraded*: [Superior Arcane Hunter's Stealth (Ancient)] --> [Unseen Arcane Hunter (Legendary)]**

Grinning to himself, Jake aimed the Arcane Powershot upwards as he released the string. His stealth bubble shattered immediately as a large arcane explosion obliterated

the roof of the entire castle, sending rubble and burning arcane energy flying everywhere. The throne room was instantly in a panic as everyone noticed Jake who just gave them a wave.

“Thanks for the assist, everyone!”

With those words, he jumped through the hole in the roof he had just made and summoned his wings, flying away before anyone could react. By the time they did, Jake was already far gone, feeling quite good about himself.

Four Creations down... nearly halfway.

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

Chapter 817: Nevermore: Unseen Arcane Hunter

The silence within the throne room was absolutely deafening. The king, queen, general, and ministers stared at the now broken roof, all unable to utter a single word. Finally, the silence was broken as one of the ministers fell to his knees and muttered: “No, it cannot be... it was meant to be a legend.... how?”

This was the very same minister who only days before, claimed that the rumors going around were simply just that: rumors. But who could blame him? Who could possibly believe that such preposterous stories could be true? Who would ever believe in this silly tale that in the many different kingdoms, even in the one empire, this very same figure had appeared? A masked man wearing all black clothes suddenly showing up out of nowhere without any warning, wielding a bow in the middle of the throne room. Sometimes even in the middle of festivals or other large gatherings with many powerful people. It all sounded so incredibly silly.

In fact, the minister's theory had been that the other factions had made up this mystical figure to excuse some grand magic ritual they were working on. Many had observed the pillars of energy shooting up where each “attack” happened, but who would believe all of this was due to some person firing an arrow into the air with enough power to slay the most powerful person in the realm?

Well... perhaps they should have believed.

“Your... your majesty... should we follow or-“ the general began to utter.

"No!" the king quickly yelled to shut down the notion. "No... we cannot risk angering such an entity further. Even without provocation, it attacked us within your heartlands."

"I wonder," the queen muttered. "Why did he speak as if we assisted him?"

The king shook his head. "Who are we to try and understand such a being? Who is to say it even possesses logic similar to ours?"

"Are you sure it wasn't a human?" the queen questioned further.

"Impossible," the king said as he suppressed a shiver. "I met the eyes of that thing before it delivered its message of destruction. That was no man."

No one else spoke for several more seconds before someone finally raised a hand. "Should we... you know... find someone to fix the ceiling?"

A good idea... sadly for the kingdom, all the craftsmen who specialized in building castles were already busy repairing the roofs of other royal buildings throughout the land, even if some held back on repairing, fearing the entity would return.

Alas, he never did... but the legend of the mythical Roofbreaker would live on for generations to come.

--

"Submitting two Creations at once, I see," Nevermore – the Architect – said right as Jake entered her room.

"I figured I would shake things up a bit," Jake smiled. "Why, isn't it allowed?"

"No rules state if you can submit more than one Creation at a time. Even if you couldn't, what would stop you from submitting them one after another, having to merely exit and enter a few times? That simply sounds like wasted time for both of us," the Architect answered. "Also, it isn't uncommon for people to submit all ten Creations at once. Likely to ensure they have ten they are satisfied with before locking themselves into any of the Creations, considered a submission cannot be taken back."

"Wait, should I have done that?" Jake wondered out loud.

"You could have, but in your instance, I doubt it would have benefitted you much. Based on my observations, your creation process is very sporadic, and I doubt your methods are very compatible with a carefully laid-out plan," the Bound God commented.

"I feel very called out right now, and I get the feeling you peeked at my very comprehensive list of planned Creations I made," Jake muttered. "And, in my defense, it isn't like I haven't stuck to it for the most part. Besides, the best plans and strategies

aren't those set in stone, but those fluid enough to always adapt to take advantage of any situation."

"In that case, you truly are an expert strategist," the Architect definitely called him out, but before Jake could further respond, she cut the conversation short. "Now, let us skip these pleasantries. Please proceed with your submissions."

"Alright, alright," Jake agreed as he decided to submit the Creations in the order he made them, naturally starting with the Grimoire.

Jake had made sure to keep the Grimoire in his spatial storage at all times when in the common areas where the gods who had a watch party could observe. He had a strong feeling that just revealing the cover of the book wouldn't be a good idea, as his Path of a Heretic-Chosen could be seen as... well, heretical. Especially factions like the Holy Church wouldn't like the thought of Jake being able to spread professions and classes related to being a Heretic-Blessed.

Hence why Jake kept it stored away until it was submission time. The Architect had promised to keep anything he submitted hidden so the Grimoire wouldn't leak and be revealed to the outside world. Jake was fully aware his Path would be revealed one day, but C-grade was probably a bit too early to do that.

Submitting the Grimoire, the Architect took it and actually had a comment.

"I can understand why you asked about keeping your submissions hidden. This little tome could cause quite the uproar if I leaked its properties," the Architect said with a smile.

"Which has to add to its value, right? People love forbidden things," Jake said in a cheeky tone.

"Perhaps," the Bound God answered as the Grimoire disappeared. "Now, what is your next submission?"

"I thought you already knew," Jake muttered.

"I do, but I need you to vocalize it to make the submission official."

"Fair enough. So, how do I submit a skill I improved? Also, will anything happen to the skill?" Jake questioned.

"Nothing will happen. As for how you submit it... simply say what you are submitting," the Architect explained.

"Alright," Jake said. "I want to submit the skill-improvement of Arcane Stealth evolving into Unseen Arcane Hunter. The entire journey from when I began to improve it till now."

The Architect's eyes flashed golden for a second before she gave him a smile.
"Submission complete. Now, did you have anything more to submit?"

"No, tha-

Before Jake could finish, he was thrown out of the room again, finding himself standing outside the door.

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"-t's it... damn, Ms. Architect really doesn't like spending time with me," Jake shrugged, not really feeling bad about it. Alright, he felt a little bad, but that was trumped by the happiness he felt from his newly improved stealth skill. He was also confident it was a damn good submission, especially when you considered he improved it all the way from rare to legendary in less than a year. Jake really was a genius if he had to say so himself. Read full story at **novel★fire★net**

Now, when it came to the stealth skill itself, Jake was more than happy with its effects. Did the thought of trying to upgrade it to mythical rarity strike him? Sure, but Jake had a feeling he would be thrown out of Nevermore from running out of time before that would happen. Even an upgrade still staying within the legendary rarity would likely take long enough to piss off Jake's party members due to Jake taking years in excess doing the Challenge Dungeons. So, yeah, Legendary had to be good enough. Besides, Jake believed it was a pretty good legendary skill.

Moreover, considering he had upgraded it himself and not simply picked it during a skill selection, the skill already suited him incredibly well, and he had a high level of innate understanding. Of course, there was still plenty of room to improve, but Jake was definitely satisfied for now.

Opening up his system menu, he admired the description of the skill one more time.

[Unseen Arcane Hunter (Legendary)] – As the leaves rustle and your ears perk up, you cannot help but wonder: was it merely the wind, or has the Unseen Arcane Hunter chosen you as his next prey? Allows the Hunter to blend into the environment, making you unseen even to the eyes of some of the most alert predators as your form escapes the very realm they are capable of perceiving. A layer of stable arcane energy covers your body, suppressing all energy and aura emanating from your body, making you near-undetectable to anyone who cannot notice your physical form. The arcane mana perfectly seals in any inner energy released, allowing some skills to be used. When standing still, this stable layer can be expanded, sealing the Hunter within a small area, allowing you to conceal all traces of your existence within. All effects of Unseen Arcane Hunter are determined by Perception and Wisdom.

It had a nice and long description and even a bit of fun flavor text in the beginning. The effects were exactly what Jake wanted, and the only thing he had "lost" were some of the now-useless stat scaling and the ability to make himself look like a rock. Instead, he could create a stealth field where no one could see or feel any of his energy within. Only while stationary, though, but that was already pretty damn awesome.

Of course, the biggest benefit of all was that it was now a skill at all, meaning system assistance had set in. Before, Jake had to dedicate some mental energy to make sure the skill didn't lose its effect, while now, everything was on auto-pilot. He didn't have to think about anything but could just let the system do its thing.

When it came to upkeep, the cost was also nearly non-existent. The skill did require an upfront investment that was quite steep to create the arcane layer and "shift" Jake's entire being on the visual spectrum. It also took a good ten seconds to activate the skill fully, meaning it wasn't exactly made for quick mid-combat re-stealths.

Anyway, the first thing Jake did after coming back from the Architect was to give Temlat a good jumpscare. His little student was improving nicely even while Jake was busy with his stealthy escapades and was rapidly approaching evolution time. He still had a few more levels to go, though.

[Half-elf – lvl 195]

Jake wasn't overly worried if he would get good evolutions, either. His improvement speed was high, and Jake was nearly done nurturing his curse of hatred with his own Sin Curse. Temlat's curse wouldn't evolve into a Sin Curse of Wrath quite yet, but Jake would bet good money it would either shortly before or after the C-grade evolution.

Resistance training was undoubtedly Jake's trump card in his training regiment. Its effects were far more than merely being able to resist someone at a higher grade; but also helped Temlat handle energies that were usually too powerful for him and tempered his mind to stay calm even when under pressure. Jake wouldn't quite say it made the Willpower stat better, but it definitely did help his power of will.

With Temlat not needing any help, Jake was left to figure out what to do next. He needed to make five more Creations, assuming Temlat would be one, and he wasn't quite certain what those would be. He did know one of them had to heavily involve his Bloodline, though, and he definitely wanted to throw a little bit of the already limited Jake Juice he had into a Creation. Far from enough to do something like help birth a new True Royal or perpetually hungry space worm, but enough to give him a good submission.

Referring back to the list he had kind of stuck to recently, Jake considered his next move. Taking out the small notebook he had made it in originally, he quickly made some edits and nodded at the slightly changed list.

1. A classic poison.
2. Something transmutation-based.
3. Use Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen for something – work in progress with Temlat.
4. Skill-related thing. Based on magic and mana.
5. Origin-related Creation. This may be done during one of the prior Creations.
6. Something weird Bloodline-related?
7. Ritual stuff.

Jake had removed the things he had already done and promptly removed the elixir one. Jake had a good feeling he couldn't make a good elixir that would match up to any prior creations, so he shelved that semi-indefinitely. The skill had upgraded in rarity during his time in Nevermore, and he had crafted quite a few elixirs, which was also why he knew he had kind of plateaued in his improvement speed.

About fifteen minutes passed as Jake wracked his brain to find future plans, and after much deliberation, Jake knew his next three projects.

One of them would be a ritual. What kind of ritual? Well, the kind Villy really liked to talk about. Kind of, at least. While researching and creating a planetary sacrifice did sound a little fun, Jake wanted to make something he could actually use.

Sacrificial rituals used sacrifices as fuel to accomplish something, and Jake wanted to do something similar, just not with people. The core part of the ritual was that one could force unwilling entities to have their energies absorbed by the ritual to power it, and that was something Jake viewed as interesting. Not necessarily to use living things as sacrifices but to help subdue certain natural treasures and non-intelligent beings with an innate nature to resist being part of any ritual.

He had also been a bit inspired by the Dark Witch and how she had tapped into the energy in the World Core – something that was notoriously difficult to influence using any rituals. Jake wanted to do something similar by simply becoming able to make a circle that could be forcibly "linked" with certain objects even if they resisted, allowing Jake to draw or send energy into the object. What's more, Jake already had a good idea of how to do this from some instances on prior floors, so it shouldn't take overly long. Of course, even if he took inspiration from other places, he still wanted to mix in a bit of that Primal Hunter flavor to help suppress any entity that refused to back down. Plus, adding his new flavor would give it some bonus points for uniqueness.

The second project Jake wanted to get started was to transmute something. What exactly he wanted to transmute, Jake wasn't clear on yet, but he did have an idea that

may or may not prove feasible. If it was feasible, it would be great and even something he could use in conjunction with the aforementioned ritual down the line.

Thirdly was the most boring of the bunch. Jake wanted to just make a damn good poison. This was chosen partly out of necessity as he realized he would need to craft a lot anyway to make sure he had enough Merit Points to do everything else he wanted.

A ritual circle would not net any items he could sell back, while the transmutation experimentation he wanted to do wasn't the type to yield anything to return either. In fact, he would be surprised if there was anything left to return most of the time.

Also, it wasn't like it was a bad idea to submit something that was just a good classic poison with any curse or soul mumbo-jumbo. Just a mixture of extremely deadly toxins found in the wild mixed together to create an even more toxic substance that would do some serious damage.

Alright... Jake had another reason he wanted to make this poison. After being done with the Challenge Dungeons in just a few more years, Jake would have spent forty years in Nevermore. While Jake had done plenty of alchemy during this time, it was very varied alchemy. He had been the supplier of potions for his party, worked on a lot of rituals where needed, had to craft poisons for everyday use, and, oh yeah, also been the sole supplier of Elixirs to make sure everyone always had all the bonus stats they could get from consuming those. To add on, Jake often had to just craft with whatever they found on the floors as they were constantly on the move to try and get a good time for a potential achievement or to complete a bonus objective.

This meant he hadn't had time to just sit down on focus solely on improving his craft. To not need to produce something useable for a good while. However, in this House of the Architect, things were different, and even if the poison Jake made wouldn't be the best submission, he would make it anyway.

To summarize, Jake just really wanted to make a poison, so he would make a poison.

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Chapter 818: Nevermore: A Sense of Progress

Jake had done the impossible. Accomplished something that surely deserved a 25% bonus to Nevermore Points simply due to this momentous achievement. As for what kind of miracle Jake had pulled off?

He had managed to actually stick to a plan.

Three Creations had been planned, and Jake had worked on them without any distractions or random things stealing away his attention. He didn't even go fuck around in any of the worlds but just hunkered down and did his alchemy, with any expedition he did make highly focused on his goal.

For the transmutation, Jake wanted to pull out an old method from the Order that Jake had never really learned. Jake's Touch of the Malefic Viper had begun to integrate parts of his arcane affinity in the transmutation process early on, which had certainly led to many advantages, but there were also drawbacks.

Jake's arcane affinity had powerful innate concepts, but so did the original Touch of the Malefic Viper skill. The Path of the Malefic Viper was a Path that had led to the pinnacle and allowed a lowly snake to ascend all the way to godhood. Yet Jake didn't really use many of these Records in any of his transmutation efforts. This was a "weakness" Jake sought to address as he wanted to also be able to use a way of transmutation the Viper was incredibly well known for:

Corruption.

This wasn't anything new to Jake. He had corrupted many things before but recently had kind of stopped. Now, he only corrupted stuff using his curse energy, and he wouldn't even call what he did with his arcane energy corruption.

Jake recalled his fight against the Great White Stag, where he corrupted a ritual using his poison and Touch. He recalled when he infused the Quintessence with dark and poison energy down in the lake during the final dungeon in the Tutorial. Those times were far more classic cases of corruption where Jake infused concepts innate to toxins into objects or magical constructs to corrupt them.

Mind you, none of this would be an attempt to upgrade his Touch of the Malefic Viper. He wasn't trying to do anything the skill didn't already explicitly allow, but instead, something he had neglected properly learning how to do.

In some ways, one could view transmuting something through corruption to be akin to permanently poisoning an object.

Now, the process of learning – or perhaps relearning just at a higher conceptual level – was quite simple. Jake would just go around and corrupt whatever items he could find. Jake was kind of lucky that the factions in the many worlds did have items, even if they all tended to suck and never reached above epic rarity while at the same time barely being for C-grades. Alas, they were good enough when it came to learning how to corrupt things.

Ah, that was another thing. The prior times Jake corrupted stuff, he had kind of just rolled with it. He had no real control or end goal but had just poured in whatever toxic energy he could, hoping things would work out. He had focused too much on merely making an object toxic to its surroundings and never thought about controlling the corruption.

The reason why the Malefic Viper was so feared in the multiverse wasn't just because of his ability to spread corruption... it was his ability to meticulously control it. To change an entity into something it was never meant to be, his every action made with intent behind it. In fact, his name itself came from his ability to corrupt things. It was the basis of the malefic-affinity, after all.

So... to summarize, Jake wanted to learn how to control the malefic concept infused through Touch of the Malefic Viper. At least the aspects of the concept he needed to transmute things. It was a pretty slow and arduous process, but with enough trial and error, Jake quickly got it down as he looted the armories of most of the factions in the medieval world – everyone still too distracted by the fact some maniac had blown up all their castle roofs to notice the sneaky thief who stole all their weapons.

The second thing Jake worked hard on was his ritual, which he managed to complete a lot faster than he had ever expected. Perhaps he had set the bar too low for what he wanted to accomplish, or perhaps it was something else that had ended up playing a role.

You see, even if Jake had stuck to his plan, that didn't mean unexpected gains couldn't appear. During the last many years, and even recently with his Unseen Arcane Hunter skill, Jake had truly pushed his Perception to the limit. During all this crafting, Jake poured in all his focus and attention as he scanned and kept an eye on everything during the crafting process.

One day, when he felt especially frustrated while trying to make his ritual work, Jake did everything to try and find the flaw. Kneeling down, Jake put both his hands on the magic circle as he poured in energy to try and identify what he was doing wrong, but he found nothing. At that moment, he was annoyed. It was so much easier when he used a cauldron as Jake had an almost innate feeling for everything going on within as he practically merged with it while crafting. That is when he questioned... why couldn't he treat the entire ritual circle like his cauldron?

Why couldn't he make it feel as if it was one with his body? So Jake tried to do just that as he attempted to pour in some of his soul energy. At first, it didn't work at all, but after a bit of pushing, he found an opening, and ever-so-slowly it slipped inside. Jake began to feel the entire magic circle far more intimately, and through that also discovered a minor flaw that led to a bottleneck in the energy transfers within, which was what currently hindered his progress.

Having done so, Jake had a thought and decided to just give it a go. Perception was his most powerful stat by far, and in all honesty, perhaps this was overdue, so Jake finally consolidated all of his improvements since before even evolving to C-grade.

Sense of the Malefic Viper was one of those skills Jake rarely thought about but always used. Whenever he did any kind of alchemy, he would immerse his senses in the craft, and when he held a cauldron, it was as if it merged with his soul, allowing him to far more easily keep track – and thus control – everything going on within.

He also used it when looking for alchemical ingredients in all of the many different floors he had gone through. He had even made several improvements to the skill already, even if it hadn't gotten him an upgrade. When he evolved the skill originally, it only gave him the ability to feel alchemical ingredients in his surroundings, but this had many limitations.

Herbs and toxins of high quality often had ways of hiding themselves or had defenders that helped hide them. While Sense could sometimes get around this, there were also many times it couldn't.

However, no matter how well something was hidden, Jake's Sphere of Perception and Pulse of Perception would still pick it up. Before evolving to C-grade, everything within his sphere would also be more than close enough for him to feel it using Sense of the Malefic Viper, but after evolving, that had changed, especially when introducing Pulse.

Pulse of Perception was hundreds of kilometers in radius, even going below ground, which his Sense had a hard time penetrating. When going through the floors, Jake often had to forage for his own ingredients, and using Pulse had proven invaluable there. Without even thinking about it, he quickly adapted Sense of the Malefic Viper to even work with things he only "saw" using Pulse. It wasn't as good as if he laid eyes on them, but it gave him a good general understanding of the properties of whatever he found.

There were many other things, but none were represented in the skill description itself. Jake wondered if all of this would be enough, but after only a little bit of pushing, the skill gave way as a notification popped up in front of him. This chapter is updated by m0vel.fire.net

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[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper's greed for natural treasures is neverending; his desire to discover all the world has to offer ceaseless. Gives a passive ability to detect herbs and poisons in different forms and a strong feeling of their properties and affinities. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense the poison you have inflicted and its effects on any inflicted entities. Allows you to temporarily merge

a part of your soul into a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device, making it effectively act as part of your body. Even without fully merging your soul, you will still receive all sensory benefits from using a Soulbound cauldron or similar crafting device. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. All effects of Sense of the Malefic Viper are further improved within the body of the alchemist. Passively provides 3 Perception per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your gaze scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours; may all truths lay bare before you.

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[Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper’s greed for natural treasures is neverending; his desire to discover all the world has to offer ceaseless. Gives a passive ability to detect alchemical ingredients and gain an innate understanding of their properties, no matter the detection method used to uncover them. Allows the alchemist to far more easily detect affinities in the environment and detect areas optimal for cultivating herbs. Massively improves your ability to sense all energies you have inflicted other entities with. Allows you to temporarily merge a part of your soul into objects and magical constructs you are in physical contact with during crafting, effectively making it a part of your body. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Sense of the Malefic Viper based on Perception. All effects of Sense of the Malefic Viper are further improved within the body of the alchemist. Passively provides 9 Perception per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). May your senses transcend comprehension as you scour the multiverse for all that is rightfully yours, as all truths lay bare before you.

Sometimes, the best gains were those least expected, and this was definitely one of those cases. Jake had not entered this Challenge Dungeon thinking he would improve any of his Malefic Viper skills, much less do it so easily.

Jake wasn’t sure that simply expanding the ability to infuse parts of his soul into more than a cauldron or a crafting device would have been enough for an upgrade, which was why the improvement to its base detection was more than welcome. It was more of a formality to add it, even if it did have some interesting implications. The wording had also changed quite a bit, with especially the last sentence standing out:

”Gives a passive ability to detect alchemical ingredients and gain an innate understanding of their properties, no matter the detection method used to uncover them.”

This sentence pretty much just clarified that the skill would work no matter how Jake found the alchemical ingredients, even if it was through Bloodline stuff. He couldn’t help but wonder if this would have other implications down the line and how exactly the skill interacted with his intuition when searching for alchemical ingredients, assuming it interacted with those instincts at all.

Now, one little piece of clarification. Jake had no interest in submitting this skill improvement at all, primarily because nearly all of the improvements had been gained outside of the House of the Architect. Plus, it was still an in-rarity upgrade, making it far worse than something like his new Unseen Arcane Hunter skill.

No, what he would submit were the two things he promptly used his newly improved Sense of the Malefic Viper to accomplish.

Because with the upgrade to his Sense of the Malefic Viper, both the transmutation and ritual projects went even more smoothly. Jake had already semi-cheated by merging with weapons using Fang of Man when holding them to better feel the energies moving within, but Sense getting upgraded just made everything even easier. Especially when he didn't try to corrupt a weapon.

About a month passed from when Jake gained his Sense of the Malefic Viper improvement till he was ready to make the final push for these two submissions – the third project, the general poison, still far from ready.

Jake stood before a magic circle that was nearly thirty meters in diameter as a giant orb pulsed in the middle, having surrendered to Jake. The multi-colored orb was nearly five meters in radius and it looked like a glass marble with cloudy energy constantly moving within.

[Elemental Confluence Spirit Orb (Ancient)] – An orb made up of a myriad of elemental orbs from C-grade elementals that died natural deaths. The elemental energies within retain some of the instinctual wills of when the elementals were still alive, making the Spirit Orb incredibly challenging to work with. Contains a mix of highly concentrated and untamed elemental-affinity mana within.

The Spirit Orb had been surprisingly cheap in the Merit Point Exchange, probably due to how hard it was to work with. Which had been exactly why Jake bought it. The Spirit Orb had fought everything Jake tried to do with it, vehemently resisting any attempts to affect or draw out any of the dense mana within, but now, it was entirely defenseless as Jake drew out its energies despite its resistance.

A dark green aura enveloped the orb the very next moment as the Spirit Orb quivered. It was as if an invisible hand grasped it, and Jake began to extract some of its energy as he separated elemental energies from the confluence. Two new small Spirit Orbs appeared, floating in two focal points of the magic circle, as Jake moved on to the next function of the magic circle.

And the next Creation, as it was now transmutation time. That's right, this was a two-for-one. A ritual magic circle and a transmutation job.

With a smile, Jake quickly remerged these two small Spirit Orbs with the main one and activated Touch of the Malefic Viper as he touched the magic circle. Dense and

powerful dark green energy wormed its way into the defenseless Spirit Orb as it began to take root. The energies within the orb once more tried to fight but were entirely pacified as the corruption slowly overtook the Spirit Orb. Within half an hour, the entire orb changed color. From a multi-colored rainbow, it became a mix of dark green with occasional flashes of multi-colored, yet oddly muted, light. Looking at it once more, Jake used Identify.

[Unstable Corrupted Confluence Spirit Orb (Ancient)] – An orb once made up of myriad elemental orbs corrupted by powerful toxic energies. The elemental energies within have been corrupted nearly beyond recognition, making them highly volatile and destructive. Contains a mix of highly concentrated and equally unstable malefic elemental-affinity mana within. Due to its unnatural form and the lack of balance caused by the corruption, the Spirit Orb has become unstable: Unable to maintain its current form in: 127:11:57

This was where Jake usually stopped his corruption. He would make an unstable mess that would explode within less than a week... but this wasn't what Jake was going for this time around as he activated Touch of the Malefic Viper once more.

True corruption requires stability and control. The malefic affinity was one used with intent and purpose and was very rarely found on anything that could be considered unstable. Despite its destructiveness and propensity for corruption, it was a very stable affinity created to follow the intent of its creator, so unless Jake wanted to or was fine with making the item he transmuted unstable, it shouldn't happen.

Infusing his energy into the orb once more, Jake continued the transmutation process. He sought to stabilize his Creation, but without using even a smidgen of his arcane affinity. He relied solely on the concepts inherent to the Touch of the Malefic Viper skill as the floating orb slowly became more muted. The multi-colored flashes stopped, and the dark green cloudy energy within became the only thing visible.

The entire process ended up taking nearly five hours, but in the end, Jake got a notification as he smiled while looking at the giant floating marble of pure malefic death.

[Malefic Confluence Spirit Orb (Ancient)] – An orb once made up of myriad elemental orbs, now thoroughly corrupted by the Chosen of the Malefic One. The elemental energies within have been corrupted beyond recognition as the malefic affinity has taken root. Contains a mix of highly concentrated malefic affinity elemental mana within. The energy within is highly toxic and has many alchemical uses. The energies within remain highly hostile and resistant to anyone but the creator of the Malefic Confluence Spirit Orb.

The energies within stabilized, and Jake was left with a highly useable and equally destructive Spirit Orb that would also serve quite well as a bomb if he just gave it a small nudge. Of course, that wasn't what he was going to do with it.

This would be one of his Creations... with the other one, the magic circle beneath he had channeled his energy through. Even if they worked together well, they were two entirely separate disciplines that required very different skill sets and relied on highly varied concepts.

About a year had passed at this point since Jake entered the House of the Architect, and he felt like things were going incredibly well if he had to say so himself.

One thing was for certain... when Jake left the Challenge Dungeon, he would be an even better alchemist and significantly more skilled in several diverse disciplines. And, in some ways, wasn't progress a reward in its own right?

Ah, who was he kidding? Jake would get incredibly disappointed in himself if he didn't get a good overall evaluation.

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Chapter 819: Nevermore: A Whole Lot of Mana

The submissions of Jake's two latest Creations went as smoothly as always, with no real surprises. The Architect was good at forcing him to leave once the job was done, not giving him any way to glean more details than she allowed.

Jake was fully aware both the transmuted Spirit Orb and the ritual itself weren't that good Creations, at least not by the standards of Jake being a Chosen. Sure, they were okay Creations and many would be proud of them, but nothing to write home about. In some ways, Jake had chosen to submit them not just because he wanted some diversity with his submissions but because he wanted to improve both those aspects of his current alchemy. Especially the two of them in conjunction with one another.

It would effectively allow Jake to set up far larger rituals to corrupt things. The ritual would naturally also work with his arcane affinity, and he could totally see himself laying that down for large-scale transmutation projects down the line.

Anyway, with the ritual and transmutation-based Creation submitted, Jake had four more overall but only needed to come up with two more. Temlat and his "normal" poison were both work-in-progress, and he had already semi-counted them.

With that in mind, Jake had a significantly shortened list remaining, with only three topics to work on... though he may have to come up with more.

1. Skill-related thing. Based on magic and mana.
2. Origin-related Creation. This may be done during one of the prior Creations.
3. Something weird Bloodline-related?

It was a very short list, and it really put into perspective how difficult it was for someone to submit ten sufficiently different and valuable Creations. Even if you could include intangible things like skills, it took a lot of imagination to guess what a good Creation would be. Would it be considered good to submit a Creation that was just Jake wiping out all life in the different worlds? Or would it instead be good to maybe submit one where he made peace between all the races in that medieval world? That was the kind of stuff Jake could definitely see someone like Jacob or even the Fallen King doing. Though their methods would differ quite noticeably.

These worlds added so many layers and possibilities. However, Jake still believed the best Creations came in the form of items. If he had to guess, then the Grimoire was probably Jake's best Creation so far, with the Unseen Arcane Hunter skill a pretty close second despite its intangible nature.

Temlat had a good chance to take the top spot, but Jake felt like he needed one or maybe even two more real bangers to ensure he got a great overall evaluation. However, with Jake's remaining list, he wasn't sure how to do just that.

The most obvious choice would be to just improve another skill... the problem here was that Jake didn't have any he wanted to do that with. Sure, he did have an inferior-rarity Alchemist's Purification, but honestly, that skill was just fodder for his Malefic Viper Legacy skills at this point. Even if he did improve it, Jake had no idea how to do it in a satisfactory way that didn't also risk messing up any potential fusions down the line.

He had confidence in getting it to maybe epic rarity just by infusing concepts he was already familiar with from his arcane affinity. However, that wouldn't even make for a good submission as it didn't require learning anything new, and besides, it would mess up fusing it later on. No, if he wanted to somehow make it a good one, it would just take way too much time, as Jake would have to learn a lot of new stuff. Something he didn't want to spend the time and effort on.

Now, there was one other cheat-like option to get an upgrade Jake had purposefully been avoiding: Path of the Heretic-Chosen. In fact, Jake had kind of ignored using the skill during his entire time in C-grade as he felt he didn't want to waste it. He was up to two charges now and damn close to another. Even so, he wasn't sure if it was worth using, even if it helped get him a better evaluation in the Challenge Dungeon.

Not to mention, Jake wasn't sure if it even worked. The skill was very special, and Jake felt very unsure how exactly it would interact with Nevermore and the Challenge Dungeon rules. His main question was... were any Records and improvements he

gained during the vision considered as having been achieved within the Challenge Dungeon? The wording on the skill wasn't exactly precise:

“Allows you to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper on a far more direct level by relying on your direct connection as a Chosen and the mentality of a heretic. Focusing on any core skill, event, or entity related to the Malefic Viper’s Legacy will allow you to peer into the True Records of the past as you journey through time, space, and reality to experience history firsthand...”

It specifically said Jake would journey through time and space. Based on what others had said, Jake would also disappear whenever he used the skill with even his physical body leaving. An anchor of sorts would remain, sure, but did this anchor count as Jake still being within the House of the Architect? Was he in both places at once? Would that make any gains only count for half, according to the Challenge Dungeon?

Jake had these doubts and even asked the Architect... only to get the answer that she wouldn't answer that but for Jake to just give it a try and see, and then she would gladly accept the result as a submission. So, yeah, definitely not a risk Jake wanted to take, especially not considering one final thing...

He still remembered the first vision he had of Valdemar. That vision had been far more valuable than any other but also consumed two charges at once. If he didn't have two back during the fight with baby Snappy, Jake likely wouldn't have gotten such a good vision. This begged the question, what would Jake see if he consumed even more charges at once? One could argue that there probably weren't any individuals who warranted taking three charges to get a vision of, but there was one person Jake wanted to see more of than anyone else who he believed could require just that. The one man even the Viper recognized as a genius above geniuses:

The First Sage.

To glean some of his secrets couldn't be cheap. Hence why Jake didn't want to risk using Path of the Heretic-Chosen just to get some more Nevermore Points. Jake genuinely believed the visions he got would have an impact far beyond just this megadungeon, not to mention the Challenge Dungeon he was currently in.

With all that in consideration, in addition to there not being any other obvious skill-upgrade candidates, Jake moved on to something entirely different. He chose to instead use what he always used whenever he didn't know what to do: his Bloodline.

One of the two remaining Creations would obviously include him using his Jake Juice. Of course, he couldn't make anything that required a living being, as anything with a Truesoul couldn't be a submission in itself, but something like a core was an option.

The problem with that was Jake doubted he had enough juice to fully transform a core into a fully-fledged Origin Core... and even if he did, would he want to submit one? In

either case, Jake had decided to go with something else a bit less impressive. At least, he thought it would be less impressive, but that was all up to the Architect, right?

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With a very loose plan, Jake began to work on a method to integrate his Jake Juice into a Creation. He also wanted something that would show off his skills in manipulating mana. Even if Jake had shown off a lot of his skills related to mana during many of his prior Creations – most of them, in fact – he still wanted to do one that was just pure freeform mana manipulation. Put a bit of that practice from his Puzzle Box of the Seeker into use in a more direct way.

Thus, Jake began to work on that project as he split his time between Temlat, the poison he was working on, and this mana creation. He quickly got on something he wanted to show off regarding his mana manipulation, and if everything worked out as he hoped, the submission should be pretty damn awesome.

Months slowly passed as Jake worked hard on all three projects, making impressive progress across the board. Temlat was still improving by the day, and even if his leveling wasn't fast, Jake knew he was improving his skills at a rapid pace. He also volunteered to go do combat practice all by himself, showing that his confidence-level had grown significantly. Jake believed that he would evolve before Jake had been in the House of the Architect for two years, which also showed Jake that getting a student fast after entering the Challenge Dungeon had been an excellent call.

Poison-wise, things were slow but steady. Out of everything Jake was doing – besides maybe the first submission that was just Jake being Jake – this was the thing he had the most experience with, and it only made sense this Creation would take the longest. Jake was trying to make a poison that he was happy to put on nearly all his arrows and katars going forward, so it was only natural he took his time to make something proper.

Finally, there was the mana project, which would definitely be the first one to finish. Jake studied quite a bit regarding what kind of mana construct he wanted to create, but more so, he worked on exploring to see if what he wanted to do with his Jake Juice was even possible.

He had to take a calm and studious approach, as he didn't have the Jake Juice to just experiment with willy-nilly. He had one shot, and if he failed that, he would be back to having two Creations to figure out. That's why he wanted to get this one right the first time around.

Even so, there was a limit to how much Jake could learn without just saying "fuck it" and giving it a go. So, one day, when everything just felt right, Jake stopped stalling and got to work.

Locking up the room, he made sure no one would disturb him as Jake regenerated and made sure he had full mana. Then, he just jumped right into it.

Jake needed no tools for this. He needed no skills or anything like that. Everything would just be purely mana and his Jake Juice. Yet Jake wanted to create an item... which usually wouldn't be possible. But Jake had confidence as he began to summon monstrous levels of mana all at once.

Every pore of his body opened as he pumped out arcane mana and filled the room. At the same time, he began to gather it between his hands as he sat in a lotus position and focused on his sphere to take in everything around him.

Tens of thousands of mana gathered quickly as a small ball was formed. More and more mana was released from his body every second as soon, over a hundred thousand mana filled the room without any signs of stopping. This was another reason why Jake didn't want Temlat to enter on accident... this kind of environment definitely wasn't healthy for a D-grade.

Jake's output of energy continued as more and more mana gathered in front of him as the minutes passed, with the ball rapidly also growing in size. Energy began to spin around the ball as Jake kept it in its mixed state, where it neither sought destruction nor stability. After nearly one hundred and fifty thousand mana had been poured into the orb floating in front of him, Jake began to feel the pressure.

What Jake was currently doing usually had little practical use. He was just gathering all of his mana outside of his body in an orb through a process that was far from fast, efficient, or generally considered useful. Hours went by as Jake had to slow down to remain in control, but once he gathered his mana in the maelstrom around the orb, he could keep it calm and simply revolve there without his direct need for control.

Every hour, Jake consumed a mana potion on the dot to make sure he wouldn't run out. He used a lot more mana than he gathered as the efficiency fell the more time passed, and he had to use the majority of his mana just to control the environment.

His Willpower and senses were strained as he took his foot off the gas. Jake continued slowly and steadily as he tamed the orb of pure mana floating in front of him. It was about the size of a wrecking ball at this point, which was far too large, and Jake knew it.

Feeling he was at the limits of what his mind could handle, Jake initiated the final part of this entire endeavor. With a deep breath, he forced the rest of the mana toward the giant mass of mana and began to condense it.

Gritting his teeth, Jake pressed with every inch of his Willpower to make it smaller, but even so, the ball of incredibly intense arcane energy got no smaller than one and a half meters in diameter.

Jake, standing up from his lotus position while pressing his palms together, opened his eyes wide as his body exploded with arcane energy as Arcane Awakening fully activated. A new rush of pure power allowed Jake to condense the orb further. However, the more pure mana he squashed together, the more unstable it became. Should Jake lose control for only a moment, the entire thing could explode, and while that wouldn't harm Jake much as it was his own arcane affinity, it would be a massive waste of time and effort.

Pressing on, the mana slowly grew denser and denser. Jake had to control every inch of energy he poured in and make it fit as the internal balance structure within the ball was constantly maintained. It was like trying to fill in all the gaps of a puzzle, where he had to carve out every puzzle piece himself to leave no gaps and use all the "space" efficiently. However, despite all his efforts, Jake couldn't hold on much longer when the mana orb was still the size of a large beachball. Blood began to pour out of his nose and ears as his skin peeled from the use of Arcane Awakening, signifying not just his mind but his body had reached its limits.

He had a choice to make: allow everything to break down or commit. Jake wasn't a quitter and chose the latter.

The sound of a heartbeat sounded out from deep within him as a single spark of energy was summoned. Jake instinctively knew what to do as he reached out and touched the giant dense orb that contained more than three hundred thousand arcane mana with just a single finger.

This small spark of energy traveled from around Jake's heart until it reached the orb and left his body as he sent it off only with his will in tow.

Without any warning, a shockwave sent Jake flying back, dealing no damage but pushing him away. Jake slammed into the back wall as he stared toward the arcane orb with a mix of anticipation and worry. He wasn't sure what had happened, but he knew that the moment he was blasted back, his connection to the orb was severed as he lost control. He expected an explosion to follow, as the mana was now entirely uncontrolled and unrestrained, but nothing happened. Latest content published on

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Staring, Jake looked at where the orb had been but found it gone. Before any panic could set in, he instantly saw what had happened, as on the floor right below where the orb had been, something was lying on the ground. Jake quickly got to a standing position and walked over to pick it up, pinched between two fingers as he felt nothing dangerous coming from it.

Jake held the small marble, no larger than the tip of his finger. It was purple, but when Jake really focused, he could see what looked like an occasional small red dot deep in the center. Holding it, he instinctively got the feeling that trying to smash it would be

utterly impossible... and yet just a mere thought from him and a whisper of arcane mana wishing for it to be destroyed seemed to be capable of utterly unraveling it.

Shaking his head, Jake steeled himself. He had stalled enough, and it was time for the ultimate test. Jake took a deep breath as he used Identify on the small marble, fully not expecting any real result... which was why it came as a delightful surprise when he did.

[Perennial Arcane Marble (Unique)] – A marble made entirely from the arcane mana of the Harbinger of Primeval Origins. The arcane marble is perfectly stable, leaking no energy, and remains utterly unaffected by all outside influences that do not originate from its creator. This marble is incredibly durable, but should it be damaged, it shall react violently and lash out with the power of pure destruction at whatever broke it. A faint amount of pure, unrecognizable energy is sealed within the marble. Through this energy, a perennial existence awaits.

Jake flashed an exhausted smile as he read the description. He had no idea if this was a good outcome or not for what he had done, but in either case, Jake was bloody exhausted as he laid back and closed his eyes.

Dispensing Jake Juice always took a lot out of him, after all.

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Chapter 820: Nevermore: A Peculiar Little Thing

If anyone else had seen what the person sitting on the ground with his arcane marble had just done, they likely wouldn't believe its legitimacy. Certain rules and norms existed that everyone assumed to be true, so it was natural that when someone didn't play by these rules and decided to make up their own laws for how things worked, no one would take them seriously.

However, Jake had never been one to just believe it when someone said something couldn't be done. Especially not when it came to anything his Bloodline could do. Jake still only had a faint grasp as to the gravity of what he had pulled off, but he knew it was impressive if anything the books claimed regarding mana constructs was correct.

Mana constructs were, by nature, temporary. No items made up entirely of mana could exist, and even mana with souls – elementals – had a limited lifespan. Mana itself was a malleable element that made up everything and was, in the eyes of many, the purest form of energy. It was one of the three fundamental energies, with many believing inner energy and vital energy were derived from mana. Jake didn't really believe this, as he

had heard differently, so he kind of ignored those notes. It was this lack of caring about what others had researched and claimed should be possible that allowed him to make the small marble in his hand.

Jake had made a prediction that paid off. He had been told before that his stable arcane mana registered as something physical and not made of mana. However, it was more accurate to say that his stable arcane mana registered as non-summoned simply due to how stable it was. Any analyst would still be able to figure out it had mana in it – everything did to some extent – but Jake's stable arcane energy was more akin to a naturally occurring piece of metal than a pure mana construct.

That was actually a pretty good comparison. Jake's stable arcane affinity was very much akin to something like metal in that they were both very, well, stable.

Everything contained mana, and everything leaked and absorbed mana at different speeds, with absorption nearly always faster than the leakage, which was how raw materials grew in rarity and energy density as time passed. Most metals were known to be very slow at both of these things, making them take a long time to improve in rarity in the wild. This lack of leaking and absorption also made metals incredibly stable, which was where the entire concept of stability came from.

Stability merely meant to be unaffected by the environment – both good and bad.

Yet, no matter how stable a magical construct was, it would never be as stable as a real item. It would always just be a collection of mana as it lacked aspects that made it truly physical and corporeal. Lacked the Records to be an independent item. Even if a metal or earth maga summoned a giant wall, it would disappear within a short period, assuming it wasn't just made by manipulating material that was already there. With time, the internal mana structure would simply be broken down if the source of the mana was a person and not environmental mana.

In the same way, a weapon summoned by a metal mage also needed to be constantly supplied with new mana. More importantly, It also wouldn't be identifiable despite looking very much like a regular item. Yet the arcane marble Jake had just made was. It registered as a standalone item, entirely separate from Jake's own existence and mana. This meant that even if Jake died, the orb would remain, something utterly impossible for any other kind of mana-summoned object. Holding it in his hand, Jake also felt it would remain for a long time. A very, very long time. Unsurprisingly, considering the word perennial in the item name.

Now, it had to be mentioned that creating an actual item out of nothing using only mana was theoretically possible; however, not for someone like Jake. With enough Willpower, it was possible to "will" something into existence, including real items, but the sheer Willpower required was entirely out of the realm of possibility for anyone doing this Challenge Dungeon. Making something from nothing was the kind of feat only gods or perhaps peak S-grades could reliably pull off.

In conclusion... Jake had pulled off something a C-grade shouldn't be capable of. He had created a true item out of nothing but his own stable mana. He had created something real. A marble capable of existing, even long after Jake's own death, assuming he messed up dodging one time too many.

One may ask what the function of this item Jake had miraculously made was, and... well... it was very tough and would exist for a long time, so that was definitely two things. Ah, it was also a little pretty, and its sheer uniqueness definitely made it a nice collector's item. As for practical uses...

Yeah... it was entirely useless. It was just a very hard marble, and any Origin Energy within would instantly be destroyed should something break it. In fact, Jake felt that the Origin Energy would work actively to destroy itself and anything that broke the stable barrier that defended its existence. It was pure instinct to aim for mutual destruction, as should the marble break or leak in any way, the energy would instantly dissipate and greedily be absorbed by the environment.

Instinct was actually quite a keyword here. Jake hadn't been the one to really intend to create something called a Perennial Arcane Marble. It had all been up to the Origin Energy. In the same vein that Jake didn't intend how a core would mutate and transform when he infused this unique energy, he also didn't control what the energy would do this time. He only sent with it the hope that it would be stable and not break apart, with the Origin Energy then doing the rest of the work itself by forming the marble.

The more I think about it, the more this Origin Energy seems kind of alive, Jake thought to himself as he lifted the marble and looked at it more closely before he got up and headed straight toward the Architect to submit it. *Or, maybe it's more correct to say it makes things come alive? It definitely makes whatever I infuse it into change by itself when infused...* Find the newest release on *novel·fire·net*

Jake still felt very unsure exactly why this energy worked the way it did, and he felt he wouldn't fully figure it out for a long time. The best he could do was figure out aspects of the energy and be satisfied with that. To focus on the outcomes and not the underlying explanation for everything. Then again, maybe he could ask the Architect if she would spill a little bit of insight. With her direct system connection, she had to know something, right?

Reaching the door leading into her room, Jake didn't even have to knock as it opened by itself. Walking inside, the Architect sat in her usual spot and opened her eyes to regard Jake right as he stepped inside.

"Quite a peculiar submission you have this time around if you are showing me what I believe you will show me," the Architect said, her eyes already fixated on the small, useless, arcane marble in Jake's hand.

Jake tossed the marble into the air before catching it again, noticing how the Architect's gaze never left the small thing. This gave Jake an idea, as he sighed loudly. "I will be honest; I'm not even sure if it's worth submitting."

"Oh?" she questioned.

"I have no idea if it's considered good or bad... it's technically just a bunch of mana made into a marble with a tiny smidgen of this albeit pretty unique energy within," Jake said, continuing to play with the marble as he faked being deep in thought. "Actually, how long have I been in the House of Architect by now?"

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"A bit over sixteen months," the Architect answered.

"In that case, I got time to do something else," Jake said, faking relief. "I was pretty fast in some of the prior Challenge Dungeons too, and with the time me and my teammates allocated, I could easily spend a year more in here."

The Architect didn't say anything as Jake continued talking while holding up the marble and looking at it closely. "I apologize for wasting your time; I don't think this one is worth submitting."

Jake waited patiently as the Architect just sighed after a few seconds of silence. "You are not a particularly good actor, but fine, I'll bite. I do want that little marble of yours. As for why... well, let me ask you something instead. All Nevermore Attendees make use of this World Wonder to gain power, levels, and Records. With that in mind, what do you think the Wyrmgod and I get out of all of you being here?"

"Information?" Jake questioned. Nevermore collected data on everyone after all, so... wait. "No... you get Records?"

Nevermore – the Architect – smiled at his response. "Precisely. As you harvest your gains, so do we harvest some of what you reap. We learn about all those who pass through here, and your Records become one with the World Wonder, allowing it to keep growing era by era. This is part of the reason why unique items are so highly valued in this Challenge Dungeon. It is still an evaluation of your skill, yes, but selfishly, we value uniqueness highly due to how much it benefits us as it expands the spectrum of Records available. Of course, everyone is unique in some way or another, and helps expand it. No two people have the exact same Records, but there will be inevitable overlap between those who follow similar Paths. Your Path is unique in its own right, and your Bloodline of is one of the most potent ones I have come across, meaning any Records related to it are highly valued. Far more than a mere evaluation in a Challenge Dungeon can make justice."

Jake slowly nodded, surprised he got the Architect to spill so much when she had been tight-lipped for over a year. She really wanted his small marble, huh? However, with the things she said, Jake still hadn't fully gotten his answer.

"That is all very enlightening... but that doesn't answer my question. Will this small marble even be considered a good submission? Despite its uniqueness, it's still just a bunch of stable arcane mana squished together with some of my unique energy in the center. That it is considered a real item is probably impressive, but I am not sure exactly how impressive. Sure, you may value it due to how unique you find it, but that doesn't make it a good submission according to the rules of this Challenge Dungeon," Jake pointed out.

"You are aware I will not answer if something will receive a high evaluation or not before submitting it, but I will dispel some of your doubt. As I am well aware that you already know, creating an item from mana alone is far from a simple matter and carries many implications. This is not to mention the nature of the specific item you created. I cannot reveal much, but I will say that you are far from understanding the true meaning of this Primeval Energy. You all are far from fully understanding it, your Patron included," the Architect said. "I will end my comments on the matter here. Decide to submit it or not. I will not force you, nor will I make any promises regarding an evaluation. The only promise I will make is that nothing regarding this little marble will be leaked to any other being, not even the Wyrmgod."

Jake didn't need to think much more as he chose to submit the arcane marble. He had always planned on doing so, but he had genuine doubts about how good of a submission it was. There still was some doubt, but much of it had been dispelled after this conversation.

The final sentence was a clue. For the Architect to specifically promise once more that she wouldn't leak anything meant that her leaking it would be a big deal. That communicated to Jake this little marble was a big deal, similar to his Grimoire, though probably in a very different way. The kind of way where more people would want to explore Jake's special little energy as they came to realize it potentially had more effects than just bringing out the Primeval Origins in cores to give birth to powerful ancient variants.

Either way, Jake had now submitted it, meaning he only had one more potential Creations he needed to come up with while he kept working on his poison and "teaching" Temlat here and there. Jake wouldn't really say he was teaching much, which was why he felt weird thinking about it as teaching. He was more just giving occasional advice, pointing the young half-elf towards books, and helped him out when stumped. True, there was also the curse nurturing and presence resistance training Jake still occasionally did, but those didn't really include Temlat learning anything.

Shaking off the thought, Jake focused his attention on this last Creation he had to come up with. For what felt like the umpteenth time, he went through all of his skills, not to

look for one to upgrade, but to see if there was one that would give him any inspiration for a crafting venture.

Sure, there was still the possibility of just making an elixir even if Jake had written it off... he could also just be boring and submit a potion? Nah, that would suck too much. As Jake was thinking, he suddenly got an idea that would be awesome if it worked.

With excitement, he tried to pull a certain item out of his inventory and, surprisingly enough, found himself successful. With a grin, he held the mythical rarity Cradle of Soul's Kindling as he peeked inside with the hope of getting lucky. It would be perfect.

Using the extracted Soulflame, Jake's Alchemical Flame would upgrade several grades at once, and Jake would even have technically crafted it as it was fully born when he took it out of the Cradle. All that needed to happen was for Jake to get lucky by having a good Soulflame inside, and he would be golden.

However, reality proved cruel as Jake checked the Cradle and found no good Soulflame available. Soulflames had the qualities of elementary, low-tier, mid-tier, high-tier, pinnacle-tier, and Supreme Soulflames, and as Jake looked inside, he saw that while the area where arcane affinity Soulflames spawned was still expanding, the best Soulflame with his affinity was a mid-tier one. Ah, but he did spot a few high-tier Soulflames in there. Sadly, these were all of different affinities.

Alas, sometimes Jake couldn't get super lucky. After infusing what little mana he had remaining into the Cradle to give his arcane affinity a bit more of an edge in the battle of affinities, he put the Cradle away again, finding himself back at square one.

You know what... fuck it, let's just focus on the poison, and I am sure I will get on something along the way. If not, maybe I can just submit my inability to get on anything good as a Creation... Jake thought self-deprecatingly as he went toward the alchemy lab to play with poisons.

Within the Architect's room, she was looking at the marble in front of her. It didn't look like much, as if it was just a small gem or pearl. There was none of the aura a high-quality item would usually leak, but just a completely inert object. Yet the Bound God found it more than intriguing, even if it raised more questions than it gave answers.

Still looking at it, she felt the probing of her fellow ruler of the World Wonder as the Wyrmgod curiously approached her. Likely because he had seen the Chosen leave her chambers.

"I see he has handed in another submission. My guests grow curious, so--"

"No," Nevermore cut him off. *"Not only am I unwilling, I am incapable of sharing."*

"Incapable?" the Wyrmgod questioned. *"Like with...?"*

“Yes, the same as with four of the Creations from the man called Eron, the Chosen of the Lifesoul Daolord. Truly curious to see two individuals with such aberrant Bloodlines appearing on the same planet,” the Architect answered.

The Wyrmgod grumbled but stopped probing as Nevermore kept looking at the small marble. He knew that when the system set down a hard line like this, there was no need to keep trying. It had decided to block certain information, making it so there were things not even she could see, and what she could see, she was physically incapable of sharing with anyone.

She wanted to probe it more... but she knew that even if the system allowed it, all she would be doing was breaking the marble. Breaking the stable energy surrounding the spark would result in the spark infusing the rest of the energy to destroy itself. A truly peculiar Creation with no real uses to anyone.

However, even if it didn't have any practical use cases, this small marble was Perennial. Everlasting. Something that shouldn't be possible. With time, all items degraded. A sword will lose its energy, becoming inert. A magic circle will need constant repairs to keep active. Any structure will require maintenance... even a small rock would change with time, finding itself affected by the environment.

Yet, despite how much the world would change or how many eras would pass this small marble would remain. Unless destroyed, it could potentially continue to exist forever... a fate usually only reserved for the divine. Achieved with not a single smidgen of divinity.

Peculiar indeed...

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Chapter 821: Nevermore: Checks & Balances

“Isn't it entirely expected a few of his Creations will be entirely hidden even from you? You know how the system is with Bloodlines,” Nature's Attendant spoke up within the divine watch party living room. “If I am correct, little Dina must also have submitted some items that were restricted when she did the House of the Architect.”

“She did,” the Wyrmgod confirmed. “However, it is rare that Nevermore herself shows interest in a Creation. Much less several Creations within a short time span. My attention wasn't truly on the Chosen of the Lifesoul Daolord, as while his methods and Path are interesting, it isn't one I find particularly appealing. However, it seems there is more to him than I initially believed.”

"All Bloodlines have secrets and are irregular by definition," Vilastromoz shrugged, fine that the topic had switched away from Jake. "For him to have his own special means is indeed only to be expected."

The Viper wouldn't say he was worried about how things would go in the House of the Architect for his Chosen. Both when it came to Jake doing well and regarding if he would reveal something, he probably shouldn't. The Bound God of the World Wonder was a quasi-system entity, making her subject to its rules. Even if she wanted to share all of Jake's secrets, she would be unable to.

It did annoy the Viper a bit that Nevermore knew more about Jake and his secrets than his Patron god, but there wasn't really anything to do about it.

When it came to the overall evaluation Jake would get, the Viper also had great confidence. Even without factoring in Jake's Bloodline, alchemists tended to do very well in this Challenge Dungeon. Statistics showed that of all the popular profession archetypes, alchemists were the overall top performers in this Challenge Dungeon simply due to how diverse of a craft it was. Poisons, potions, elixirs, pills, transmutation, magic circles, herbology, and many more disciplines were part of the art of alchemy. All very different, with the only truly common thing being their requirement for high-level mana control.

This also meant that his Order was one of the factions that had the best average performance. Alright, it also helped that the Order only tended to accept elites, but the fact it was an alchemy-focused faction was definitely the most important factor.

With all that in mind, Jake would likely get a decent evaluation even if he only had his alchemy to rely on. But Jake, of course, didn't only have his alchemy. Throwing in the Bloodline meant that Jake had a great whiff of uniqueness in there, and the Viper was sure Jake would pull off something impressive, bringing him from a decent to a great evaluation.

However, it was far from assured Jake would get a top-tier Grand Achievement.

"Jake and even Dina would definitely have earned a top score if this was Nevermore back right after it got established," Nature's Attendant shared with a nostalgic smile. "It sure was interesting back then before all the checks and balances."

The Wyrmgod scoffed. "Balance had to be achieved. With the further propagation of Bloodlines, something simply had to change. A Bloodline should not result in an automatic top-tier evaluation. At least Record inflation meant that the Leaderboards from back then are now useless."

"I think we should give poor Jake a helping hand by allowing him full points even for stuff that is fully Bloodline-reliant. The guy is clearly starved of points," Minaga said in a fake sad tone.

"I am sure he'll be just fine," Nature's Attendant chuckled. New novel chapters are published on *novel·fire·net*

The Viper smiled at the conversation, remembering how Nevermore changed and adapted with time. It was true that Nevermore once had far fewer balancing factors and far more things to exploit. There was quite a period where the evaluations in all these Challenge Dungeons were made entirely based on the Records contributed. This, in nearly all cases, resulted in anything using a Bloodline leading to an automatic top score, as few things could be more unique than a unique Bloodline. Well, besides maybe a Transcendent skill, something that would also automatically qualify someone to get a top-tier evaluation back then.

Now, things had changed significantly. No longer was a Bloodline an unsurmountable advantage, even if they were still a big bonus. It also mattered how well one used one's Bloodline now, and the overall quality of the items submitted using it.

Even so, the Viper was confident. As long as he remembered to submit a damn Grimoire, at least.

"Ah, by the way, that human from your Chosen's Planet just got done with the Challenge Dungeon. The one who walks a Path of the Void under the influence of Oras," the Wyrmgod shared with the room a bit – about three months - later as he looked at Vilastromoz.

"So?" the Viper questioned, finding himself a bit intrigued but not overly interested. He already had a good idea of how that man would do.

"A 25% Grand Achievement earned," the Wyrmgod said, finally getting the attention of many of those in the room. 25% was incredibly rare, after all, and unless Bloodlines or Transcendent Skills got involved in breaking a scenario, they were considered borderline impossible. The fact that the man following Oras had neither made this outcome an event worth noticing, even for the gods present.

Vilastromoz wasn't overly surprised, though. He had seen what the man had created, and out of everyone there, he was one of the people most knowledgeable about Oras. He knew the Void God wouldn't ever bother with anyone who didn't surpass comprehension in at least some areas.

"How?" the Blightfather, who had been silent for a long time, asked. "From what I gathered, he had a mechanical profession. The variety of methods and Creations he can submit should be limited, and he didn't even spend overly long in there."

"You know that is not a question I can answer," the Wyrmgod shook his head with a sigh. "All I do know is that underestimating the mind of a man who walks side by side with Oras and keeps his sanity isn't wise."

A notion none of the gods present would ever disagree with. The Void Gods were incredibly well-respected entities, after all. They were gods that existed outside of the physical realm while rarely interfering directly with reality. Not because they couldn't, even if they were severely restricted outside of the void. However, even if they rarely interfered, one could never truly make them enemies... for doing so would mean the void would become a place even a Primordial should reconsider visiting.

Then there was also the fact they were just so alien that not even the Viper was sure what their deal was most of the time.

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"So, will your Chosen also walk out with a 25% Grand Achievement?" Minaga asked the Viper. "If he does, things could get very interesting on those Leaderboards. Not to say it won't get interesting even if he gets lower, but, you know, it will leave a lot up to the final Challenge Dungeon. Not that I think he will do badly there at all... in fact, I am very much looking forward to the experience."

The Viper listened to Minaga's long rant as he just answered the initial question as honestly as possible.

"How would I know how Jake will do? I haven't seen any of the Challenge Dungeon as the screen only flickers on for the minutes he walks around the atrium."

"Oh... yeah, fair enough."

--

Jake had no idea his small marble had left a Bound God who had existed since the second era pondering in genuine puzzlement. Much less the happenings in the streaming room. Not that he had any time to think about such things, even if he had known. He was a busy man, after all, and was working hard on his current poison project. A project that had experienced what Jake believed could aptly be described as the concept known as feature creep.

The original plan had expanded several times as Jake got more and more small ideas to improve things. At first, Jake had wanted to make either a really strong Hemotoxin or a really strong Necrotic Poison. Mind you, Jake had at least been clear from the start he wanted a poison that targeted life-affinity lifeforms. A poison tailor-made for those would be better than trying to mix in stuff to also target something like elementals, so that's why he went with a more focused one.

Also, the vast majority of foes Jake hunted were flesh and blood lifeforms. Beasts of different sorts, primarily, and while he did throw in the occasional plant, elemental, or mechanical creature, his Blood of the Malefic Viper usually did the job fine against

those. Plus, as a hunter, Jake could choose his own prey, so if he only had poison good against flesh and blood, he could just only target flesh and blood prey. And currently, the only things Jake was itching to put arrows in were quite susceptible to both bleeding and necrosis.

At least Jake was fairly confident Ell'Hakan wouldn't enjoy having his body rot and bleed from the inside.

His original plan to make either a strong Hemotoxin or Necrotic Poison quickly morphed into Jake asking himself a very simple question: why not both? Well, the answer was that different poisons very rarely mixed well, resulting in the final product turning out worse than if you had just focused fully on either. Alas, this was a problem Jake knew could be overcome as merging poisons was something Jake had read a lot about and knew as possible from prior projects. He just needed a way to make his two best types of poison compatible.

Now, Jake did also consider merging in a few concepts from his Sleeping Night poison but ended up quickly scratching that idea as he felt like trying to mix in Neurotoxins would just make the entire project way too damn complicated. Plus, if he struggled to merge two poisons in a satisfactory way, how was trying to merge three going to make things any better?

To clarify, the Sleeping Night Toxin had contained elements of hemo- and necrotic toxins, but he hadn't outright merged two fully-created poisons together to make it. That poison had also been far more subtle due to the ethtoxin infused to calm the two other kinds of toxins down until it was time to go wild. Finally, even in Sleeping Night, the two toxins didn't exactly mix well together. It was just that their violent clash would only happen once awakened, and as it would take place within the target's body, it wasn't really a problem.

To start this new and exciting project, Jake had first needed to make two powerful poisons to merge. One Hemotoxin and one Necrotic Poison, both firmly in the rare rarity, to then hopefully merge them even an even better rare rarity poison.

Once more, it had to be reiterated that poison rarities were quite a bit different from many other types. A bit like potions. The rarity was a lot more "set" than in other things, and even just making rare poisons in C-grade was considered pretty damn good. In fact, Jake had been told by Villy that should he manage to create an epic rarity poison and upgrade the skill to epic while still in C-grade, it would be very impressive.

Shit, it wasn't uncommon for some alchemists to never even reach rare rarity with their poison crafting while in C-grade.

One of the reasons why the rarities for these crafting skills were a bit different was because they were never downgraded. Every evolution from now on – B, A, and S-grade – would result in every single skill getting evaluated and potentially downgraded.

The only ones immune to this were Jake's unique skills and his crafting skills. Elixir making, potion brewing, and poison concocting to be more accurate. So, if one wanted to look at Jake's rare poison skill in a more arrogant and definitely not accurate light, one could imagine it was actually meant to be three rarities higher as it would dodge three downgrades, making it already a legendary skill.

Yeah, alright, that wasn't how it worked, but Jake liked to imagine it was. Anyway, this peculiar nature of the crafting skills also resulted in the spectrum within each rarity being far, far wider. Jake could make a rare rarity poison that was dozens of times more powerful than another and still stay within the same rarity, while if he did that with most other projects, the sheer power difference would result in a rarity difference also showing up. It did feel a bit weird that Jake could toss a dozen legendary rarity ingredients together and end up with a rare poison, but what can you do.

All of this is to say that despite Jake only aiming to craft another rare rarity poison, it didn't make the final result any less impressive. He didn't even consider making an epic rarity poison, as he knew it wasn't going to happen. In fact, he had a way higher chance of making one of ancient rarity due to Malefic Viper's Poison proccing. Something he seriously doubted would happen due to how damn low its proc rate was.

Jake even regretted using that Venom from the horrible statue Felix made, but then again, it would probably have counted as a crafting ingredient and not something Jake could use during the Challenge Dungeon.

Back on the topic of this poison in question, Jake had rapidly made progress over the last many months, and when he transitioned into only focusing on this specific one, things only picked up further.

Before he began, Jake had been quite a bit better at making Hemotoxins compared to Necrotic Poison, but he quickly shored that up and got them to just about the same level. That was necessary if he wanted to merge them and create something new. Something Jake had come across that had a damn impressive and highly innovative name:

Hemonecrotic Poison.

Alright, it was just a combination of the words hemotoxin and necrotic. But the poison itself was actually pretty damn good.

One of Necrotic Poison's biggest weaknesses was how effective it was. It sounded counterproductive, but it tended to simply rot away the area it affected too quickly and ran itself dry of energy. This even happened with the higher-quality Necrotic Poisons that released necrotic light into their surroundings. The result was that anyone who was inflicted could more accurately target the poison with their vital energies or even just cut off the affected area.

Some enemies Jake had faced on the different Nevermore floors even "sealed" off the area he had affected and let it rot away until the necrotic energy ran out to then swoop in and cut off the very small affected area. This could result in a potent Necrotic Poison doing nothing more than rotting away a thumb-sized hole around where his arrow had struck, doing far less damage than he would have liked.

In many ways, Necrotic Poison was the most straightforward kind of poison there was, with no real hidden tricks. Just a shitload of death-affinity energy trying to make stuff die. It was both its biggest strength and biggest weakness.

However, what if the Necrotic Poison, with its incredibly potent death-affinity energy, was allowed to spread throughout the body? If it rapidly began to affect several places in the body at once instead of just one localized area?

To then make matters worse, this necrotic energy would be merged with a Hemotoxin – one of the notoriously most difficult poisons to get rid of as it bonded to the blood and vital energy of the infected person. It was a real double-whammy of damage that would create a high-damage, high-resistance poison. The kind Jake could confidently build up throughout a long fight.

The kind of poison he would happily use on his prey.

Jake was excited about finally getting it done, and as he researched, what he had hoped would happen even ended up happening. He found something else that seemed interesting to craft... he found what could very well become his tenth and final Creation.

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Chapter 822: Nevermore: A Corrosive Idea

Poison came in many shapes and forms. Jake usually relied on the classic poison in liquid form that he coated his weapons with, but powdered poison was just as normal. Powder had the great properties of being dissolved in water or even burned to create a mist or smoke with toxic properties. If this powder was dissolved in purified water, one could even have a do-it-yourself poison kit.

Jake felt like he could quite easily make a powder, and this was one of the things he considered as his final Creation. It didn't take much more than putting in certain catalysts and then boiling a mixture long enough for all the water to evaporate. Getting a working method down shouldn't take more than a month or two. Jake found a few use

cases for a powder, but ultimately, it wasn't something he thought worthy of submitting, so he didn't bother getting more familiar with the craft.

However, as he briefly studied these powder poisons and worked on crafting his Hemonecrotic Poison, he came across another form of poison Jake had neglected for a long time. A form of poison Jake had encountered before, and he kind of questioned if it should even be called a poison.

It was something many other professions also used. Jewelers and blacksmiths used it to remove impurities when crafting, weaponsmiths while tempering arms, and Jake had even seen Arnold use some that he had acquired from who-knows-where.

He was naturally talking about the wonderful world of acids. Alright, calling it a wonderful world was probably overdoing it, as dying to an acid was probably one of the worst ways to go. Jake should know. One of his first really close encounters with death was that time in Villy's Challenge Dungeon, where he barely touched some acid and nearly had his entire body corroded and melted away.

The poison back then had been of the necrotic kind and made to dissolve anything alive. That's also why there could be an entire basin of it, as it wouldn't do anything to anything non-living... and this was actually where one of the big differences between poisons and acids appeared.

If Jake opened a poison bottle and poured it into a bowl, the bowl would begin to take heavy damage as the energies within the toxins would leak into it. Even if it was a poison made to kill flesh and blood lifeforms, the antagonistic mana within was simply too reactive with anything it was in contact with.

This was also the reason why poison lost its effects pretty quickly when out of the bottle. If Jake didn't have Malefic Viper's Poison, it would last minutes, not hours, when he coated a weapon and had it out in the open. Another reason why his quiver was also a godsend at it allowed Jake to have poisoned arrows in there for way longer without losing potency.

Acids, on the other hand, were far more stable unless they came in contact with what they were made to corrode. Jake could leave an open barrel of acid just sitting there for years without it losing much, if any, potency as long as no one consumed any of the energy within by dissolving anything.

Jake had never really worked on acids, as, in many ways, they were just worse than the poisons he used. Splashing a few drops of Necrotic Poison on an open wound would corrode an arm away, while a few drops of acid with necrotic properties would only melt away a tiny bit of flesh where the liquid hit.

The mention of open wounds here was quite important because this was where acids differed quite a lot from regular poisons again.

While throwing a bottle of poison on someone did do some level of damage and would act slightly acidic, it was very inefficient. Nearly all of Jake's poisons worked through injection with sharp objects like arrows or katars. He needed to personally deliver the poison to the inside of the Soulshape, or it would have little to no effect.

Acids you could just throw at people. It didn't really matter; as long as someone was hit, it would do its thing. Sure, an open wound would be nice, but it was secondary to just splashing someone with plenty of it. And Jake did mean plenty of it because just throwing small bottles of acid would rarely do much unless it was *really* potent acid.

Now, the ultimate question was why Jake suddenly got so damn interested in acids. In truth, Jake didn't really need to learn how to craft it. Combat-wise, it wouldn't even do that much for him. However, there were some instances where acids were just straight-up better than any kind of poison Jake could craft.

He still vividly remembered his fight with the Altmar Census Golem. That damn thing had been entirely immune to all his poisons, and sharp weapons didn't really work. The only way he had eked out a victory had been through Touch of the Malefic Viper, which managed to corrode through the Golem's defenses. Back then, the energy Jake had released may as well just have been him making his hands into acid due to the nature of the toxins released.

In one of the books, Jake actually read an interesting analogy. It said that if the usual poisons were the swords, daggers, and spears of toxins, then acid was the hammers, maces, and staffs. The blunt weapon of the toxic world. This was mainly because of the targets it was considered good against and how a blunt weapon would hit a large area with far more overall force, especially effective when sharp weapons just wouldn't get the job done, while at the same time recognizing that when a sharp weapon did work, it tended to be a lot more effective.

Jake liked that analogy quite a lot, and right now, he didn't really have any blunt weapons. His closest thing was arcane explosions, and that wasn't really a blunt weapon, now was it? So, there would likely be some combat applications if Jake made a good acid.

As for how acids worked a bit more in-depth... well, there were a few ways. Acids had to be targeted against something specific, the same as regular poisons, but in a far more deliberate way. Mixing different acids to corrode more things also didn't really work, and honestly, why would you even want that in most cases? The acids you could mix also had to be in the same ballpark, or they were utterly incompatible. At least they were to someone like Jake, who was still working on his very first acid.

Choosing what you wanted to corrode wasn't that much different from before the system, but instead of targeting certain chemical compounds, you targeted affinities and even concepts. All metals partly shared an affinity, and they all had the same

conceptual Records of being metal. So, if Jake made a metal-melting acid, it would work on all metals, at least somewhat.

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The same was true if Jake made something that was just a mana-melting acid. As for what acids could target, the more narrow it was, the more potent the acid tended to be against that specific thing. So, if Jake made an acid targeting earth-affinity mana, it would be much more effective than one generally targeting mana. What's more, it could target only that one thing while ignoring everything else around it, not wasting any energy on what Jake didn't want to get rid of.

There was one other big reason Jake thought creating his very first acid would be a good idea. Jake had nine Creations he had planned to submit, and while all of them used his arcane affinity... none of them really made any use of the destructive aspects of his affinity. They had all been about the stable elements, especially the small marble he submitted – though that entire thing had more to do with Jake Juice than anything else, his arcane energy just the packaging to show off the energy.

Jake did use his destructive arcane affinity when doing alchemy. He used it to eliminate things he didn't want or need during crafting. To break apart certain ingredients. Something that was extremely similar to how acids worked.

Using his destructive arcane energy was incredibly difficult in his usual poisons due to its... well, destructive tendencies. It liked to destroy anything that wasn't stable arcane energy and coupled with volatile poison that also wanted to kill stuff, the two of them went for each other the second Jake wasn't holding the reins.

Acids were a lot more stable. It wouldn't fight back as long as the acid wasn't made to corrode Jake's arcane affinity. This meant Jake only had to address the destructive arcane energy to make it calm down. A task that wasn't as difficult as one would expect as long as it wasn't actively being attacked. Jake's arcane affinity was a lot about balance, so all Jake needed to do was stabilize the destructive arcane energy just enough to not want to consume itself along with the acid. He would put it in sync with the acid and do so his arcane affinity would work in tandem with it, helping with the corrosion. Make it so that when the acid became aggressive, so would the arcane energy.

It also wasn't like acid wouldn't have uses outside of combat, especially not if he infused his arcane energy. There would be many instances where he could use it together with transmutation to corrode away unwanted parts of an item he planned to transmute, and the experience of learning how to make a good acid and how exactly acids worked would surely prove useful. Especially if one considered how an acid could target very specific things to corrode.

Finally, Jake had one more reason he wanted to learn acids... one many probably wouldn't expect:

Blood of the Malefic Viper.

Jake had noted before how his blood was pretty much acid in its own right, even if it was a pretty weak one, and he knew that a part of the Path of the Malefic Viper revolved around acids. He also highly suspected that either *Palate* – due to stomach acid, though that may be a stretch – and/or *Blood of the Malefic Viper* were skills more directly related to it. This update is available on [n0v3l~f1r3~n3t](#)

If Jake actually learned how to make acids and even consumed a lot of it, his blood would also get more potent acidic properties which would also help when he used his blood as a crafting ingredient. Considering how damn much blood Jake could spill these days, he could see that prove very potent. So, yeah, one of the reasons Jake wanted to learn how to make acids was because he thought it would be part of upgrading *Legacy of the Malefic Viper* skills and because he wanted to make his own blood more acidic.

Anyway, these were all the many reasons and thoughts Jake had in regard to making an acid. As for the *Hemonecrotic Poison* Jake was also working on? Well, he only had all this time to work on his acid because he was already done with that one:

[Potent Hemonecrotic Poison (Rare)] – Mixing potent Hemotoxin and Necrotic Poisons, a Hemonecrotic Poison has been made, capable of rotting your foe from the inside. If injected, this poison will bind itself to your foe's vital energies and blood, using it as a vehicle to spread necrotic toxins. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal. Cleansing the Hemonecrotic Poison vital energy is extremely difficult.

Alright, it wasn't really right to say he was done, but he had made one. Reading its description, it did exactly what Jake had wanted it to. It had the good properties of both *Necrotic Poison* and *Hemotoxins*, making it an extremely difficult poison to deal with for anyone unlucky enough to get it into their system.

The entire crafting process had been precisely as Jake expected. It was just a lot of work to make the two poisons properly mix while checking books whenever something didn't work, and if the books didn't have any answers, to just keep trying until he eventually found the problem himself.

This poison was probably Jake's strongest yet against other humanoids or beasts. It would deal a lot more damage than his usual poisons, for sure. So, Jake had done the only logical thing he could and promptly went to the *Merit Exchange Store* and sold his very first *Hemonecrotic Poison*.

What? Jake wasn't going to actually submit this one. Jake had checked the time and out of all the *Challenge Dungeons*, he would definitely spend the most time in this one. As

he had been pretty damn fast in Minaga's Labyrinth despite clearing so many Sections, he was even ahead of schedule. Two years had been allocated for all the Challenge Dungeons, and Jake hadn't even spent that long in any of them so far. It had gotten close with the Colosseum of Mortals and Test of Character Challenge Dungeons, but it hadn't taken quite that long.

This meant Jake was fine with spending a bit longer in the House of the Architect as long as he saved two years for the Endless Journey.

He also had to consider Temlat. The half-elf was improving, yes, but Jake didn't want to pressure him and put him on a timer, and who knows when he would evolve? He sure as hell wouldn't tell his student he had to evolve just because Jake got tired of waiting. That would go against any kind of teaching style Jake would ever want to be associated with.

Plus, Jake had kind of forgotten that Evolution Quests were a thing, and Temlat had come to him a few days prior and said he still needed to do those. So, yeah, that added a bit to the time Jake thought he would originally take to evolve.

That's why Jake settled on just letting Temlat decide when Jake would be done with the House of the Architect. He wouldn't rush himself to complete the Hemonecrotic Poison. He would only submit one to the Architect after Temlat was also "submitted."

If not, all Jake would be doing was making himself impatient, waiting for Temlat to get done.

As for the acid, Jake decided that he would be fine submitting that even before Temlat had reached his final form. Even if he did want to make a good acid, the regular poison was still his biggest priority, so that would be the final thing he submitted. It did kind of go against the notion of waiting with the best till last, but the Architect had never mentioned that was a thing, so Jake should be fine.

Time quickly passed as the usual routine continued. Jake had more time to focus on Temlat as his poison and acid project didn't take up all his time, especially the poison, as he was just reiterating and improving on the current poison at this point while making a few small improvements.

Finally, one day, Temlat approached him...

"Lord Thayne," he said in his usual semi-respectful voice.

His body looked a lot different than when Jake first met him. He had a dark aura around him and had begun to wear a cloak at all times, with shadowy energy hiding him due to his stealth skill. His eyes looked full of determination, and Jake could feel a faint bloodlust within him. A suppressed anger.

[Half-elf – lvl 199]

Seeing his level, Jake had a good idea why he was there.

"You got your race evolution quest?" he asked.

"Yes," Temlat answered in a solemn and serious tone, making Jake frown a bit.

"What do you need to do?"

"It asks me to reaffirm... or reject the source of my hatred..."

Jake wasn't sure what it meant but quickly got a good idea as he sighed. "Well, it seems like it's time for you to finally visit your homeworld again."

Because, surely, nothing could go wrong there, right?

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Chapter 823: Nevermore: Temlat's Path

Temlat hadn't been home ever since the day Jake fetched him from the dystopian futuristic world he came from. He hadn't even asked to go once. Instead, he had stuck primarily to the centaur world and the jungle world for all his training sessions.

His reasoning was that he didn't want to risk losing control of his emotions. Also, he was certain he was still wanted in his homeworld after having escaped from that noble woman on the floating island. Jake had briefly asked Temlat if he wanted Jake to go and check things out, but the half-elf had answered in the negative. He didn't even want Jake to tell the lady Temlat was dead or anything like that.

One of the reasons for this was also his desire to protect those he actually did care about. The freedom fighting force he had been working with were the only people in that entire dystopian world he considered friends and family, and he feared getting them involved wouldn't end well. If they knew Jake had taken Temlat in, they would want to see him, and if they were told he had died, Temlat feared they may go for revenge or do something dumb. Jake also sensed that Temlat was afraid of how they would look at him these days. He had changed a lot in the time he had spent with Jake, the curse energy affecting him a lot.

Jake had simply done as Temlat asked as he continued to go with his free-range teaching style. However, even so, he gladly joined his student when he asked Jake to join him on this first visit back.

Standing in the portal room, Jake gave Temlat a look, noticing he was hesitating.

“Nervous?”

“I... what if they can’t recognize me? My friends, that is,” Temlat muttered. “You know... the last time they saw me, I was running from some monstrous cloaked guy, and now I have suddenly been gone for nearly two years. I feel like I have changed a lot during this time too... I know I have changed.”

“Any changes will surely be easily explained away by telling them that the monstrous cloaked guy decided to help you get stronger,” Jake said casually and calmly, trying to reassure his student.

Temlat flashed a light smile, the curse energy around him temporarily fading a bit. “Yeah, probably. No matter what, they’re gonna be ecstatic when they learn why I am back. When they learn what we can now do to set things right.”

Jake just nodded, genuinely hoping his reunion would go well. Jake knew the feeling Temlat was currently experiencing, as he had felt something very similar when he had first gone to see his parents after the integration.

To return to loved ones a changed man wasn’t easy. You wondered if they would accept you, and even if they did accept you if they would begin to treat you differently. Especially if you experienced a large shift in your status. Jake had already been tired of everyone acting all weird because he was the Chosen of Villy, and he really didn’t want his parents to also act differently back then. Jake had gotten lucky, and he hoped Temlat would share the same fate.

“Let’s not delay anymore,” Jake finally said as he gave Temlat a pat on the back. “Let’s go.”

“Right,” Temlat nodded.

It was time for him to either reaffirm or reject the source of his hatred. In order to do that, he would first meet up with the freedom fighter organization to learn what had happened during his absence. To have clarified how shit the world still was and to hear their opinions on if his deep hatred was truly justified. In other words, he would have a discourse about his own hatred to either come out feeling vindicated in what was to come or reconsider his entire Path. Needless to say, Jake wanted him to feel confident in the Path he was walking, but even if he ended up rejecting the curse and evolving in another direction, it would be interesting for sure.

Jake wouldn't involve himself either way. It wasn't his job or why he was there. He was just there to guide Temlat in whatever direction he decided to take his life.

Walking through the portal, Jake was instantly hit by the slightly metallic smell and taste of the futuristic world. He didn't like it at all, and his Sense of the Malefic Viper unprompted made him aware that pretty much nothing alchemical could grow anywhere nearby. *Yeah, definitely happy Haven has strict building codes.*

"It looks the same," Temlat muttered as the curse energy around him fully retracted, Temlat absorbing it into himself to keep it hidden.

"Even if you have changed a lot in recent times, two years is just an insignificant blip in the existence of a world like this," Jake commented. "Especially if those who live there have no desire to pursue change."

Temlat looked at the floating mansions still high up in the sky, adding: "Or if those who hold power do not allow any change to happen."

"That too," Jake agreed. "Anyhow, this is all you. I'm just gonna be the little spirit that'll follow along as you decide what you want to do. Feel free to ask me if you need something, but I won't interfere in anything unless you ask me directly, alright?"

Temlat nodded with determination. "Thank you, Teacher."

Jake had already been focusing as they talked, his body slowly shifting on the spectrum of Perception. The stable arcane mana covered his body, and soon, his form faded away, making him invisible to anyone who wasn't Temlat. Temlat was only able to see Jake was there because he already knew Jake was there, to begin with.

The two of them headed into the city, Temlat flying over it with confidence. His own stealth skill wasn't all too shabby, and Jake knew most weaker C-grade couldn't see him unless they really tried. Even if they were spotted, Temlat had good odds of defending himself, even if a C-grade got mixed in there.

While Jake hadn't been the most attentive, he did keep up with Temlat's progress. He knew the young half-elf had gotten a lot stronger in the nearly two years since Jake took him in, to the level where he had even managed to take down a handful of C-grades, that centaur warlord included. Sure, he did sometimes use tricks to get it done, but as a hunter who liked to start a fight with an extremely strong Powershot, Jake couldn't exactly fault him for getting early advantages.

Temlat and Jake had appeared quite far up in the air after going through the portal but soon headed downward toward the slums. The city was absolutely massive, but Temlat clearly knew where to go as he beelined for a certain area Jake recognized. It was close to where he had originally been "kidnapped" by Jake and also close to the headquarters of their particular freedom fighter squad.

Also, while Jake had said he wouldn't interfere, he could ask questions.

"Did your former friends have any C-grades among them?" Jake asked while wondering if they ever even stood a chance against the C-grades living in their mansions with C-grade guards.

"We had one," Temlat shared as they kept flying. "Our leader. He used to work security for one of the mansion owners, but after a particularly bad case, he quit. The government tried to make trouble because he didn't work for any of the people in power, but he managed to convince them he had retired and that he would contact them if he ever wanted to go back to work. Now, he is under surveillance, but as long as he stays in the same area, there shouldn't be any problems."

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"I see," Jake nodded solemnly.

He didn't say anything more... because he felt the area in front of him. There wasn't a single C-grade anywhere to be found below any of the highrises or the floating islands, at least not in the entire area of his Pulse of Perception. Jake didn't want to jump to conclusions, but he got a bad feeling.

Soon, they arrived in the area district where Temlat's squad used to reside. Jake could feel the half-elf's excitement but bit his tongue even as they landed, and Temlat began to scout the area. They went toward a few warehouses that stored ores from the underground mines, where they headed inside and toward a hidden staircase.

Temlat frowned a bit as he went closer, muttering to himself. "It hasn't been reinforced for a while... our leader was the one who did that..."

With a careful demeanor, he unlocked the hidden pathway and entered using some secret code, Jake following. Down below the warehouse, Jake saw several people gathered, none of them particularly powerful. At least none of them matched up to Temlat at all.

The people in the room had also noticed Temlat was there, as the entryway also included a detection spell. One that Jake naturally dodged easily with his stealth skill. Anyway, the people in the room quickly hid themselves, likely preparing for an ambush.

Right before they reached the final door, Temlat stopped and raised a knuckle. He knocked in an odd pattern as he also spoke up. "The Broken Collar has returned."

One would assume the people inside would calm down with this revelation, but instead, they tensed up. Jake was quite curious as he saw they nearly all of them carried what

looked like laser rifles or guns, and while he very much wanted to disassemble, that wasn't why he was there.

Temlat opened the door only to have all the weapons trained on him. The half-elf was confused, but before he could say anything, a woman who also happened to have the highest level in the room – 190 – raised her voice.

“Temlat!? What the fuck are you doing here? No, where have you been!?”

“I... I just got back,” Temlat stammered. He had removed his hood and hidden the curse energy as best he could, but Jake still saw some of it shimmer beneath the surface, barely being suppressed. “As for where I was... a lot has happened, and I cannot tell you exac-“

“Fuck that! Give us a proper explanation!” one of the others yelled.

None of the guns had been lowered yet, and their aggressiveness was over the top, in Jake's opinion. It was more than just nervousness, suspicion, and agitation. They were genuinely angry, and as someone who had a budding Sin Curse of Wrath, how couldn't Temlat recognize that?

“I was taken away by my teacher to train and get powerful,” Temlat shared, not going into details about exactly who Jake was. “I have come back now because there are things I have to do before I can evolve.”

Silence took over the room for a few seconds before the woman spoke up.

“That's it? That's your fucking excuse?”

“What?” Temlat asked, confused. Jake was also a bit perplexed about what exactly had happened.

“You just waltz in here with some bullshit story about a teacher and expect us to believe you? Do you know what the fuck you've done?”

“No, I quite obviously don't,” Temlat shot back, failing to suppress some of his anger.

“Oh, do you remember Isaia?” the woman said in a cold tone. “You know, the man who saved your pathetic life and brought you here?”

“Of course I remember,” Temlat said in a calm tone.

Jake quickly put two and two together that this Isaia was the leader.

“Then do you know what he did for you?” the woman spat out, not even giving Temlat time to answer. “When you didn't return, he went to that owner of yours, acting like a

buyer trying to get you back... how the hell don't you know any of this!? A year! A fucking year the announcement was up!"

Temlat only looked increasingly confused as the woman and the other seven people in the room only got madder. Their anger, in turn, also affecting Temlat.

"What announcement!? Just tell me what is going on and stop acting like whatever the fuck happened is my fault!"

"They knew you worked for him!" another person yelled. "They captured him and... they said if you didn't return they would... would... a fucking year! It was there for a year, and you just hid away, not doing shit!"

"How could I do anything if I didn't know!? What the hell happened? Just tell it to me I am getting sick of this shit!" Temlat yelled, agitated and angry. Jake understood why. Emotions were high, and in all honesty, they had probably both underestimated the impact of Temlat's passive curse aura amplifying everyone's anger. As he had only ever really spent time around Jake, the Attendants, and his enemies. This meant he had never been required to learn how to fully suppress it.

"What do you think happened?" the woman asked in a cold tone. "What do you think they did to him when you didn't turn yourself in?"

Temlat clenched his fists hard enough for his nails to pierce his own skin as he cursed out loud. "Fuck! Why did he go to them!? What was he thinking!?"

"You have the gall to blame him?" the woman shot back. "But, hey, at least we agree! He shouldn't have gone and tried to save your worthless life."

Her words were full of spite as she continued.

"No, he should have never taken in a pathetic half-breed like you at all. You know he only did it because he felt bad for your pathetic whore of a mother, right? Isaia always had a soft spot for pitiful things."

Jake considered speaking up but stayed silent, not interfering. He saw Temlat standing there trembling for a few seconds before he suddenly calmed down and took a deep breath.

"I don't even remember my own mother anymore," Temlat said, the curse aura around him slightly moving. "Isaia very much took on a fatherly role... but even so, he always had the mission as his top priority. Have you all forgotten?"

"What fucking mission?" one of the others yelled. "They are hunting us! Just because some bitch didn't want to let her pet go, nearly all of us have been killed already. There is no mission. It died the day you let Isaia die."

Temlat's coldness only increased as he nodded. "You are right that Isaia's mission died... but his ideal lives on. He wanted the world to change and for those in power to pay for what they've done. So I ask all of you, if you had the chance to fulfill that ideal, would you do it? Would you risk your lives for the cause?"

"Did your soul get fucked up or something?" the woman said in a mocking tone. "Without Isaia, we can't do shit to anyone, even if-"

"Why did I even ask?" Temlat said in a casual tone. "It wasn't a choice to begin with."

A dark wave of energy was released from Temlat as he unleashed his curse. Only now did those in the room seem to realize the young half-elf had gotten a lot stronger than before. His skill allowing him to hide his level had done so none could see it.

"What happened to you?" the woman muttered, her eyes wide open.

"I found my Path... and I reaffirmed what I must do."

Without any warning, Temlat took out a disc, and a ritual circle appeared all around him. It had been the ritual Temlat had worked on for this entire duration as Jake's student. Jake felt the concepts within it instantly but chose to remain silent still.

Curse energy erupted from the floor, was what looked like black chains of flames engulfed every single person in the room besides Jake and Temlat. The flames instantly began to burn the freedom fighters as they all screamed in pain, the central woman screaming the loudest as she cursed Temlat.

"You fucking lunatic! What are you doing!? I'll fucking kill you, I'll-" New novel chapters are published on *novel*fire*net*

"Thank you," Temlat just said. "Your anger is very helpful."

With a wave of his hand, the flames all intensified as none of them could speak. They all became fuel as Temlat turned and threw Jake a look. "Thank you, Teacher. From the beginning, all I wanted was revenge on those of this world who only deserve death... and you made that possible. Even if I don't turn out as you had hoped."

Temlat bowed deeply as Jake nodded. "Your Path is your own, not one for me to define. Do what you think you have to."

The half-elf nodded as the curse energy released from the sacrifices began to make its way toward him. His own aura began to intensify as soon even Temlat's body erupted in flames. The light smile on Temlat's face disappeared entirely as all emotions were burned away.

Finally, he took out his dagger – the one he had when Jake first met him – and pressed it against his own chest.

Right before the final emotion that wasn't pure hatred and anger disappeared, Temlat plunged the dagger into his own heart. A black burst of flames erupted from the stab wound, and in the very next second, Temlat popped out of existence, having gone to the evolution space.

Jake sighed as he wondered what would return... and as he felt the aura of the room begin to change, he got a clue as he sensed something he hadn't since he met the Dark Witch on floor forty-one.

The unmistakable scent of a plague.

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Chapter 824: Nevermore: The Child Who Is Not Embraced By the Planet Will Spread His Plague

The curse energy within the underground room kept increasing with every passing second. The former freedom fighters stood catatonically as their bodies still burned, and Jake felt that their souls had already mostly been extinguished. They were being reduced to nothing more than the hatred within their hearts.

Plague energy also slowly began to emerge, infecting the mostly dead people. Jake realized now it had come from the dagger Temlat had used to stab himself with. The half-elf had changed it to somehow inhabit a nascent plague of some sort. It wasn't a true plague yet, though. Temlat was far from being capable of making something like that, but it had the fundamental building blocks.

Building blocks Temlat had merged into himself right as he evolved.

Jake remained an observer as he waited for nearly a minute, the curse energy in the room continuing to rise. It was feeding into the evolution as far as Jake could tell, affecting Temlat's evolution just as he had wanted it to.

He didn't know what would emerge once the evolution was complete. However, he didn't have a good feeling it would be something... acceptable. Curses and plagues were both less-than-fondly looked upon in the multiverse, and a merge of the two could

only end in disaster. Especially with what Temlat had done right as he evolved. He had purposefully damaged parts of his own soul, as far as Jake could tell.

Which meant he didn't plan on emerging as anything even close to a normal person anymore.

Soon, the energy reached a crescendo. Jake felt the Sin Curse within his own Soulspace rumble to life as curse energy tried to infect Jake, Eternal Hunger gladly eating it all up. Jake breathed in through his nose as Palate faintly activated, eliminating the traces of a plague that attempted to infect him.

Then, out of nothingness, a figure appeared. A cloaked being that looked surrounded by darkness, its form not entirely corporeal. It looked vaguely like Temlat had with his hood up... but Jake barely felt the familiar aura of his student. Instead, he felt only a bubbling mass of anger, and with a deep breath, he analyzed the being in front of him.

[Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath – lvl 200]

The former freedom fighters all turned to black energy as they fed the Plague Remnant, the magic circle beneath him fading right after, having done its job. Jake considered what to do, genuinely unsure what his next actions should be.

He knew what Plague Spirits were. They were the premier example of beings that should be killed on sight if anyone encountered one. Mostly, they appeared when powerful death-affinity energy gathered in an area and was nothing more than mindless elemental-like beings who lived only according to their instinct to spread their plague and consume all life.

Jake also knew of another creature called Curse Remnants. These were very similar to Plague Spirits, but instead of a plague, they spread their curse energy far and wide, cursing anything and everything. As with Plague Spirits, these were also simply mindless creatures with nothing more than an instinct to spread their namesake to the world.

Both were considered living calamities. Beings to destroy. However... Jake didn't remember ever coming across anything called a Plague Remnant. Much less a Plague Remnant of Wrath, indicating Temlat managed to finally evolve his curse of hatred into the Sin Curse of Wrath.

The easy explanation was that Temlat had truly managed to fuse the two into one. To create a cursed plague... which actually didn't seem that weird. The two concepts mixed well, both being highly infectious magical ailments that could infect from one person to another without needing the original source to get involved.

One thing was clear: the being before him was a living calamity. Even if Jake didn't recognize it, he knew it was dangerous. What's more, the aura it gave off wasn't meek

by any standards. It was still only a C-grade, but Jake knew that it was a powerful variant.

Paths tended to be more powerful if they also included giving something up or having severe restrictions. Jake's class was the easiest example; his Path making it so he couldn't get any experience from anything lower level than himself. Temlat's Path had taken far more from him than simply that.

The Plague Remnant in front of him began to slowly move as it turned into a dark smoke that quickly sought outside the underground chamber. As the Remnant left, Jake knew what would happen if he did so. He knew that everything around him would be infected and a chain reaction would start. A snowball of cataclysmic proportions.

However, as Jake looked at what Temlat had become and analyzed the plague energy trying to constantly affect him, Palate quickly gave him an understanding. If he killed Temlat here and now, everything would end. The world would be saved.

Jake seriously considered it for a second until the smoke stopped just before the exit of the chamber and took on the form of a hooded figure once more.

*"Thank you, Teacher. Thank you for allowing me to finally spread true justice upon this filthy world and for granting me the power to do so. If you are still here... witness as I expunge my Wrath. Witness as a wrong is made right. Witness **me**."*

Sighing, Jake realized the young half-elf had lost his ability to perceive Jake after he evolved and quickly made it so Temlat could see him and flashed his student a smile. "Go get 'em."

The former young half-elf didn't respond but quickly turned back into his remnant form. Jake was both happy and conflicted, knowing that Temlat's psyche persisted, though it probably shouldn't have surprised him too much.

It was similar to the Yalsten Shade of Eternal Resentment. Jake wouldn't be surprised if that creature had also once been a Curse Remnant, but as it ran out of targets to infect, it died and was reborn into the shade it had been when Jake encountered it. Even that creature back then had retained some level of thought.

Curses were based on emotions, and in order to truly feel emotions, one needed a more complex mind. Perhaps not to the level of being fully sapient, but at least sentience was required. Of course, the psyche of such beings was very rarely just that of one person or in any way cohesive, which nearly always made Curse Remnants act illogical and on instinct as the only thing all the different psyches could agree on was their one shared emotion.

Jake would guess that inside Temlat's head, he heard the voices of the former freedom fighters he consumed, and with every death, the choir of voices would grow. The faint

curse energy released upon their deaths would become one with Temlat, empowering him and becoming one with him.

Following Temlat outside, a geyser of black smoke erupted out of the warehouse. As if a smoke bomb had been dropped, it rolled out with Temlat in the middle, slowly spreading out. It was barely noticeable due to the usual constant smog that hung in the lower parts of the megacity, and it took people a while to notice anything was even wrong... by the time they did, it was too late. The D-grades simply had no way to resist the influence of a C-grade Cursed Plague Remnant.

As Jake had noted many times, this megacity was ridiculously massive, with a population density absolutely insane. Hundreds of billions, if not trillions, lived on the planet, and due to how crammed they lived to one another, there was no escaping the Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath.

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Jake observed as the smoke entered the mines. The miners working there began to get agitated and angry. Swinging wildly when the annoying ore refused to get free from the damn rock. This earned them an angry foreman who screamed at them... only for the miners to all turn as they charged the one foreman. The foreman killed dozens before he was overwhelmed and hacked to death by the workers.

On the lower floors of the megastructures, the mayhem began to break out. Any small inconvenience became a cause for conflict as fights broke out. This was also where the truly insidious aspects of a plague were shown.

Not everyone was affected the same, as some had stronger mentalities or were simply a lot less emotional by default. They fled, afraid as they got attacked by others, going to somewhere the conflict had not broken out yet... bringing with them the Cursed Plague of Wrath. Their very presence made them spreaders, as their attempts to garner help only resulted in anger from those asked.

However, as Jake observed, it quickly became clear the anger was not indiscriminate. The curse was not without cause. Students killed teachers, miners killed foremen, children their parents or disciplinarians, and workers killed managers... rather than simply mindless anger, it was wrath towards authority.

Jake remained a silent observer as he saw the cursed plague spread. He saw how every death, no, even just every infected person, fed Temlat, the source of everything. Minutes turned to hours as Jake kept looking on, choosing to take this as an experience to learn and a solemn moment to reflect.

To observe a scene like this wasn't something anyone could just do. Sure, Jake could probably find a recording if he wanted to, but this was vastly different than merely

watching something unfold. It was closer to what he got while using Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

He felt everything. Took it in. Even if he knew this entire world was "fake," he never liked to think of them as such. To these people, they were as real as Jake himself, and they had full lives. Their lives just couldn't impact the wider multiverse in any way.

This begged the question... what would Jake have done if Temlat had been a student Jake had taken outside of Nevermore? What if this exact same scenario played out? Jake wanted to tell himself he would have advised Temlat against researching plagues, but in all honesty, he probably wouldn't have. Even if he did, he wouldn't have insisted if there was the slightest pushback.

Jake's teaching style was a lot closer to Villy's than anyone else's. It was a style that could barely make one acknowledged as a teacher, more a sparring partner or external advisor. Jake didn't want to tell someone what to do or give them unsolicited advice. From the very beginning, he wanted Temlat to find his own Path. To decide what he wanted to do and not fit into a mold Jake created.

So perhaps that was Jake's biggest fault... he hadn't chosen his student properly. Temlat was talented, he had a rare compatibility with curses, but he lacked ambition. His goal had always just been to get revenge, which was such a weak motivation. But... for Jake, who knew he only had a few years in the House of the Architect at max, this goal was good enough. In many ways, he had just taken advantage of Temlat's short-term goal to get a better result for himself, which made Jake feel even more conflicted if he did choose to step in and interfere now that Temlat was finally capable of realizing his dream.

As Jake reflected on his entire approach, he kept watching Temlat. He kept watching, even as the first megastructure began to tumble and the people charged toward the sky and the mansions up there. Only a few hours had passed at this point, and when Jake looked down and saw the ever-growing Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath still within the warehouse, he could only sigh.

[Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath – lvl 212]

He leveled up at an unprecedented speed, and from the looks of it, things were barely slowing down. At least not yet. Jake knew he was an empty cup that was just slowly getting filled with shitty muddy water. The curse energy that made up the Plague Remnant was getting contaminated by all the beings that were consumed along the way, and it would take a long time for him to properly consolidate himself once he was done.

Yet Jake doubted he cared. In fact, he doubted Temlat would be able to even feel the emotion of caring much longer as the curse energy from all the infected and dead people mixed with his own. At least Jake thought so, but to his surprise, he still sensed

Temlat. He saw that he still maintained his humanoid figure standing in the middle of the warehouse.

He retains an ego even now... is it because of the presence-resistance training we did?

Jake had been able to hold onto his mind when he consumed all the curse energy from Eternal Hunger because of his Bloodline-empowered psyche, so it was entirely possible Temlat had built up enough resistance to handle the influx of curse energy he experienced. Compared to the curse energy that eventually gave birth to – and still resided within – Eternal Hunger, Temlat's current form was nothing. One had to remember that this planet only had C-grades on the weaker side as their strongest, and barely any of those had even fallen yet.

Time passed as the cursed plague spread further and further. Attacks on the sky mansions had begun to happen, but their defenses were far more impressive compared to anywhere else. The formations alone were nearly enough, and when most of them sprung large laser towers and what looked like Tesla Coils, Jake thought the masses were done for.

However, that was when the nobles showed they truly had no idea what they were dealing with. Be it in a foolish attempt to save resources or pure ignorance, they began to send out their security forces to fight. The automatic defenses would not be affected by the cursed plague, but these guards?

Hundred were instantly killed by each C-grade bodyguard as they dominated the sky, killing in droves. The D-grades and even E-grades who had joined the assault didn't stand a chance, but this was where another scary aspect of cursed plagues was seen.

With every kill, a bit of the energy invaded these C-grade's bodies. With every kill, they got more and more infected, and as they had no time to sit down and purge the energy, the outcome was obvious.

It was one of the strongest guards – who had also killed the most – that fell first. His eyes were bloodshot, and right after killing a dozen D-grades, he turned around and roared as he released a massive blast of fire toward the floating island where he used to be employed. His hatred toward the owner who forced him to perform a massacre was obvious. The automatic defense system instantly triggered and attacked him, but he defended himself well. The other C-grades saw their friend being attacked, which seemed to also push them over the edge as they also began to attack the nearby sky island.

In the meantime, the D-grades kept coming for the guards and the island both. It was pure pandemonium, and Jake could only watch in silence as the barrier broke on one of the smaller sky islands. The woman who used to call the living calamity currently washing across the world a pet lived in one of the larger ones where the defenses still held out, but it was only a matter of time.

Temlat had been the first domino that started a cascade effect that appeared unstoppable. Millions more were infected every single minute as Temlat no longer even needed to do anything. The cursed plague was spreading all by itself, causing destruction all across the planet.

Jake had flown high up into the air as he stared down. The spread was impressively fast, and as the planet wasn't overly large, Jake guessed it would reach everywhere within a week at most.

A single week for an entire planet to fall to one newly evolved C-grade... Jake understood why Plague Theory and curses were both not anything to be taken lightly. It was something most factions outright banned, to the level of hunting down people they believed were researching it unauthorized or while not part of a big faction.

The former half-elf himself was also growing in power still. After half a day, when nearly half of the sky islands near the original source of the cursed plague had fallen, he had already gained nearly thirty levels from the billions upon billions of infections and deaths he had caused.

[Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath – lvi 229]

His leveling speed had slowed down, though. His container for experience was just about full, and even if he kept growing stronger and absorbing more energy, it wouldn't translate into levels much longer. Jake also knew that once he did hit a wall, it would be incredibly hard for him to ever overcome it. This was one of the reasons why Villy was so insistent on Jake also making sure he had a good foundation... leveling this fast felt nice and looked overpowered, but it was sacrificing long-term power for short-term gain. Alas, Temlat already knew this when he evolved... For more chapters visit [novel•fire•net](#)

No new developments happened for a good while. The massive cloud of pure curse energy around Temlat now covered several square kilometers, forming a domain all around him. He looked to be entirely focused on gathering this energy until suddenly, Jake saw it all begin to gather. A second later, he realized why.

The barrier to the mansion Temlat had once called a prison had been broken... and the massive cloud of curse energy shot upwards, the Sin Curse making the air shiver in his wake. It gathered into the cloak, and to Jake's pleasant surprise, a face emerged within. Temlat's unmistakable visage didn't only tell Jake he still retained his ego... but that he was going to personally unleash his own Wrath on the woman who once dared call him her pet.

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Chapter 825: Nevermore: No Regrets

Temlat undoubtedly had one person he hated more than anyone. An individual that represented everything he despised above all else. Despised how she was just sitting up on her floating island, staring down with mockery at the average folk beneath. She had been such a shitty person Temlat had even awakened his innate curse affinity due to how much he hated her.

This hate was felt throughout a huge part of the planet as Temlat descended upon the cloud island. The others infected by the cursed plague, even the C-grades, backed away instinctively when they saw the cloaked figure approach. Be it because they sensed the dangerous energies he emanated or simply his power, Jake didn't know.

Landing on the floating island, Temlat began levitating forward. A few times, he reached out and made a guard or servant erupt in black cursed flames, rapidly consuming them. Jake made the educated guess these were servants of the mansion he hadn't been a big fan of.

Following along, Jake remained true to his promise as he only observed. In his sphere, he saw the woman Temlat was aiming for, hiding with two others inside a room with heavy magical seals on it. A safe room of some kind, it appeared.

Considering the state of the mansion, a large metal box buried toward the middle stood out quite a bit, and Temlat approached it at a steady pace, not rushing at all but keeping a calm demeanor. One side of this metal box was partly transparent, allowing the people inside to look out but no one to look in – outside of people like Jake who had high enough Perception to entirely ignore the one-way glass. Temlat clearly knew they could see out as he floated down in front of the box, and his voice echoed out from beneath the hood, showing the Cursed Plague Remnant had gotten a better hold of his new form, even capable of transmitting sound now.

"I hear you've been looking for me... well, here I am."

Promptly, the one-way glass became two-way, revealing to Temlat the three within. Standing at the glass was the woman who had originally hired Jake to "retrieve her pet."

The woman who had set everything that was happening into motion. She looked through the glass at Temlat, clearly unsure what she was looking at.

"My dear? What happe-"

A huge blast of black flames shot at the metal box, making it rumble, and the magical formations crackle from the sheer energy.

"Do not call me that!"

"I... why are you doing this? No, it cannot be; my sweet little one isn't like this," the woman said in denial as she leaned onto the side of the wall, looking scared. However, some-fucking-how, she gathered herself and took on an adversarial stance. "You are from those dirty slums, aren't you!? I'll tell you, when the security forces arrive, you'll be in big trouble! Are you also the one who hurt my dear little one and stole its gentle visage?"

Temlat looked at her, seemingly lost for words for a moment before he just started laughing. The cloud of curse energy around him ebbed and flowed as Jake found not a single trace of happiness or humor in his voice.

"It. You keep calling me an "it." Tell me... what is the name of your former dear little pet? Do you even know it?"

The woman just stared as she seemed offended. "My dear was always called my dear; it didn't have a name."

The response was swift and decisive. A massive inferno of black flames erupted all around the metal box, burning away at it incredibly rapidly. Curse energy and plagues both sucked against magic formations like this, but the sheer energy output was enough to rapidly overwhelm the defenses. One crackle after another sounded out as the magic formations broke, and the metal itself began to break apart.

"Then allow me to remind you. Let my name be the last word you ever hear and your final memory: Temlat." Follow current novels on novel•

With that, the metal box broke apart. The two other women in the box died instantly as nothing more than collateral damage as the flames enveloped the source of Temlat's hatred. She didn't share the same quick death as they suffered. Her screams began to echo as the Cursed Plague Remnant floated in front of her, controlling the black curse flame.

For a good while, the only thing Jake heard was the woman's screams, with only the faint echoes of battle in the background. Temlat was not in a hurry, as he did what he could to make it the most painful death imaginable.

Jake stared for a while at Temlat's actions before he finally sighed and used One Step, appearing right beside Temlat, standing firmly within the cloud of cursed plague energy.

"It's enough," Jake said.

"Enough!? No, this bitch could burn for eternity, and it would never be enough! She deserves more than I could ever do to her!" Temlat's enraged voice echoed out

as his curse energy rumbled like a thundercloud. Jake absorbed the pure curse energy of hatred as he understood... as least as best as he could.

"I said it's enough. Simply torturing her will accomplish nothing beyond this point," Jake spoke in a calm voice. "To end her Path is the ultimate revenge. To sever her impact on the world and allow her Records to fade into obscurity. That is the true way to destroy someone. Erase her from existence and show her just how insignificant she is."

Temlat's attention was on Jake for a moment as he finally released a pulse of power. The flames intensified, and after a final scream of pain, the woman's entire body disappeared, not even leaving ash behind. In the final moments, a bit of curse energy was released from her dead body, but Temlat instantly motioned and scattered it, refusing to allow it to be absorbed into him.

Jake had said before he wouldn't interfere, and yet he had stepped in anyway. Not just because he believed that Temlat was doing something senseless but because of what had to come next.

It was his time to take responsibility as a teacher. To see if Temlat truly realized the consequences of the Path had had chosen.

Sin Curses were the most powerful... but they were also insatiable. They would never be satisfied and never reach their goal. Jake's Eternal Hunger would always demand more, always be a glutton, to the level where it would try to consume Jake if it got too famished. In the same way, Temlat would always need an outlet for his Sin Curse of Wrath. Sin Curses were based on emotions that couldn't be killed simply by fulfilling them. Wrath was something internal. What you yourself felt, regardless of what you direct your wrath at. You would always find a new target to hate, always find a new outlet. Not feeding the curse would only result in an internal collapse as the hatred turned toward the one and the only thing it could: himself.

The anger would be fully directed toward Temlat. Toward his own existence. He would begin to hate life itself, hate the entire world. This often resulted in someone infected by a Sin Curse of Wrath simply losing their minds and beginning to mindlessly destroy anything and anyone around them, only stopping when slain.

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That's why people used Sin Curses so sparingly, and if they began to lose control because the curse grew too powerful for them, they sealed it away. A bit similar to what Villy had proposed Jake could do with Eternal Hunger if the weapon ever got too much. He could "sever" it from himself and have it sealed away and drained of energy until the weapon just became an inert object many, many years later. It seemed like a waste, but it was better than Eternal Hunger getting hungry enough to just outright eat Jake, even if it would result in its own demise.

Temlat... couldn't seal away his curse. He was the curse incarnate.

There was no breaking free of the curse's influence, no escape from its effects. Temlat's Path was to be a Cursed Plague Remnant until the day he died. He was to spread the Sin Curse of Wrath, with the only reprieve coming when the curse also took his own mind... or if he managed to fight it long enough and stay lucid, see himself fade away and die in a struggle against his own emotions of wrath.

"What will you do now?" Jake asked after a long silence.

Temlat didn't answer right away as he just stood there, looking at where the source of his hatred had died. Where he had killed her. Jake felt that a sense of emptiness and lack of purpose had begun to affect the curse energy around him, but after Jake asked, it refocused.

"End what I started. She was a symptom of a disease... one that only a plague can cure."

Jake nodded, understanding what Temlat would do.

"Then do as you have to. I will stay and watch as promised... and once you're done, let us speak once more. As you said, I'll be a witness to your Path."

Temlat turned to Jake, his face clearer than ever, even seeming to have a bit of color to it. He nodded decisively as he took to the air, Jake focusing on reentering his stealth state before following. Jake also quickly saw where his student was headed.

The woman had mentioned it, but the most powerful people on the planet hadn't fallen yet. While the whole planet was effectively just one massive city, there were more dense areas than others. Temlat had resided in the second-to-most dense area, with only one other place having more people living there. With more people also came more C-grades and the closest thing to a government this world had.

One could view this fighting force as the army, even if they called themselves security forces. There were thousands of C-grades in the mix, but they all faced an opponent they weren't fit to fight. Temlat also had an army with him, as the central government was the main focus of the outrage of many. A full-on war was happening as the soldiers tried to defend their stations, but killing only served to turn them to the side of the enemy.

Some could resist, but they were in the minority. Mages and those with high Willpower, more often than not, managed to stay clear-headed even as the cursed plague infected them, but their calmness only made them targets of the irrational rage of others.

As time passed, Jake noticed how Temlat had begun to slightly change the target of the curse of wrath. No longer was it merely those in power... it became those *with* power, too. Those with the potential to grow powerful and become the ruling class once more.

The army quickly fell to Temlat and his army of infected. From there, the slaughter truly began. Those who had been fighting side by side before began to butt heads, and the D-grades turned toward the C-grades, while the C-grades turned to the C-grades higher level than themselves.

Jake's estimation of the cursed plague taking an entire week to infect the planet also turned out to be off by two days. Five days was all it took for the cursed plague to infect practically every single person on the entire planet. Due to how everything was constructed, there were truly no places to hide, and as long as someone – anyone – knew who and where you were, you too would become infected. It also helped that the planet was pretty small compared to something like Earth.

Slaughter roamed every street and building. Megastructures fell like dominos, and every single sky island was brought to the ground, viewed as monuments of oppression. The mines were blown up and collapsed, as barely anyone was spared.

A week after Temlat had appeared, the planet was borderline unrecognizable. Not a single towering building remained standing as the entire surface of the world was covered in debris. Trillions had died and killed each other in rage.

Throughout it all, Jake had kept to his promise and witnessed Temlat carrying out his Path. He nearly stepped in many times, but at every instance, he stopped himself upon confirmation that Temlat remained lucid and in control despite everything. As long as that was the case, Jake wouldn't directly interfere.

Everything seemed senseless, but Jake began to see a purpose. At the end of the day, he also saw that Temlat had grown in level far more than he had ever expected possible for a newly evolved C-grade... but he had also seen how it hadn't increased in a day, communicating he had hit a wall. One he would find very difficult to ever overcome. He had gotten powerful, though.

[Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath – lvl 248]

Temlat himself had finished off the last C-grades on the planet, meaning none remained. Jake released a Pulse of Perception and did see some survivors. Not many, but there were some hidden beneath. E-grades, children, the weak and oppressed who had been living in squalor only a week prior.

Flying down, Jake appeared standing beside Temlat, who was floating above where the governmental head office had once been. Now, it was only a huge black crater as Temlat had burned away even the debris to erase information about the society that once was.

“My question comes again... what now?” Jake asked.

The feeling of emptiness from the Cursed Plague Remnant of Wrath was even stronger than before. With everything destroyed, he would soon need a new target. Seconds ticked by before Temlat finally spoke, his voice as empty as his aura.

“From the very beginning, I just wanted revenge. I wanted that bitch to die and see the world that allowed someone like her to exist crumble to the ground. Both of those things have now become a reality. The only survivors are those who remember the injustice... who were so pitiful no one even felt any wrath toward them. Let them be the ones to rebuild a new world for themselves, one that is better than what was,” Temlat said, having clearly given this entire scenario a lot of thought.

Jake simply listened, knowing now was not the time to add his two cents to the situation.

“Even now, I feel it creeping up. I feel my mind being consumed because I suppress my own urges. I want to just fly into the multiverse and look for my next target... to infect everything. Without you, Teacher, I wouldn’t even be able to remain lucid right now...”

Temlat looked toward the sky as he began to condense his form. The huge cloud of curse energy gathered into one singular humanoid form as Jake saw the half-elf he had first seen appear before him once more. He kept looking upward for a while before turning to Jake.

“Teacher... am I an idiot?”

“Very much so,” Jake nodded. “But you at least chose to be an idiot yourself. Chose your own Path.”

Temlat smiled despite the Sin Curse. **“I did... and it was totally worth it. I do not regret my decision to become what I am in order to fulfill my goals. But... I do have one regret...”**

“What is it?” Jake asked.

“I don’t want to just die with this world. Your words... that allowing Records to fall into obscurity is the ultimate revenge... to be forgotten... I don’t want that,” Temlat said, turning to look at Jake. **“Will you remember me?”**

“I am known for having a shitty memory, but I think you’ll be hard to forget,” Jake shook his head and put a hand on Temlat’s shoulder. Even with his student’s control of the cursed plague, it still tried to constantly infect Jake, failing at every turn when faced with Palate and Eternal Hunger.

“Thank you,” Temlat muttered. **“Then, could you fulfill one final selfish request of mine?”**

Jake already had a good idea of what he wanted as he nodded. “If it’s something I am capable of.”

“Please allow me to die when I am still me and have no regrets of my actions. Consume my existence so my Records can at least still persist in some way,” Temlat finally said. **“Please consume me with your own Sin Curse.”**

“Alright,” Jake simply agreed, knowing Temlat had thought this through.

Motioning, Eternal Hunger appeared in his hand. Without Jake even doing anything, it began to give off a hungering aura toward Temlat, wanting to devour him.

Temlat looked at the katar as he bowed deeply. **“Thank you for giving my life meaning and allowing me to do something with it.”**

With those words, Temlat’s form began to break apart. Eternal Hunger lashed out to eat, and Jake, for once, didn’t hold it back but just held up the weapon. Temlat’s form began a torrent of black smoke that buried itself into the black katar, getting consumed in the process as one Sin Curse devoured another.

After less than a minute, nothing remained, and as Jake looked down at the mythical weapon in his hand, he could only sigh loudly as he clenched his fists.

“My first student... Temlat... and this is how it ends. Fuck I’m a shitty teacher...”

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Chapter 826: Nevermore: Brittle

Jake floated silently in the air as the aura of Temlat slowly faded away. With his death, the curse and plague both disappeared, curing all those who had been infected nearly instantly. Looking down at Eternal Hunger, he wondered if anything had changed but found no obvious changes to the weapon, at least not besides its clear satisfaction with having consumed another Sin Curse to fuel itself. He did feel that the Records of another Sin Curse had slightly affected it, but... Temlat had simply been far too weak to truly affect the mythical weapon in a major way.

Sighing yet again, Jake headed toward one of the portals leading back to the House of the Architect. He had no reason to stay on the ruined planet and would leave while only offering it a few more thoughts. As Temlat had said, chances were the survivors would eventually rise again. While ninety-nine point nine percent of the population had died, hundreds of thousands, if not a few million, had survived. With no wild beasts on the planet either, there was no threat to these people, and using the materials of the old world, they should be able to rebuild.

Hopefully, the memory of Temlat would persist for a long time. It would be good if he could serve as a legend and a warning that should they indulge too much and become too corrupt, another being like him could appear. Jake hoped this, even if he knew that a case like Temlat rarely happened. In most cases, the fucked up society would just persist.

Cases like this megacity weren't rare across the multiverse. For there to be a clear divide between grades and those who had power and those who didn't wasn't anything new. To take advantage of those below you was just the natural next step in the eyes of many.

Jake would also leave Temlat's world with a lesson on what Earth absolutely couldn't become. He wasn't averse to those in power having more, well, power, but that didn't mean one could just exploit others without any consequences. If that was allowed, how would people be able to rise and claim power for themselves?

After blowing away some debris, Jake arrived at one of the portals and left Temlat's world behind. He walked straight toward the room of the Architect to submit his eighth Creation... even if it felt damn weird calling what had happened a Creation.

He had given little thought to what Temlat's Path would mean for his submission, much less if his death would have any impact. Even if he had considered these things, Jake sure as hell wouldn't have refused his first student's final request just because he wanted some more Nevermore Points.

Arriving at the door, Jake once more didn't even have to knock as he just walked in, seeing the Architect already waiting for him.

"I'm here to submit my eighth Creation," Jake said in a calm tone.

The Architect nodded, motioning for Jake to clarify exactly what he was submitting.

"I would like to submit Temlat's Path. From when he became my student till his end," Jake said.

"The evaluation will only take into account the impacts on his Path that you had," the Architect clarified for Jake. "Be they directly or indirectly."

Jake just nodded. "Alright."

The Architect's eyes flashed golden for a moment before the light faded. "It has been done."

The room was silent for a while as Jake just stood there, deep in thought. The Architect didn't make any moves to throw him out immediately, quite clearly reading he had more to say.

"Hey... I have a question. Off the records," Jake muttered.

"I am not giving any advice on Creations," she said, but luckily didn't just throw him out like usual.

"It isn't that. It's just... you've been here for a long time and seen a lot, right? I know I could ask the Viper after this, but I feel like I need a qualified outside perspective that isn't from him," Jake began as he just laid it out straight. "I am a shit teacher, right? My first student and he ends up turning into a living calamity that I eventually end up eating with my own Sin Curse weapon after he destroys a planet."

"Answering that question with a simple yes or no isn't possible," the Architect said. "It is all subjective. If your goal was to guide your student toward godhood, you did indeed fail. If your intentions were for him to realize his goals and form his own Path with you only acting as a supporting pillar, you were a great teacher."

"People take students for a myriad of reasons. Some selfish, some out of pure benevolence, and some out of obligation. The student also takes a teacher for similar reasons. In the end, it is a relationship between two people. If the student and teacher are both satisfied with an outcome, who else is to say either party was good or bad? So I think the only thing you need to ask yourself is if you are alright with what happened. If you got an outcome that you can, at the very least, accept."

"I see your point, but... I did also allow Temlat to walk down a Path of self-destruction that ultimately resulted in him taking his own life," Jake protested.

"You say you allowed him to do something... as if you were responsible for the Path he chose," Nevermore said. "If you had taken responsibility for him, and you promised to help him live a long and fulfilling life, you did indeed mess up, but your student walked into this with both eyes open. He knew what he was doing."

"Even if you say that, isn't it my responsibility to at least warn him? To nudge him away from pitfalls like that? Temlat wasn't in a good state of mind, one where it could be argued he wasn't fully capable of making the best choices for himself."

"We are back to the purpose of your teachings once more. Were you his guide? His guardian? His friend? Such things need to be decided before anyone can talk about if

there were any failures. If you do feel like you made a mistake, it is something to reflect upon, but your conflicted emotions on the matter do not mean you failed in the eyes of others, not even your student's," the Architect continued.

"Is that a nice way of telling me Temlat never blamed me for the doomed Path he walked down?" Jake questioned, despite already knowing the answer. He knew Temlat hadn't once blamed Jake but only felt gratitude for allowing him to succeed in his goal.

If he had felt even the slightest tinge of anger, how would someone with the Sin Curse of Wrath be able to suppress even hinting it? The answer was that he couldn't. Never once had Jake been the source of Temlat's anger or resentment... which, for some reason, didn't make Jake feel much better.

"You can choose to interpret it as such," the Architect answered in a relaxed tone. "I do not think it is my place to give you advice on teaching, but I will say one thing. You are used to your own perspective where you value absolute freedom, and that style isn't compatible with many. However, in the cases where it does work, it is the one style that doesn't impede your student's natural growth and the most optimal to allow them to build their own Records. The Path one defines by themselves is the most powerful, after all. There are ways to do what you are doing, so don't get too discouraged."

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Jake listened attentively, but he still felt unsure about how he had approached everything. He had tried to act a bit like Villy by just allowing Temlat to do whatever he wanted and only answered questions when asked, never volunteering any advice. In some ways, it had worked, but Jake didn't feel good about the outcome.

Upon reflecting, Jake did realize one major flaw with how he had done things. As Nevermore said, Jake was too used to his own perspective, and he also had to consider that the advice Villy gave was with whom Jake was taken into account. Jake had his damn Bloodline, which was essentially a cheat against making horrible decisions, as his intuition would always scream at him whenever he tried to do something too dumb. Villy practically never really had to caution Jake compared to other advisors, even if he did sometimes give minor warnings during their conversations.

If Jake could go back, he would have sat down and properly understood what Temlat wanted to do. He would have discussed the outcomes Temlat wanted and made clear to him the consequences of the Path he had chosen. If Temlat still insisted to keep going after that... Jake honestly couldn't say he would have stopped him. He would just have supported Temlat in realizing his dream, even if realizing it would mean his death.

Because, as Nevermore had said... Jake didn't want to be the type to "allow" someone he was teaching to do something. Well, unless it was something that Jake believed crossed a line that shouldn't be crossed... which wholesale slaughter of a deeply corrupt megacity planet surprisingly wasn't. Alright, he wasn't sure how he would have

acted if it had happened in the real multiverse... which in itself was probably a questionable moral stance to have.

Anyway, Jake knew what the Bound God in front of him was doing. She was doing that thing where she said things not necessarily because it was her true thoughts but because it would make Jake think and reflect... the same tactic Villy liked to use. Maybe it was just a god-thing...

"You look like you have a lot to think over," the Architect said with a smile. "I believe it would make more sense to do so outside of my chambers. Good luck."

Jake was teleported out in an instant, still a bit lost in his thoughts as he appeared in front of the closed door.

Shaking his head, Jake got his shit together and began heading back toward the lab. He had to keep his head in the game and keep moving forward. Jake was still in a Challenge Dungeon, and he had just "wasted" a bit over a week in the megacity world with Temlat. He didn't regret having done so, but he knew he couldn't keep delaying his crafting.

Speaking of the Challenge Dungeon and its objective... Jake had no idea how good or bad the submission he had just made was. He truly didn't. Out of everything, even that weird small arcane marble, this was the one he felt the most unsure about. It probably didn't help Jake felt like he had done a shitty job. Alas, there was nothing to do now besides just finishing the House of the Architect and hopefully at least honoring some of Temlat's memory by getting a good evaluation.

But first, Jake needed to calm down his own emotions. Returning to the lab area, Jake went toward one of the rooms to gather his thoughts. On the way, he walked by where Temlat had stayed and stopped in the doorway. He looked inside and saw the sheets had been taken off, cleaned, and neatly folded on top of it. The entire room was clean to a fault and looked practically unused, making Jake look down and clench his fists.

He knew he wasn't coming back, didn't he?

Jake turned and continued into the room he usually used and sat down to meditate and calm himself. He ended up sitting there for over three full days as he mulled over all his time in the House of the Architect and everything that had happened with Temlat. After these three days, Jake opened his eyes again, having calmed himself enough. He wasn't sure if what he had done could be called grieving... but he had at least reached the state of acceptance and the realization that sitting on his ass would do no one any good.

Willpower was truly one hell of a stat.

Returning to the lab room, Jake got to work without pause. He had pretty much completed both the poison and acid he wanted to create already, and now it was just the last stretch to get the final products in the bag. The first of which would be the acid.

Jake had considered the project plenty already, and he went with as simple a form as he could. One that truly made use of his destructive arcane energies to corrode other types of mana and materials. He had considered for a good while how he wanted to attune his acid but ultimately just went with pure mana. The reason for this was simple.

If he made it focus on pure mana, Jake believed he could make the acid almost adaptive. Make it so he could infuse it using Touch of the Malefic Viper right before using it if he wanted it to work on something that wasn't just pure mana.

The creation process for acids was quite different from similar poisons. While making a poison usually required you to mix herbs and extract its energy, acids-creation was far closer to old-school chemistry. It was to primarily mix different liquids together while occasionally adding a solid catalyst. There were some plants that could also be helpful, but Jake didn't use any of these for this acid.

As mentioned before, acids were far more stable than regular poisons. They didn't really give off any passive energy or consumed themselves by simply existing, which was also the one reason he could make his destructive arcane affinity work with it. Jake could infuse it in a "calm" state where it wouldn't react with the liquid it was placed inside. Only when the rest of the acid saw something and became active would the arcane mana also react to break down and destroy the item in question.

It took quite a while to properly get the arcane affinity to do what he wanted, but when he got that down, the rest was pretty smooth sailing, to be honest.

This wasn't Jake's first time making it, but after a few days of getting the final parts fully down and getting himself into a properly focused state, Jake made the best acid he had created so far.

Jake sat with his cauldron in front of him and stared at the transparent liquid with a faint purple hue, nodding in satisfaction as he used Identify.

[Adaptable Arcane Acid of Brittleness (Rare)] – An acid created with a mix of highly mana-corrosive acids and destructive arcane energy as its base, specifically created to corrode other forms of pure mana. Upon coming into contact with pure mana, this acid will turn highly destructive and begin to corrode it. Has an increased ability to intrude into physical objects and corrode the pure mana within. This acid is significantly more effective against passive environmental pure mana. The Arcane Acid is highly adaptable to changes in its nature that will cause it to target other forms of mana. This change can only happen once.

Without waiting, Jake poured out a bit of it into a glass beaker and took out an ingot of metal. It was a form of iron that Jake couldn't easily damage even if he wanted to, and he usually had to use Alchemical Flame if he wanted to break down.

Starting his test, Jake put a single finger inside the acid. Nothing happened, and Jake promptly activated Touch of the Malefic Viper. A bit of energy entered the acid, and Jake saw the purple hue begin to swirl within for a moment until it stabilized. Jake quickly used Identify to confirm and nodded in satisfaction at the result.

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[Metal-Adapted Arcane Acid of Brittleness (Rare)] – An acid created with a mix of highly mana-corrosive acids and destructive arcane energy as its base, specifically created to corrode other forms of metal-affinity mana. Upon coming into contact with metal-affinity mana, this acid will turn highly destructive and begin to corrode it. Has an increased ability to intrude into physical objects and corrode the metal-affinity mana within. This acid is significantly more effective against passive environmental metal-affinity mana. The Arcane Acid has been adapted to metal-affinity mana.

Taking the metal ingot, Jake placed it inside of the acid. The reaction began instantly as the entire thing began to bubble, and Jake saw the metal slowly begin to change color as it looked like small purple sparks constantly nibbled at it. After ten or so seconds, Jake took out the ingot again and held it in his hand.

Appearance-wise, it looked nearly the same, except for some chipping in the corners. However, on the inside, the entire ingot was a mess.

Clenching the ingot in his hand, the entire thing crumbled between his hands, the metal so brittle it could barely keep itself together.

Ninth Creation down... one to go.

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Chapter 827: Nevermore: A Black Heart

Submitting the acid was uneventful, which shouldn't really surprise anyone, considering Jake and Nevermore had spoken only a few days prior.

By now, Jake just wanted to be done with the Challenge Dungeon and move on to the next. He didn't like spending too much time in the laboratory as he had caught himself with less-than-pleasant thoughts more than once. Especially after one of his more focused crafting attempts, Jake exited it excitedly, and as he looked at his concoction, he briefly wondered why Temlat hadn't come to ask him anything recently, only for realization to instantly set in right after.

There were just too many bad memories and reminders there, so without any unnecessary delays, he went to work on the final Creation.

The Hemonecrotic Poison, like the acid, had more or less already been completed before. In fact, he had already managed to create an improved version of the Potent Hemonecrotic Poison before, one that he nearly felt was good enough to submit.

[Heartrot Poison (Rare)] – The heart blackens as it rots away. Blood pumps throughout the body as every beat brings with it only death. Mixing potent Hemotoxin and Necrotic Poisons, a Hemonecrotic Poison has been made, capable of rotting your foe from the inside. If inflicted, the poison will spread throughout the bloodstream, binding itself to your foe's vital energies and using it as a vehicle to spread necrotic toxins. This poison seeks toward the heart and binds itself to it, making it linger for far longer and spread faster. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal. Cleansing the Hemonecrotic Poison from the bloodstream is extremely difficult.

This poison was an improvement over the general Hemonecrotic Poison in every way. Rather than simply infect the bloodstream, this one would seek out the heart and try to bind itself to it. This would not only make the poison a lot harder to heal, but effectively contaminate the vital energy of whoever Jake hit. Coupled with the stickiness of hemotoxins and the damaging aspects of necrotic poison, this poison would surely do a number on any vitality-based lifeform he hit it with.

What's more, it was great at accumulating. As it all gathered in one spot, Jake would have an easier time controlling and amplifying it with Touch of the Malefic Viper, making it even better.

It was, without a doubt, Jake's best poison to date, but he still decided to keep crafting more until he ran out of ingredients with the hope of making the best concoction he could.

Jake had asked the attendants, as he didn't want to waste the time of Nevermore, what would happen to any excess Merit Points he had once he exited the Challenge Dungeon and had it confirmed he would lose them. He then considered just buying some rare stuff before leaving but was promptly informed that any materials he bought within the Challenge Dungeon would also be lost upon exiting. So Jake had to use everything, or it would go to waste. He couldn't even bring any of what he had created out with him, but at least he could use the materials for a bit more crafting experience.

After Jake had crafted a particularly good Heartrot Poison, he considered calling it quits but saw he had materials for one more attempt. After that, he would be out of both Merit Points and ingredients, and Jake thought it would be cathartic to use this last batch. To have a clean break with the Challenge Dungeon to allow him to move on more easily.

Sitting with his cauldron, Jake first poured in some purified water, followed by some of his blood, naturally infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper. Mixing everything for a bit, Jake soon tossed in the epic rarity black moss he had bought, followed by a mix of mushrooms and roots that either contained hemotoxins or necrotic toxins, with a few also in there to serve as binding agents for the two, allowing them to work together. Finally, he just straight-up poured in two pre-crafted poisons of the hemotoxic and necrotic kind.

As Jake placed the last ingredients in the cauldron, he let his mind wander.

The House of the Architect had been a weird Challenge Dungeon for Jake. He had made some great progress in many aspects, especially his alchemy. Many things had begun to fall behind during these last many years doing Nevermore, and now he had time to finally play catch-up. Not only that, Jake had even managed to upgrade his stealth skill to legendary rarity, something he was incredibly happy about.

It did suck that he had to use what little Jake Juice he had managed to replenish, but he didn't regret doing so. He believed it had been a good call.

Shit, Jake had even learned to craft a Grimoire. That was a great and invaluable experience, and he knew the next one he made would be even better. If he had a scribe produce the ink and make the book itself for him to use during the creation process, one that could make them to Jake's exact specifications, things would only get better.

Out of any timespan Jake had spent focusing on his alchemy, this was definitely the most fruitful when it came to pure progress, only capable of being slightly rivaled by the time shortly after he went to the Order of the Malefic Viper. However, it was indisputable the gains of this Challenge Dungeon had been plentiful, and Jake had gotten a lot more done than he thought possible.

His only regret during the House of the Architect was how he had approached his first student. Jake was far from adequate to do anything like taking students yet and would need a lot of time to properly learn how to not suck ass at teaching. To be able to have at least some confidence in what he was doing. Even if he wanted to be a free-range teacher who fostered independence and self-study, he at least wanted to be good at doing that.

Jake wanted to, at the very least, be able to look at his students with a smile and feel like he didn't let them down.

As Jake finished up the final batch of poison, he was barely paying attention to what he was doing and practically running on autopilot. Yet right then, something stirred him. He looked down, and his eyes narrowed as he felt the mixture between his hands near completion. It actually took him a millisecond to remember he was even crafting right now... which was why it didn't make sense that what he saw felt like, by far, the best poison he had made in this dungeon so far.

Before he could even fully process why this particular concoction was so good, everything around him rumbled as a presence descended from above. Jake felt as if reality itself began to warp as what looked like a single scaled finger momentarily appeared from above, seemingly piercing through every layer of protection set by Nevermore and the system. At the tip of this finger, a small translucent drop of blood gathered before it fell right into the concoction.

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The finger disappeared as fast as it had come, reality returning to normal, but Jake instantly knew what it was. He had felt it a few times before, after all, which also meant the notifications that came next didn't surprise him.

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

You have successfully crafted [Malefic Blackheart Poison (Ancient)] – A new kind of creation has been made.

It was the class-specific skill Malefic Viper's Poison once again. This time, not forcibly triggered by using the venom from Felix's statue, but through what Jake felt had to be sheer luck... though Jake doubted it was that simple. The skill always seemed to trigger at odd or highly impactful times, like when he helped create the core that gave birth to Sylphie or when he passed the Malefic Viper Challenge Dungeon all the way back in the Tutorial.

Jake looked down at his concoction and used Identify.

[Malefic Blackheart Poison (Ancient)] – Turn the heart of your foe black, as only death awaits them. Mixing potent Hemotoxin and Necrotic Poisons, a Hemonecrotic Poison has been made, capable of rotting your foe from the inside. If inflicted, this poison will merge with the heart, turning it black as death overtakes it, forcing it to pump out necrotic toxins into the body rather than vital energy. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are extremely difficult to heal. Cleansing the Blackheart Poison is impossible unless the heart is completely destroyed. Should the heart be destroyed, all the remaining necrotic energy within will instantly spread throughout the body.

It was just like his Heartrot Poison but improved in every single way. Seeing it, Jake honestly had some mixed emotions... and not just because of everything with his student and how his wayward thoughts regarding him had partly somehow led to this Creation.

No, what truly miffed him was that he couldn't just keep the damn poison for himself and hand in the regular Heartrot Poison. Jake would very much like to just keep this one as an ace up his sleeves. Alas, that wasn't possible, so Jake did the next best thing he could.

Bottling the poison up, he had five bottles total. Jake felt pretty darn certain submitting more or less of the poison wouldn't matter for the evaluation, so he did what any reasonable person would do, which also happened to be the one way he knew for him to keep a part of the poison with him. Starting with the Heartrot Poison he had left over that wouldn't make any sense to turn into Merit Points, Jake began to chug down his own poison.

It tasted like shit. Find the newest release on *novel♦fire♦net*

Drinking one's own poison using Palate rarely had many benefits and honestly wasn't worth it, but there were some minor gains, and Jake honestly had nothing better to do with it. However, something he did know was good to drink was whatever Malefic Viper's Poison transformed.

Both the Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau he had made during the Tutorial and the poison he made during his fight with Minaga had been either partly or fully consumed by Jake. Especially the first poison had given Jake some great insights into vital energy and whatnot, with him sadly only passively absorbing a bit of the poison he used to kill Minaga. Well, a Minaga.

This was likely because it included insights directly from the Viper himself and not just Jake. It was effectively a way for Jake to absorb Records of an extremely powerful poison while at the same time having the benefits of being recognized as the crafter of it. Actually, thinking about it, Jake wouldn't be surprised if this skill was another attempt from Villy to exploit some loophole in the system...

Anyway, when Jake was done with the Heartrot Poison, it was time to move on to the main course. Jake was a bit more careful with this one as he only dripped a few drops of the poison on his tongue at first. As it entered his stomach, Jake felt the energy it gave off was far more potent than the regular poison, but it was still more than manageable. Drinking the rest of the first of four bottles he was to consume, Jake meditated as he slowly absorbed the poison into his body.

Jake opened his eyes not long after, frowning a bit. *It's not quite enough...*

That is when he got a brilliant idea as he took out his katar. Coating his weapon, he not only made the effect of it more powerful through his passive skills, but he could even consume the poison in a far more effective way. Turning the weapon on himself, he stabbed himself in the arm, allowing the poison to fully infect him and his bloodstream.

Feeling the poison worm its way to his heart felt a bit icky, but he soon realized there had been a bit of a lie in the description, or perhaps Jake had just misunderstood a word. While it was true the poison could not be cleansed from the heart, Jake sure as hell could absorb it. It probably made sense, as Jake was sure there was no such thing as something being "impossible," and maybe to cleanse something had a special meaning. Who knows? What mattered was that Jake got far more out of the second bottle than the first.

For the third bottle, Jake felt a bit more frisky as he stabbed himself in the stomach, allowing more of the poison to affect him faster. When it was time for the fourth and final bottle, Jake felt confident enough to get the full Malefic Blackheart experience as he stabbed himself right in his own heart.

It hurt like hell and definitely couldn't be recommended, but Jake gritted his teeth as his heart turned black. Hemonecrotic toxins were pumped through his veins and spread throughout his entire body as his veins turned black, and dark spots began to appear on his skin before it started to rot shortly after.

His extremities were hit first as his fingers began to fully blacken, and his toes went entirely numb. Yet Jake did nothing but rotate the poison, even reining in Palate a bit for the poison to really do its thing. Only after a few minutes did Jake decide it was enough as he actively worked to eliminate all the poison.

Fifteen minutes later, Jake opened his eyes, the black spots gone. He did end up losing two toes and a pinky finger, but that wasn't anything a quick health potion couldn't fix. After properly regenerating and making himself look just semi-representable by not being covered in rotten flesh and blood, Jake headed toward the Architect to submit his final Creation and finally get the hell out of the Challenge Dungeon.

With this Malefic Blackheart Poison, Jake felt a lot better about his final submission, and he hoped it would help contribute to the final evaluation. Though, if he was being perfectly honest, Jake didn't know how much impact a single item would have.

Jake had thought a lot about how this evaluation would work. Nevermore had said that it was an overall evaluation of all items, which made Jake think that one couldn't get the top score by submitting one top-tier Creation and a load of shit afterward. Instead, everything you submitted had to be at least decent, with a few top-tier products in there.

In Jake's opinion, he had three top-tier submissions. The Grimoire, the legendary stealth skill, and finally, the poison he had just made. Meanwhile, the arcane marble and his horrible attempt at being a teacher were extreme wild cards. There was also Jake's

very first submission, which was just a conversation... yeah, Jake had no idea how good or bad that was, but hey, at least it was very different from everything else, so it should get some bonus points for that.

Arriving in front of the Architect's door, it opened by itself as always as the woman within raised her gaze upon his entry.

"Here with my final Creation to submit," Jake said as he took out the poison bottle. "I want to submit this Malefic Blackheart Poison. Also, I hope the skill I triggered didn't cause too much of a disturbance."

"It's not anything for you to worry about," the Architect said as the bottle in Jake's hand disappeared. Nevermore's eyes glowed for a second as she looked at Jake.

"With the tenth submission, it is time for the final evaluation. Shall we proceed now, or do you have unfinished business within the House of the Architect you want to finish first?"

"No, let's just get this over with," Jake sighed as he began to feel a bit nervous. He felt like he was doing an exam back in university all of a sudden... and Jake had never been a big fan of exams. Well, except for those multiple-choice ones, as he could often just rely on his guts on those ones, effectively cheating.

"In that case, let us begin," Nevermore said with a smile as the door behind Jake closed, and the final evaluation began.

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Chapter 828: Nevermore: Evaluation (1)

"So, how exactly does this evaluation work? I would assume all of the submissions have already been evaluated upon submission," Jake asked. "And even if they hadn't, I doubt doing so would take you much time."

"Indeed, each evaluation has already been completed. However, this final part is a bit different. This evaluation is not for anyone's benefit, but your own," the Architect answered. "Part of the purpose of this Challenge Dungeon is to benefit you, after all. Tell me, have you noticed something different about this House of the Architect compared to where you usually work?"

"A lot of things, considering it's a Challenge Dungeon inside a World Wonder," Jake responded in a rather deadpan tone. "Unless you expected me to notice something specific?"

The Architect sighed. "The environment. With your senses, you should have noticed a slight difference. Tell me, how would you evaluate your gains during your time spent here?"

"I felt like I made a lot of progress?" Jake semi-asked. "More than usual, but there can be many explanations for that... one of which is that the environment is actively helping somehow. But it isn't like it's anything extreme."

"To you, perhaps it didn't feel like it helped much, but to others, it is far more extreme," the Architect said before elaborating further. "The environment in which you are crafting is incredibly impactful on what you can make, and the House of the Architect is filled with the Records of C-grade crafters throughout the eras. The effect was weaker for you compared to many others as you already do many things at a high level, but it will help uplift the Records of many of those who are struggling, allowing them to accomplish new feats they thought impossible."

Jake frowned a bit at the explanation as a thought occurred. "Does that mean I make better things when I craft at the Order of the Malefic Viper compared to at my lodge back on Earth?"

"No, the differences in Records between those two places simply aren't enough. They aren't focused enough. Also, the environment itself wasn't designed by a higher being to support crafting, and even if the Viper wished to do it, it would inadvertently come at the cost of weakening other forms of Records. In fact, places like this are nearly exclusively found at Challenge Dungeons or very unique locales, such as World Wonders," Nevermore explained.

"Huh," Jake let out, guessing that the Challenge Dungeon he had done when he first got his profession probably also counted.

"Are all the Challenge Dungeons in Nevermore like this?" Jake questioned, remembering when Nevermore first mentioned that one of the reasons why Challenge Dungeons didn't give levels was to improve Records. Maybe every single Challenge Dungeon was also designed with special Records there in mind.

"In some aspects, yes, but it varies dependent on the era and the Challenge Dungeons in question. The Challenge Dungeons are ultimately evaluations for a grander achievement, and that is their primary design above all else."

Jake nodded as he moved along the conversation. "So what does it mean when you say this evaluation is to my benefit?"

“Rather than simply give you an achievement and throw you out, we will go through your submissions and you will receive feedback. However, only the feedback you ask for yourself, outside of some very broad conclusions,” the Architect explained. “I will also give you a general oversight as to how good each submission is if that is something you want.”

“Damn, feels almost weird being told I won’t just be thrown out of the room for asking one question too many,” Jake smiled.

“That can still be arranged if you want,” Nevermore responded in what Jake really hoped was a joking tone. “I do have some leeway, after all. This part isn’t anything the system demands but merely an extra reward, so to say.”

“But there will still be a real reward after, right?” Jake said, trying to change the subject.

“That we will discuss later... for now, let us proceed with your submissions, starting with your first one,” the Architect said. “So, any questions regarding the submission of our first meeting?”

“Well... was I an idiot for deciding to submit it?” Jake asked, a bit unsure.

That first submission had been made entirely on impulse, and after over two years in the House, Jake felt more uncertain than ever if it had been a good idea.

“Answering that question is far from straightforward, as in order to provide a satisfactory conclusion, I would need to know what you would have submitted instead,” Nevermore answered, and honestly, she had a good point. “However, I will say that the submission didn’t drag down your overall evaluation when it comes to the ten Creations you submitted. Its uniqueness and vanity were enough to allow it to stand on its own. Also, if nothing else, it was highly time-efficient, was it not?”

“So, I wasn’t entirely an idiot, got it,” Jake nodded. “Now for my other submissions... I am not sure it’s worth it to go super into detail about all of them, so can we just batch all the mediocre or even bad ones together? Do a quick-fire round, so to say?”

“Very well,” the Architect said as she summoned a few projections showing Jake’s Creations. “First of all is the Cursed Stimulant of Hunger. This submission is rather unique due to its curse-related properties, but the Creation itself isn’t of extraordinary quality compared to all the others. From my observations, you are already aware of its shortcomings, so it does not appear pertinent to go into detail.

“Next is the ritual circle, which, while fine and also satisfactorily diverse, isn’t that impressive either relative to your other submissions. The Elemental Confluence Spirit Orb falls into the same camp as the prior two, where it is different but not outstanding on its own. It did help these two that you managed to upgrade your Sense of the Malefic Viper during their creation process, but the impact wasn’t extreme. Finally, we have the

Adaptable Arcane Acid of Brittleness, which admittedly is the best of these four, but from a pure quality standpoint, it simply isn't that impressive. The fact that this was your first time crafting an acid and the uniqueness of your arcane affinity did manage to uplift it significantly, but not enough for it to truly be considered a great submission in relative terms. Do you have any further questions regarding these four Creations?"

"Honestly? Not really," Jake said. He had created the latter three not with the intent to make great submissions but because they were in fields he wanted to work on anyway. He was a bit surprised the Architect hadn't tossed his final poison in there, which was a pleasant surprise. Jake also felt oddly happy that Temlat wasn't mentioned in this batch, showing his Path hadn't been one of the things the Architect evaluated as mediocre or bad. He did have one thing to add, though.

"You use the word relative a lot," Jake pointed out.

"Making absolute comparisons during this evaluation strikes me as meaningless," the Architect answered, shaking her head. "Your definition of mediocre may be the peak of others or below average for a third person. When Creations are also put into the context of their crafting journey and the crafters themselves, it complicates matters further, so the only thing I will compare your Creations to are those of your own making."

"Can't you throw me a small hint? Like, how did I do compared to, let's say..." Jake thought for a bit about the best crafter he knew as a face instantly appeared. "Arnold, that weird guy. He must have done well in here if he has done this Challenge Dungeon already."

"No hints," the Architect shook her head. "Now, did you have any questions or can we move on?"

"No questions... at least not any I think you will answer," Jake muttered.

Pretty quickly, they had gone over half of his submitted Creations, just leaving the Blackheart Poison, Unseen Arcane Hunter skill upgrade, weird Arcane Marble, Grimoire, and, of course, Jake's first student.

"Then let us proceed," the Architect said. "With the remaining five, how do you wish to approach the evaluation?"

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"Just go from worst to best," Jake said.

"When you say worst from best, do remember this is only in comparison to everything else you have submitted, so if a particular Creation is too close in nature to another, its evaluation will naturally fall due to a lack of uniqueness and repeated concepts."

"I am fully aware of that," Jake nodded.

"Alright then. The fifth best submission we will look at is the Malefic Blackheart Poison. In terms of absolute quality, this one is without a doubt ranked as one of the best possible I would expect to see out of a C-grade. However, the evaluation is severely harmed due to the overflowing Records of the Malefic Viper that has been mixed in. Moreover, as a poison, it aligns closely with several of your other Creations, not to mention the journey you took to create it didn't require much substantial innovation but more simply procedural iteration on prior ideas. Overall, the quality of the item does make it an excellent submission and most definitely one to be proud of."

"Would it have been better if I just submitted a regular Heartrot Poison?" Jake asked, wondering if maybe submitting an item that benefitted from the Malefic Viper's Poison had been a mistake.

"No, most certainly not. If you had done that, it would have been batched in with the other mediocre submissions," the Architect shook her head.

"Alright, that's good, at least," Jake nodded, happy to have even gotten a straight answer. "I don't really have any other questions."

"The fourth best is the Unseen Arcane Hunter skill upgrade. This is once more a skill of impressive quality, and the upgrade was most certainly substantial and integrated many new concepts, but its evaluation is harmed primarily due to two things. First of all the fact it relied on many prior insights and ideas. Simply upgrading the skill a few rarities wasn't too difficult, and while what you accomplished was a feat, it was primarily forced through due to your Bloodline and, quite frankly, ridiculously high Perception stat for someone who is barely mid-tier C-grade," the Architect said, Jake only taking the last part about Perception as praise. "The second reason the evaluation is harmed is in part due to one of your later submissions already showcasing concepts of your Bloodline and arcane affinity."

The arcane marble, Jake quickly concluded. It was actually a bit surprising it hadn't been mentioned yet, but Jake only saw that as a good thing. At least, he really hoped it was a good thing. The source of this content is **novel•fire•met**

"Any questions?" the Architect asked.

"Hm, not really," Jake shrugged. He didn't have much he needed to ask and partly considered that asking could be harmful. If she threw him off with her evaluation, making Jake doubt something he had done, it could hurt upgrades in the future. Her clear attempt to not mention anything negative about the details of the Creations themselves also wasn't lost on him. Clearly, she was careful about her words.

"As you will," Nevermore nodded as she had a slight pause. "With these last three submissions, it is a bit difficult to separate them in terms of the value of their

evaluations, so I would deem it best to not do so. The Grimoire, Perennial Arcane Marble, and the Path of your student Temlat are all unique and stand tall on their own. So, rather than simply saying which one is best, I will explain the good and bad points of them all. Is that acceptable to you? If you so wish, I could also simply rank them all one by one."

Jake initially felt a bit disappointed at not just being given a top-three list but ultimately just nodded as he realized how little it mattered. He also got the feeling Nevermore was partly doing it like this for his sake, as he kind of felt scummy having to think about Temlat's life and Path just being reduced to a placement on a list.

"Just do it your way."

"Then let us start with the most... peculiar of all your submissions: the Perennial Arcane Marble. This item exists solely due to your Bloodline and, despite not having any actual use cases, is by far the most valuable item of the bunch from any outside perspective simply due to its research value. However, since this Creation exemplifies your Bloodline and the many concepts related to it in such an overwhelming fashion, the impact it has on all your other Creations that utilize your Bloodline or arcane affinity is not to be underestimated. I can say that if you had only submitted a single Creation within this Challenge Dungeon, this one would have been the best by far out of them all," the Architect explained as a projection of the small sphere hung in the air. "Of course, if you had only submitted one Creation, your overall evaluation would have been horrible."

Jake looked at the projection of the marble as he got an idea. Hiding a mischievous smile, he asked: "So, I have been wondering... can you give me a more in-depth review of the item? Some details regarding the energy sealed within the stable arcane marble specifically, and the true meanings of that Perennial tag in front of the Arcane Marble name?"

The Architect looked at him before sighing. "Truthfully, I would be more than happy to do that, but I am unable to. This isn't simply me withholding information but a system-imposed rule specifically regarding Bloodlines and Transcendent skills. Nothing can be shared with anyone, not even the ones who submit it. Sometimes, I can still bend the rules a bit and offer some information, but this Creation of yours *only* consists of elements related to your Bloodline, so I can't give you anything more than you can already glean."

"Fair enough," Jake conceded. He did know the system could be a real stickler when it came to stuff like that. It was as bad as Villy when it came to wanting Jake to just find out shit about his Bloodline himself.

"Moving on, let us discuss the Grimoire you submitted. In truth, there is not much to say here. It is a high-tier Grimoire related to your very unique Path and mentality toward your Patron. There are many new concepts in there for sure, and even if your mentality

is once more heavily based on your Bloodline, as it is only a side effect, the penalty in uniqueness is minimal,” the Architect explained. “Ah, and on a personal note, I would heavily advise you against publicizing any of your Grimoires. The response will more likely than not be negative and get you into more problems than I believe you desire.”

“So, keep it between me and closely trusted people who won’t throw a fit that I got a bit of heretic in me, got it,” Jake said with a nod. “But, I do actually have a question related to this one, especially the uniqueness part. Something that is pretty hard to ask anyone about and that I feel the Viper can’t really offer a proper perspective of either... is this Path really that unique? From what I have seen from others, there are many who treat their Patrons more as friends or supporters rather than, well, Patrons. Shit, I have a few friends, just to mention a few, and even if they are only like that due to being influenced by me, are you really telling me no one with some kind of presence resistance like me has ever been around before?”

This was legitimately one of the things Jake had wondered for a long time. Jake understood he was considered a heretic because he viewed Villy as a friend and not just a Patron, while he got the Chosen part by still being, well, his Chosen. Also, he was fully aware that his questions had been more of a ramble than a concise one.

“I may be overstepping here... but alright,” Nevermore began. “The uniqueness of your Path does not merely come from how you want to treat your Patron, but from how you are capable of treating the Malefic Viper. As you have said, others out there also treat their Patrons more as friends or allies, especially when the one blessed is an S-tier or even a demigod, but you do not merely treat the Malefic Viper as a friend but as an equal.”

“Still can’t see the difference,” Jake muttered.

Nevermore seemed to think for a bit before he elaborated. “Usually, the relationship between a Patron and someone blessed is a one-way street of giving. The god gives to the one who is blessed, with all returns coming in the shape of Records and other such intangible things. At the same time, the god can take back any privileges if they so desire, holding all the power.”

Jake nodded. He already knew all that from talks with Villy. However, that didn’t explain how he got the Heretic Chosen profession in the first place. It was true one of the effects was that the Viper couldn’t take back the Blessing even if he wanted unless one of them died, but again, that was an effect from the evolution and not something Jake had caused beforehand.

“Your relationship with the Malefic Viper is far more two-way. As I said, I may be overstepping, but... he benefits more from you than a usual Chosen. As do you benefit more than usual. The ultimate cause of this is not your mutual willingness to be friends or partners or whatever else you desire... it is your ability to make it so. No matter how much a god and a mortal wish to be equal, they are fundamentally not. The mortal will

always be positioned lower in the hierarchy, and they simply do not have the ability to leverage their Blessing to take anything from the one who blessed them.”

“But I can,” Jake mumbled. He remembered taking that drop of blood from the Viper right after the Tutorial... had that been the trigger?

“Precisely. You are capable of taking despite being blessed. But do you know what the name of those who are not blessed yet still manage to obtain Records of a god, without said god’s permission, is usually called?”

“A heretic?”

Nevermore simply nodded as she finished her explanation. “The reason why you can take from the Viper without permission while remaining blessed is because you are capable of being his equal. Your Truesoul is capable of standing up to his. The fact that you both accept this dynamic is ultimately what gave birth to a Heretic-Chosen. If you had tried something similar with a god who had other sentiments and found your attitude unacceptable, I doubt we would be speaking right now.”

“I see,” Jake muttered. “Just to clarify, you didn’t mean that I have a Truesoul rivaling that of a Primordial, right?”

“No, yours is naturally far weaker as it is merely that of a C-grade mortal,” Nevermore shook her head. “However, when it comes to the pure quality of it, things get complicated, as every Truesoul of someone who has a Bloodline is effectively mutated. If you want my personal opinion, then no, your Truesoul is far from being able to rival any gods... not that I think you will ever acknowledge someone else as fundamentally superior to yourself.”

“Of course, I recognize that,” Jake scoffed. “Any god is, of course, stronger than me right now.”

“I said superior to you.”

“Superior in power, sure... for now. I’ll catch up eventually.”

Nevermore looked at Jake with a smile for a few seconds before Jake just scratched the back of his head. “Alright, point proven, but in my defense, I’m the one that’s right here... can we move on now?”

“Very well,” the Architect nodded, clearly finding the situation amusing. However, quickly, her face turned a bit more solemn as she spoke. “Now let us discuss the final Creation... the Path of Temlat, your first student.”

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Chapter 829: Nevermore: Evaluation (2)

Jake could admit he had not been looking forward to this part. He had already talked a bit with Nevermore about his feelings of inadequacy as a teacher, but they had never really discussed the outcome of Jake's teachings. Never talked about how "good" of a submission Temlat's Path was... and, by extension, how well what Jake had taught was viewed. Assuming one could even call what Jake had done teaching.

"We have discussed your feelings on the matter before, but be aware that your thoughts on everything are not in any way deciding factors in the evaluation of the submission. The Path of your student is judged instead from my point of view, and his growth in Records, power, and the overall outcome of your teachings are what truly matters."

"Which is why I'm surprised it's rated so highly, considering the outcome was his death."

The Architect sighed. "The outcome of nearly all Paths is death, and it has to be compared to what else your student would have accomplished. Temlat, the young man you picked up, would have died at level 199, never succeeding in reaching C-grade. His death would occur in an attempt to attack a major conference approximately nineteen years from the time you picked him up as a student, killed by a casual attack from a C-grade security captain."

Jake remained silent, which the Architect took as a prompt to continue.

"He would never have accomplished any of his goals, and his Path would end there. Instead, you changed his Path entirely the day you took him in. You helped him gain power far above anything he should have ever been capable of reaching. You nurtured his curse to the level it could evolve into a Sin Curse, you made him refine his mindset through your resistance training, and last but not least, you made him realize the true power he held and the limit of his potential. The true power of curses. At the same time, you gave him confidence in pursuing what he would have otherwise thought impossible, and you even opened his eyes to the concept of plagues."

"Temlat did nearly all of those things by himself," Jake protested. "I was just around, and he put in all the work. He taught himself."

"It is rare that people argue their evaluations should be worse," the Architect sighed. "Alas, that isn't how this works. Whether you want to accept it or not, you changed the outcome of Temlat's Path from being someone who died a meaningless death to someone who evolved into an incredibly rare variant creature wielding the power of cursed plagues. Perhaps you can argue this was all him and his own innate talents,

which allowed him to reach the power he did. However, you cannot argue your influence in the most outstanding part of your student's evolution."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, unsure what she meant.

"Cursed Plague Remnants are not beings who retain sentience. Not truly. They are nothing more than a jumbled mixture of thoughts and desires focused on whatever the curse is about. There is no ego. What Temlat became wasn't that. Through your training and the influence you had on him, Temlat managed to remain himself not only through the evolution process, but until the very end. He was allowed to determine how his own Path ended after he accomplished all he had set out to do. In other words, you allowed him to choose not only the direction of his Path but even its endpoint. Something that is incredibly rare in its own right."

Jake simply listened, frowning a bit.

"What he became and what his goals were also doesn't matter from a moral perspective in this evaluation. With that in mind, the fact you managed to uplift someone from being incapable of ever killing a C-grade to being able to wipe out a planet filled with them within a week is a great achievement. All accomplished in such a short time span. And, once more, it has to be reiterated how impressive it is that he remained himself even after he was done with his slaughter and could resist his very nature and choose to die.

"In conclusion... you uplifted Temlat from a nobody to what he became, allowed him to redefine his Path to one far more ambitious, and then stood alongside him as he carried out all his goals. Once completed, he then chose his own ending, his Records now living on through you. That is a fate I think you fail to understand how many would envy."

The room went silent for a few moments as Jake still just stood there, thinking. After five or so seconds, he finally sighed. "I still can't help but feel like shit for how things went down."

"And that is fine. Just don't feel sorry for your student, for he never had a single regret and only held gratitude toward you for allowing him to accomplish his goals. More than anything, do not feel pity, for nothing would be more disrespectful toward someone who decided their Path and fate."

By now, the topic had been beaten like a dead horse, but Jake still couldn't help how he felt towards things. He didn't feel pity, though. It was more that he felt annoyed at himself for not having done things properly, and despite Nevermore's words, he remained adamant that he wouldn't take on any students in the near future, if ever. And if he did, he would make it very clear he was at most a sparring partner for questions and in no way a real teacher.

"I get the feeling you don't have more questions regarding your final Creation," the Architect said after Jake didn't say anything for a good while.

“Right,” Jake nodded. “I guess, if nothing else, I can be happy that despite how much I believe I suck as a teacher, at least others value what Temlat managed to accomplish highly.”

The Architect didn’t comment on what Jake said but simply waved her hand as ten projections appeared floating in the air, depicting all of his Creations.

“Then let us wrap this up with the final overall conclusion of this evaluation,” she said. “This is also the only part where I will actually compare you to others, as the Grand Achievements given are ultimately relative, comparing your performance to that of others.”

“Moment of truth,” Jake smiled as the Architect continued.

“While some of your Creations were classified as mediocre in our earlier discussion, they are certainly not seen as such from a more general viewpoint. If compared to the average Nevermore Attendee who has completed the House of the Architect, they would all have been considered high-tier Creations that even the average genius would be proud of. Your Path as the Heretic-Chosen of the Malefic Viper and a hunter is not only unique but both your class and profession are high-tier variants, which naturally lends itself to better final products. What’s more, the fact you have crafted a mythical item before, giving you the Myth Originator title has been a tremendous boost to all your Creations,” the Architect began, with Jake feeling pretty good about all the praise and what it would mean for the Grand Achievement. Also, Jake had totally forgotten he even had that Myth Originator title from back when he made Eternal Hunger. It was one of those passive things he never thought about.

“But...”

There is always a damn but...

“Your entire Path, and thus Creations, in turn, all have the same root: Your Bloodline. While it is normal for those with Bloodlines to have said Bloodline color most of what they do, for you, the case is almost too extreme. Everything you touch carries traces of your Bloodline... which almost makes this evaluation one of your Bloodline and your ability to utilize it rather than merely your skills as a Creator. Luckily for you, your Bloodline is... well, I don’t think I have to evaluate that, now do I?” the Architect finished as she looked at Jake. “Any questions?”

“Eh... just... regarding that last part, how would you rate my Bloodline compared to others?” Jake asked a bit cheekily.

“I would not rate it,” the Architect answered in a deadpan tone.

“But if you had to.”

"I don't."

"Hypothetically speaking--"

"We are not dealing with hypotheticals here. Now, do you have any other questions?" the Architect shut down Jake hard.

Jake felt a bit defeated as he just sighed. "No, not really."

"Very well, then," the Architect nodded. "Then this officially concludes the evaluation."

Congratulations! You have completed the House of the Architect Challenge Dungeon!

"Congratulations on your exemplary performance indeed," the Architect added to the system message as a Grand Achievement popped up in front of Jake. He quickly skimmed it, hoping to see what kind of percentage amplifier he had hit.

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

Grand Achievement earned: Successfully completed House of the Architect, showing both great skill and diversity in your Path. Through a mixture of innovation and improvement of your existing skills, you have created ten worthwhile Creations, with a few outstanding among them. In the realm of uniqueness, few can match you, and even in a competition of pure crafting ability, with your Bloodline guiding your hand, you have difficulty meeting an equal. Be proud of your creative mind. 86.109 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 20% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

"20%," Jake muttered to himself as a smile crept onto his lips. 20% was good. Even if he had gotten two times 25%, it wasn't lost on him that getting such a score was far from average. He was still curious, though.

"To be clear, I am not complaining, but what would it have required for me to get a 25% amplifier?" Jake asked, genuinely not expecting an answer.

"For each of your Creations to have been considered top-tier according to the standards you already set," the Architect surprisingly answered. "That is to say, ten Creations on-par with at least the legendary skill upgrade, Grimoire, your student, or the Arcane Marble while naturally maintaining the same level of diversity and uniqueness with all ten of them."

"That sounds borderline impossible," Jake muttered. He couldn't even get on anything else he could have created...

“Accomplishing what is borderline impossible and perhaps even a bit across that line is exactly what the 25% achievement is for,” the Architect said with a smile. “You should know that, considering your prior performances. From what I hear, Minaga is still complaining.”

“I guess,” Jake shrugged, glad to hear Minaga still suffered from Jake’s labyrinth trip.

“Now, onto the item reward,” the Architect said as what looked like a coin appeared in her hand. With a fluid motion, she flicked it toward Jake. “Catch.”

Jake caught the coin and quickly looked down at it and used Identify.

[Mark of the Architect (Legendary)] – the Mark of the Architect, also known as the Bound God of Nevermore. This Mark will allow you to claim a personal domain within the World Wonder of Nevermore. This domain can be accessed on any of the city floors and will remain persistent throughout all grades. With the legendary token, you will gain access to a more exclusive domain with more privileges, customization options, and Attendants. Only you can enter your personal domain. This personal domain will last for the remainder of the ninety-third era.

Requirements: Soulbound.

“I see a trace of disappointment on your face,” Nevermore said as Jake looked at her Mark.

“Eh, sorry... it’s just that I’m not sure exactly what I will need this for,” Jake muttered. “A personal domain sounds all fine and good, but it isn’t like I spend much time in the cities anyway, and since only I can enter the domain, it isn’t like I can even use it as a secret meeting spot or anything. Also, my time in Nevermore is limited, right? I’m not sure I wanna spend it chilling in my own little space. Well, maybe outside sometimes doing a bit of alchemy in there... but the Order already got quite a few spots secured in the cities for that anyway.”

“You seem to be missing the primary benefit of this personal domain,” the Architect said, shaking her head. “This domain will exist within Nevermore. That means it will be under the influence of the time dilation inherent to the World Wonder. So, now imagine you want to grow something in your personal domain or nurture certain treasures...”

Jake fell silent for a moment as he considered her words. “So what you’re saying is that I get my own personal garden with super time dilation built-in that comes without any downsides or upkeep?”

“That is an adequately accurate assessment, yes. If that is how you wish to design it, that is.”

"Damn, in that case, it may be worth looking into," Jake said. "If I have the time. Doesn't sound like the best way to spend my limited time in C-grade when I want to compete on the Leaderboards. Say, how do I turn in this Mark and claim the domain? I just wanna at least pop by and check it out real quick."

"You turn it in right here," the Architect said with a smile. "This is the second part of your reward... the help of an architect to prepare your domain. Do note I only do this for those who get a 20% multiplier or above. Others will have to make the Attendants provided do everything or do it themselves."

"Well, sounds like I may as well get it done now, then... wait, Attendants? Do Attendants come along with this personal domain?"

"Yes, they do... it even said it in the description of the Mark you're holding. Ah, but to note, they cannot leave the domain for what I hope are obvious reasons," she said.

Jake nodded, understanding what she meant. If his guess was right, then each personal domain was pretty much just a small pseudo-dungeon within the larger mega-dungeon known as Nevermore. That likely meant many dungeon rules still applied.

"And you said you would help me design this domain?" Jake asked.

"Yes," Nevermore nodded. "According to set templates, that is. I am not going to personally customize everything, but I can take some minor input if you want some modifications."

"Exactly how will this work?" Jake asked.

"Do you wish to claim your domain now?" she asked.

"Yes?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"Then please turn in the coin to me."

"But you just gave it to me..."

Nevermore just looked back at him for a few seconds before Jake sighed and flicked the coin back to her. It didn't even reach her but just disappeared mid-air.

"Personal domain claimed," she smiled and snapped her fingers. Instantly, the entire chamber around Jake disappeared, replaced with an entirely white void. Then, in the center of the void between Jake and the Architect, a very detailed three-dimensional projection of what looked like a large floating landmass appeared.

"This is a projection of a domain template that I assume would interest you. It includes a star and is primarily nature affinity, thus a good environment for plants to grow within."

Underground, there are vast cave systems, with some caves having their own more unique affinities for you to grow other alchemical ingredients such as mushrooms and whatnot. By the way, I choose this template assuming you wish to use this domain to grow herbs,” Nevermore explained.

Jake looked at it as he got an idea.

“How long do we have for this customization part?”

“I will offer two hours at most.”

“Then, can you bring me there in person? Or make a replica?” Jake asked.

Nevermore raised an eyebrow but quickly did as he asked.

The environment shifted once more as Jake suddenly felt the world around him expand. From a white room, he appeared standing on soft grass, surrounded by greenery. Instinctively, he released a Pulse of Perception that revealed the entire floating island of sorts they were standing on, including the underground environment. It was about a hundred kilometers across with a depth of forty or so.

“Thank you,” Jake said. “Do I need to bring my own herbs and such to plant?”

“A certain amount will be provided based on your performance in the House of the Architect. It’s part of the reward,” Nevermore answered.

“Got it,” Jake smiled. “Be right back.”

Jake instantly used One Step to teleport toward one of the holes leading underground. Going as fast as he could, Jake scouted the underground tunnels, went up above ground again, and went around as much of the island as he could while scanning everything. About forty-five minutes later, he was back at Nevermore.

“Aight, got some ideas.” Follow current novels on **novel•fire•net**

What Jake had done was take a quick trip with Sense of the Malefic Viper in full effect. He rarely used that part of the skill, but a part of it included the ability to sense environments that were good for cultivating herbs and whatnot. With this trip, Jake had a good idea of where he wanted to plant stuff and, what’s more, the places he wanted Nevermore to modify a bit to make it better.

The next hour was spent with Jake and Nevermore quickly fixing all the things Jake wanted fixed. When it came to herbs, Jake had Nevermore just throw in all the hemotoxic and necrotic toxins she could in the underground. This did mean Jake also now had a lake of blood deep underground in this personal space, so it was probably good it wasn’t a place visitors could go to.

Above ground, it was primarily just flowers and then a whole lot of trees and herbs Jake had no idea about. When it came to any excess “reward” energy or whatever he had been given, Jake just allowed Nevermore to give him whatever she thought was good.

Finally, Jake went to the Attendants in this special little realm. There were ten of them total, and they all simply copied Jake’s level. They also apparently had some weird dungeon-specific skills to take care of the place, and Jake only had to give them basic commands to ensure the herbs grew well.

With everything done, Jake stood proudly alongside Nevermore. “Thanks for the help.”

“Just in time, too,” Nevermore said. “I hope what is cultivated here can bring you benefits in the future. I say this knowing full well you will likely not step foot in this space before you arrive at Nevermore in B-grade... but by the time you do, this will likely be a treasure trove. Ah, and should you die, I shall happily reclaim everything.”

“I wouldn’t count on it... me dying and stepping foot in here for a good while both,” Jake grinned. “Once again, thanks for everything. This Challenge Dungeon is definitely in the top five of the ones I’ve done so far.”

“And with that little quip, I believe it is time to say our goodbyes. I look forward to seeing how your last years in here will play out and the ultimate outcome on the Leaderboards,” Nevermore said as she raised her hand to teleport him out.

Jake was ready to be teleported as one final question popped into his head. “One final thing! There was a meta-achievement for getting an overall 100% amplifier from all the Challenge Dungeons, right?”

Nevermore stopped her hand for a fraction of a second as she just smiled. “I guess you’ll have to find out after the Endless Journey.”

“So that’s a ye-“

He was teleported out and appeared in front of the Challenge Dungeon before he could finish his sentence, but he definitely took her non-answer as a confirmation.

Finding himself at the entrance to the five Challenge Dungeons once more, Jake quickly went a bit away to avoid being surrounded by people. He got a few weird looks as he had been teleported out mid-sentence and had let out a sound, but he quickly slipped away with everyone too busy doing their own stuff. Honestly, Jake was kind of lucky his usual get-up was a cloak and mask, as that wasn’t exactly a unique outfit.

Standing away from the crowd, Jake took quick status as he checked his Nevermore Points.

Nevermore Points: 1,141,916

He had built up quite a lot of points over all these Challenge Dungeons, and that was without even factoring in the ever-increasing percentage amplifiers that would come in at the end of Nevermore. Looking toward the many entrances to the Challenge Dungeons, Jake considered if he should wait a bit and see if he could contact his party members. However, after briefly checking the timer-painting the Sword Saint had given him when they split up and seeing there were over two and a half years left to do dungeons, Jake assumed chances were low anyone would be out and done by now.

With that in mind, there really was no need to delay as Jake quickly went straight from one Challenge Dungeon into another as it was time to finally take on the final one: the Neverending Journey.

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Chapter 830: Nevermore: An Ingenious Mind

Nevermore shook her head after she threw the young human out of the Challenge Dungeon. The instance of the dungeon he had been occupying was already dematerializing and getting recycled, with the only thing remaining the ten Creations he had submitted and his new personal domain.

Of the Creations, the arcane marble was by far the most interesting and would be a great item to absorb for the World Wonder. She also had plenty of thoughts on the one who had submitted it and his... peculiar nature. Nevermore also couldn't help but find it funny he had asked about the 25% bonus as if it was something anyone ever expected to get. Though, it was hard to blame him, considering he had already obtained it two times.

Perhaps if he had spent longer, he could have reached the 25% he strived for, but she doubted it. If he had wanted to reach that evaluation, he would have had to thoroughly expand the scope of what he worked with. As an alchemist, he already had many different advantages, but, as odd as it sounds, his Bloodline became his ultimate limiter.

Alas, he had been one of the better ones for sure. Nevermore wouldn't say she was disappointed at the lack of interest from most young geniuses when it came to crafting. It was a bit discouraging, though. Creation was, after all, one of the most important abilities one could ever have for spreading their Records.

This is also why she truly appreciated when someone showed up who was a true creator. Someone who didn't merely achieve a high score through using their Bloodlines or Transcendents. That Chosen of Yip of Yore had already left a bad taste in her mouth

with the way he had achieved his albeit impressive score. This chapter is updated by
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Luckily, there had been one person also related to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper who had truly impressed her. A man without a Bloodline, Transcendant skill, or anything like that. Just a creative mind.

He didn't even walk around with a title like the Chosen of the Malefic Viper but had simply gone by Arnold. He was a man who didn't radiate the slightest arrogance or even confidence. He was a blank slate that seemed entirely unbothered with anything that didn't interest him.

His actions were cold. The worlds were nothing more than a means of production to him, and despite the fact that the resources on the planets weren't meant to be used for crafting, he had done so anyway. The student of the Viper's Chosen had wiped out one of the worlds... Arnold had transformed all seven of them as he drained them all of their resources. Except for two, that is, which he deemed unsuitable for harvest. For those, he instead managed to tap into the energy powering the portals and absorbed all the energy that way, turning them into generators.

The Creations submitted had all been sublime and incredibly diverse. The man was not limited by affinities, nor did he limit his use of materials. The void-based Creations he submitted were all sights to behold, and the sheer scale of all his actions was beyond impressive. To turn the world that the Malefic Viper's Chosen's student had come from into what was effectively one big industrial planet within only two years didn't even seem realistic for a C-grade, yet he had done it.

He achieved this through self-replicating constructs. He would make one construct that could then make others, which snowballed endlessly. Usually, this would not be possible, but their original Creator made it so by constantly remaining connected to them. He had a way of feeding them energy through a void-based connection, she didn't doubt Oras had a hand in and allowed himself to effectively function as a central hub.

In many ways, he reminded Nevermore of the automata race. His mentality, approach to things, general lack of emotions, and analytical problem-solving technique... except he put them to shame with how extreme he took the concept. Moreover, he took full advantage of the fact he still remained a human and didn't have the same limitations automata would have – primarily their severely lacking evolution and biological self-adaptation options.

Nevermore had told Jake that there were others out there who could also stand before a god unaffected without influence from his Bloodline. This man was one of them. It wasn't because he was resistant to the difference between grades, nor that he didn't recognize the gap. It was simply that he didn't actively consider it a relevant factor to his interactions most of the time. To try and suppress him with a superior aura was like trying to shine a bright light to blind a man without eyes. He simply didn't appear to have

a brain that computed the difference like everyone else... which was probably also the reason he could carry the Legacy of Oras without breaking his mind:

It was already broken from the beginning.

Yet the Bound God saw nothing wrong with this. To be slightly broken was to be different, and in trade for parts of Arnold not functioning as one would expect, he gained a brilliant mind in turn.

Looking at the two of the most impressive Creations he had submitted, she felt in awe at both. One of them was one of the odd devices he had used to drain the energy of the portals. It was filled with odd void magic and had been capable of exploiting the endless energy provided by the system to keep the portals active. It was an item split in two, looking like two rings with a thin black thread between them, where one part entered the portal, and the other remained on the other side. At least it looked like that.

In fact, the two items were constantly switching positions countless times every single second. Every time something entered or exited the portal, a very faint wisp of energy would be released, an amount so little that it barely registered. However, there was still some energy. These two odd void rings would absorb this energy at every position swap. As they switched what had to be easily trillions of times every single second, the energy absorbed was astronomical, with every shred of it feeding into Arnold, who merely functioned as a conduit to spread it out to his other machines. At least, he did for a good while until he made the second Creation she looked at.

The other item she looked at was something called a control matrix. A device made to keep track of and – as the name implied – control everything else he had made. It was an item he repeatedly expanded upon during the entirety of House of the Architect, slowly improving with new layers of magical scripts. Like an artificial mind of sorts, it slowly took the mental load and jobs off Arnold as time progressed, allowing him to free up his brain for other projects without slowing down any production.

They had both been legendary items and not bad legendary items either.

Arnold had been well on his way to a remarkable 20% score until the very last Creation that pushed him over the edge. With every item Arnold turned in, he had made exact replicas so he could keep using them because they would all be necessary for his final submission.

His final submission wasn't merely an item but the entire system he had created. He had thoroughly made the entire House of the Architect his own, integrated every single Attendant, and set up automatic purchase orders with the Merit Point Store. He effectively exploited that putting together raw materials from the store would nearly always result in a product one could sell back for more Merit Points than the cost. With the entire crafting process turning entirely automated, he made what could only

described as an ever-growing machine that would continually expand and never run out of resources.

Everything he had done had been building toward a whole that, when it came together, allowed Arnold to produce whatever he wanted completely autonomously. He had created something that would persist even after he had left the Challenge Dungeon and submitted that as his final Creation. It wasn't merely an item, but if Nevermore had to classify it as one, and considering all the parts in play, it would no doubt have been considered mythical rarity.

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The sheer level of forethought, planning, and ingenuity had been inspiring. Especially the fact he had taken everything the House of the Architect provided into consideration and integrated it into his grand plan proved he hadn't simply pre-planned the entire thing before entering the Challenge Dungeon. Proof that he had simply relied on an incredibly high level of base skill to make everything happen, actively exploiting the dungeon in every way he could, all without relying on any abilities considered outside the system.

He was a legitimate genius in the realm of creation, no doubt about it.

As for how good he was in other areas... well, he was very lopsided in his skills. He could go far, but he wasn't truly a contender for the Nevermore Leaderboards, especially not with people like the Chosen of the Malefic Viper in the mix, who had a far more general set of abilities and a high level of adaptability to his environment.

Which was bound to serve him well in the final Challenge Dungeon... something she couldn't say about Arnold's skills in there.

Vilastromoz opened his eyes just as another god in the room had a somewhat expected outburst.

"Finally! God damn, I was getting tired of that horrible Challenge Dungeon. It sucked all the fun out of this otherwise wonderful viewing party!" Minaga complained loudly, waking many of the gods in the room from their temporary slumber.

Alright, perhaps slumber was not the right word for what had just been them focusing their attention elsewhere than the avatar in the room. The majority of them were only there to observe what the influential gods said, after all, so they didn't bother to focus on it most of the time.

For the last two years or so, the Holy Mother, Blightfather, Valdemar, Malefic Viper, and Nature's Attendant had all simply observed their own private livestreams of those they were interested in, and any communication had happened through telepathy. In truth, the only person the gods openly discussed was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Jake.

Not to say the gods weren't interested in how others did. As they were in Nevermore anyway with an avatar, they had little excuse to not peek at how their C-grade prospects were doing. Valdemar and the Blightfather did also have a brief exchange when the young Ghost King known as Azal managed to gain Valdemar's recognition within the Colosseum of Mortals.

Besides these small comments and exchanges here and there, when a member from one of the Primordial's factions did something impressive, there had mostly been silence. That is until Minaga suddenly had his outburst, marking that the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was out of the Challenge Dungeon and available to be observed.

"You know why the rules are in place to restrict any viewing," the Wyrmgod sighed.

"Yeah, because Nevermore is stingy as hell and anti-fun," Minaga grumbled, clearly not a fan of the Bound God of the World Wonder.

From what the Viper knew, this dislike stemmed from the Bound God being what could best be described as a balancing voice in the World Wonder. She was the one who imposed restrictions on Minaga here and there, and as she spoke for the system, she had quickly become the boogieman in the Unique Lifeform's eyes.

"Are you still angry she won't give out any details about the Creations submitted?" Vilastromoz asked. "The information she can give, I mean."

"Damn straight I am," Minaga nodded. "Bending the rules of the system is just what you're supposed to do, so why is she being such a stickler with things like that? In my opinion, the right to privacy is a scam and not something anyone needs. Heck, look at me. I've never been alone for a single conscious moment in my entire life, and I turned out just fine!"

"Sure, sure," the Viper just shook his head. "Now, what is this Endless Journey Challenge Dungeon? The first time I remember seeing this one. Minaga's Labyrinth was too, but at least that one was easy to see through."

"It is new indeed," the Wyrmgod said. "It replaced the Adventure Time Challenge Dungeon. Too many issues arose from having to escort others around for extended periods, and it proved too detrimental for too many Paths, especially the non-humanoid ones. Even when we added a beast to be escorted alongside the humanoid. So it was replaced with this one. Similar concept, though with some more complicated interactions. But overall less escorting and more-"

"Mailman," Minaga chimed in, interrupting.

"Courier," the Wyrmgod corrected.

"I see," the Viper slowly nodded as he smiled. He got a pretty good feeling about how Jake would do in that one...

"For the record, I already placed a bet on Jake's performance in this one while he was doing my labyrinth floors," Minaga said.

"Who did you even bet with?" the Malefic Viper questioned. No one else had arrived at that point, and the Viper hadn't made that bet, while the Wyrmgod tended to avoid making bets with Minaga, considering the Unique Lifeform tended to worm his way out if he lost.

"This friend of mine called Minaga. Great guy. You should meet him someday and definitely bet with him," the Unique Lifeform said shamelessly. "Of course, I can't be responsible if he doesn't pay up. In fact, I'm not even sure he's gonna stay true to our bet."

The Viper didn't even bother responding as he just looked at the Wyrmgod, ignoring Minaga. "Is this Challenge Dungeon fully spectator-friendly?"

His fellow Primordial looked at him and smiled. "Naturally... so enjoy the show."

Jake headed straight back to the Challenge Dungeon entrances, where he promptly laid his hands on the final one before entering. While he could have sat down and chilled a bit, maybe even taken a slight break to craft some poisons before starting it, he decided against it. Considering its name was Endless Journey, he would be surprised if he didn't at least get the chance to find some time for himself at some point if he really needed to craft anything.

After his vision went dark for a moment, Jake felt solid ground beneath his feet once more. Opening his eyes and feeling his surroundings with Sphere, Jake instantly got an idea as to where he was.

He was currently standing in front of what looked like a checkpoint leading into a quite frankly massive city. A city that looked quite a bit different from what Jake had expected.

There wasn't any wall, but instead, just a tall metal fence surrounding it. The buildings he could see looked... modern at least by the usual standards of medieval cities. If Jake had to place the city in a time period, he would say the nineteen twenties or maybe thirties. Modern, yet still not exactly contemporary.

As he was looking at the city primarily through a snapshot from Pulse of Perception, the expected system message appeared.

Nevermore Challenge Dungeon Entered!

You have entered the Endless Journey. A world of conflict, intrigue, powerful beings hidden in the shadows, and uncountable tasks and missions left unfinished. Your job is to maneuver this realm as you travel in an endless journey.

As a newcomer, you are trusted simply because you have no other affiliations. Trusted to take up one of the most risky yet important jobs in the realm: that of a courier.

Your task is to accept Courier Jobs as you travel the land and deliver whatever goods are provided to their predetermined destination or target individuals. However, beware that there are many who have their eyes on you and covet whatever you are transporting, not to mention those who seek to exploit your work.

Courier Jobs have varying difficulty ratings, and as you accept more and more difficult Courier Jobs, you can move on to more dangerous areas of the realm to complete jobs. In fact, as you complete jobs, your reputation will grow, making easier Courier Jobs no longer available while unlocking more and more difficult ones. Note that even if some Courier Jobs have identical difficulty ratings, the actual difficulty may vary, and every job may have unexpected twists.

Now, go forth as you maneuver the complex political climate of the realm. On your journey, watch out for those who wish to take what you are to deliver and those who wish you harm or to lead you astray. Trust is not to be given lightly, so stay forever vigilant.

Should you fail a Courier Job in any way, you will be teleported back to wherefrom you originally accepted the job. The Courier Job you accepted and failed will no longer be available. Should you die, you will return back to wherefrom you originally accepted the most recent Courier Job. The Courier Job you died in the midst of will no longer be available. You have three total lives. Failing a Courier Job without dying will not consume a life.

Good luck, and may the road be smooth.

Objective: Complete Courier Jobs.

Current objective: Accept and complete a Courier Job.

Lives Remaining: 3

Jake quickly scanned it and couldn't help but flash a wry smile. "And here I swore to myself I would never work a delivery job again after graduating uni..."

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Chapter 831: Nevermore: To Be A Package Delivery Worker

Delivery jobs were definitely one of the most vital functions of modern society. Before the system, who could even live without getting stuff delivered to their house within a day of ordering it online? It was truly an impossibility, and the hard-working delivery workers were the ones who made that a reality. Discover more novels at **novel~**

Jake had spent a while in university working as a delivery driver to make some money and let's just say he didn't particularly enjoy the job. True, there was something zen and relaxing about having a route and a set number of packages every day to deliver, being entirely on his own throughout. At least it was zen until the quotas just got more and more unrealistic to the point it began to interfere with Jake's studies, making him quit.

All of this is to say that Jake entered the Neverending Journey with a clear advantage over most other Nevermore Attendees as he had experience in the field. Surely, working as a package delivery driver for less than a year over a century ago would have led to translateable skills in a Challenge Dungeon within a World Wonder, right?

Jake's thoughts on the description of the Challenge Dungeon were also pretty simple. The entire thing seemed straightforward from an initial assessment, but he got the feeling it wasn't as so. Why did the Wyrmgod feel the need to warn so many times about people trying to take advantage of him? Especially the note about trusting no one set a kind of ominous tone of what was to come. One thing's for sure: this wasn't just going to be about going fast from A to B. Definitely still a part of it, but far from everything.

Still standing outside of the city, watching the crowd enter, he tried to get a better feeling for the people he would be dealing with. A few quick uses of Identify showed that the guards at the checkpoint were all around high to peak D-grade, with a single C-grade captain of sorts sitting inside of the guard building, reading something.

Seeing this, and considering he was meant to be a Courier, Jake didn't sneak in but got in the queue to enter. He even went as far as to remove his mask, pull down his hood, and lowered his level to just over 200 using Shroud of the Primordial. At this early juncture, he saw no need to attract unnecessary attention.

After about ten minutes of queuing, it was Jake's turn. He went up to the small booth with a bored-looking elven guard sitting on a stool within. "Name, level, and occupation."

"Jake, level 212, no formal work, but looking to become a Courier."

The guard looked up and quickly gave Jake a scan. "New around these parts? Where do you hail from?"

"Never been in this area before, no," Jake answered, not answering the last part on purpose.

Noticing this, the guard narrowed his eyes. "I asked you where you're from?"

"Nowhere," Jake answered kind of truthfully. "I'm a hunter. I just went wherever I wanted and always traveled before this."

"Hmph," the man let out a sound as he shook his head. Using some device that looked a bit like a typewriter, he wrote a few things before printing out a small credit card-looking thing and handing it to Jake.

"Here, hold onto that. It's an identification card. If you are looking for Courier Jobs, check out the local Guild Hall," he said after handing the card over. "Oh yeah, and don't cause any trouble."

"Thank you. I'll be on my best behavior," Jake smiled and nodded as he headed into the city. Checking out the small card on the way, he quickly read what was on it. It was as basic as could be; just saying he was an early-tier level 212 C-grade, had set occupation as blank, and name as Jake. Besides that, there was a small magical seal down in the corner, probably functioning the same as a pre-system chip or watermark.

He had arrived during the day, and the city was positively buzzing. The streets were filled, and Jake guessed this place alone housed a few hundred thousand. Race-wise, he saw a lot of humans, but there were also plenty of other enlightened races. He even saw his fair share of beasts both in and out of humanoid form. Among them, the highest leveled one he saw was level 234, so still a bit low, but a good start considering he was currently in the easiest part of the Challenge Dungeon.

Walking down the well-paved streets with actual streetlights lining it, Jake didn't at all feel like he was in a dungeon. The people there also weren't merely window-dressing but acted entirely normal, so that was a good thing.

With his Pulse, he quickly managed to locate the Guild that the guard had mentioned. It was a massive building toward the center of the city, about six stories tall. It was also filled with people, with dozens exiting and entering every minute – some from the doors and some flying off the roof.

On that note, this city had sky-lanes. Marked areas in the air for people to fly, much akin to usual roads, just in the third dimension. It wasn't something Jake hadn't seen before, but in this city, it seemed especially well-managed, with colored beams of light directing people.

Entering the guild building, Jake quickly took in the atmosphere. It reminded him a bit of an old bar mixed with a bank, if that made sense. It didn't quite give off the Adventure Guild vibe, but it seemed a lot more professionally organized. You even had to take a number while waiting your turn to talk to the employees.

Something Jake promptly did as he found an empty seat to wait. As he was sitting there, he began to scan the room more, including the people in it. There were very few present not in C-grade, with most organized into parties of sizes ranging between three and ten. What did genuinely surprise him was to see what made up these teams.

It was a mix of all races, even more extreme than on the streets. These parties included beasts and other kinds of monsters, many of which weren't even in humanoid form, and no one batted an eye. Jake wasn't really the one to talk, considering he was often seen with Sylphie, but he still thought it was weird to see a large wolf sitting at a table, eating from a plate with excellent table manners.

After waiting for a good ten minutes, Jake was called to one of the tills where a dwarf with a massive beard sat. "So, how can I help you today? Oh, and can I have your identification card, please."

"Looking for work," Jake said as he also handed the dwarf the card.

The dwarf quickly took the card and scanned it under the desk before handing it back. After seeing the result, it was Jake's turn to get a scan, and he felt the use of Identify on him as the dwarf nodded. "You're new around here, aren't you? No affiliations? You give off that kind of vibe."

"Right," Jake confirmed, pretty damn sure this was scripted by the Wyrmgod. "Heard you may be looking for a Courier?"

Jake hadn't actually heard that; he just felt like this was how the conversation was going to go. This entire scenario reminded him a bit of that damn Test of Character at the moment as Jake had to play a role... but at least he could make that role entirely his own.

"Couldn't be more right," the dwarf gave him a big smile. "Got a few jobs available. Check them out."

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Just like that, three floating system messages appeared between Jake and the dwarf.

Courier Job 1 (Easy): Deliver a letter to the Merchant's Union within the city.

Courier Job 1 (Medium): Transport a small shipment of ores to the Firesteel Blacksmith within the city.

Courier Job 1 (Hard): Deliver a Darkeye Diamond to Polsted in Polsted's Jewelry Shop within the city.

Quickly skimming the three options, they all just seemed too damn easy. What's more, they were all within the city. If he had to guess, this was just some kind of tutorial job.

"Can I accept all of them at once?" Jake tried to ask.

"Hah, only one at a time; it isn't sure the client wants to keep waiting forever for you to finish other deliveries before getting to theirs," the dwarf waved him off.

"I'll take the job to deliver the Darkeye Diamond, then," Jake said, naturally choosing the "hard" option.

"Good, had trouble finding anyone to deliver that for the entire day," the dwarf said with a smile as he quickly reached below the desk and took out a token before handing it to Jake. "As you said you were looking for work, I assume you don't have a Courier Medallion yet?"

"And you would be right," Jake nodded.

"Take this, then," the dwarf said as he handed a small metal token that looked like a big coin to Jake. "Infuse some energy into it and bind it to you."

Jake looked at the Courier Medallion for a bit as he used Identify, seeing its properties.

[Courier Medallion (Inferior)] – the lowest rarity of Courier Medallion for a novice in the field. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

Seeing no reason not to do as asked – and feeling pretty sure getting this Medallion was mandatory anyway - Jake infused some energy into the item, making it his own. As he did, the dwarf took out a piece of paper that turned into energy and flew into the token.

Courier Job accepted.

"Right, everything should be in the Medallion now," the dwarf said with a courteous smile. "Just two seconds while I go grab the diamond."

Jake nodded as the dwarf left to a back room where he unlocked what looked like a magical safe. He did some magic stuff as a small jewelry box appeared in his hand, wrapped in some kind of cloth with runes on it. Likely a protective measure.

Returning to Jake, he carried the box carefully with both hands but stopped right before he put it down on the table.

"Just to make sure, you do have a spatial storage item yourself, right? Or will you need to borrow one?" the dwarf asked.

"I got my own," Jake confirmed.

"Excellent!" the dwarf said as he put down the box. Jake instantly put it in his necklace, keeping it away from prying eyes.

"Also... before you go, just a bit of a warning," the dwarf suddenly turned serious after Jake took the item. "This diamond is quite valuable, and I heard there might be others out to get it themselves. So be careful, alright? Only give it to old Polsted personally. When the job is done, we will know, but still come back here if you need more work after."

"I'll be careful and definitely come back later," Jake said, matching the same solemn energy of the dwarf.

"You know, I am getting a good feeling about you. With some good jobs under your belt, your Courier Medallion should upgrade quickly, and I can see you becoming a real known name in the game," he said encouragingly.

"I bet you say that to every new Courier," Jake said with a wink as he turned to leave. He wasn't joking either; he was pretty sure the dwarf did indeed say that to everyone who entered this Challenge Dungeon. At least everyone who didn't somehow fuck up this early introductory part.

The dwarf just shook his head behind Jake as he walked out of the Guild. He still had the Courier Medallion in his hand and quickly infused some energy according to the faint instinctive knowledge he got when first binding it. As he did, what looked like a compass appeared on its face, pointing toward what he assumed was his destination.

With a direction set, Jake made his way over there. The city was pretty big, yes, but it wasn't that big, and with a brisk pace and maybe a few One Steps thrown in there, Jake reached the street where the jeweler was placed within minutes. Using the Medallion, he quickly confirmed which shop was this Polsted's... not that the massive sign above the entrance didn't also help.

Going toward the store, Jake saw that it looked closed. However, there was someone standing behind a desk inside, so Jake decided to knock on the door. The man behind

the desk was a young-looking guy, and when he saw Jake knock, he quickly ran over and opened the door ajar.

"Yes, how can I help you?" he asked carefully. On his way over to the door, Jake noticed quite a few curious gazes from behind, primarily from two beastfolk across the street.

"Courier here. I am meant to deliver a package to Polsted," Jake said, ignoring the onlookers.

"Ah, the diamond arrived!" the man said happily as he opened the door fully. "Please come in right away."

Jake entered the jewelry shop after the young man as they walked toward the large display case. It was filled with expensive-looking jewelry, most of it enchanted but with what Jake would consider pretty low quality enchantments. It was also all made for D-grades, with the properties all being shit. It was probably to not incentivise those doing the Challenge Dungeon to try and rob the store or something.

"Now, can I confirm the goods? I assume you have it with you," the young man said as he stood behind the counter with a big smile on his lips.

Giving him a look, Jake raised an eyebrow. "Supposed to deliver it to the owner of this shop, a guy called Polsted."

"It's fine. Polsted isn't in today; that's why we're closed," the young man smoothly explained.

"Oh, how come?" Jake asked. It wasn't like sick days were a thing after the system arrived.

"He is working hard on a project at home, and I'm honestly not sure when he will be back," the young man sighed.

"Guess I'll have to stop by his place and deliver it then," Jake shrugged.

"Polsted's gonna be pissed if you disturb him," the young man said with a slight hint of panic but quickly gathered himself. "Please, man, don't make this hard for me. The boss is gonna be up my ass if I let you go interrupt him, and even more pissed if he comes back and the Darkeye Diamond still isn't here."

"Sorry, got my orders," Jake said. "Now, where does Polsted live?"

The young man seemed to realize Jake wasn't going to give up the goods and threw a look over Jake's shoulder to someone outside. He clearly tried to do it subtly, but with Jake's Perception, how could he possibly hide anything?

"Look, how about I send someone to try and get him?" the young man asked.

Jake didn't answer right away as he sighed internally. Behind him, the two beastfolk he had seen looking curiously at him earlier entered the store, clearly both trying to be stealthy, considering the fact they both had stealth skills active.

"I think we both know that isn't going to happen," Jake sighed.

The young man's animated smile faded as he sneered. Right as he did so, one of the beastfolk appeared right behind Jake and raised a spear before holding it to Jake's throat.

"How about you're just a good little Courier and leave the damn diamond here and fuck off?" the young man said in a pretty threatening tone.

Jake identified the beastfolk with the spear holding the spear, and, honestly, the level impressed him a bit. Level 243 was pretty high compared to most others around, that was for sure.

"Well, isn't this fun," Jake commented out loud, ignoring the spear. "How about doing this instead: you tell me where to find Polsted, and I don't kill your two friends here? Alternatively, you can tell me after I kill them."

The young man looked at Jake as if he was an idiot, and, fair enough, he did look like a level 212 human who had just threatened two people over level 240. So, to make his threat look less dumb, he unleashed some of his aura from his true level.

He did so with the intent to intimidate, but it got an instant reaction from the beastskin threatening him. The spear instantly went for Jake's throat, making him react as a small layer of scales appeared and blocked the tip of the spear, the weapon utterly failing to penetrate.

"Bad move," Jake said as he turned his head and looked at the spear wielder, his eyes glowing for a second as Primal Gaze activated. The man collapsed without a sound as Jake turned back to the young man behind the counter, trying to rob him. At least he tried to as the other beastfolk tried to attack Jake full of bloodlust, also earning him a quick look with Gaze as he also fell down like a marionette with its strings cut.

"Now, where were we? Oh yeah, where's Polsted at?" Jake asked with a smile.

"You... they're dead... how..."

"Chop chop," Jake hurried him along. "Polsted. Location. Now."

"Al... alright, just please don't..." the young man stuttered before quickly gathering himself and giving Jake some actual directions.

"See, that wasn't so hard? Now clean up this place so poor old Polsted doesn't get into work with two corpses in his store. Can't be good for business, now can it?" Jake said in a casual tone as he turned and left the store.

As he left the store and headed toward Polsted's place, Jake couldn't help but think how this whole Courier thing was indeed incredibly similar to the job he had in university. Except this time around, he had a way better way to handle scammers.

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

Chapter 832: Nevermore: Odd Jobs Galore

It turned out that poor old Polsted had been held up at home by a fourth accomplice of the people trying to rob his store. Everything had been part of some big conspiracy where the young man had been a new employee who was just there to scope out the place, and after learning where the jeweler lived, they followed him home one day and held him at swordpoint. From there, they would spend the next day robbing the store, and the reason the young man had been the only one in the store was to inspect the magical seals on the display cases and eventually dismantle them.

The Darkeye Diamond hadn't even been part of the expected haul. It was pure coincidence Jake had come by that day, and the thieves had assumed they could just rob the stupid Courier along with the rest of the store. That, or Jake's insistence on seeking out Polsted had put a target on his head.

Of course, Jake knew there weren't actually any coincidences going on, but a carefully crafted scenario that tested the Courier and kind of set the stage from the get-go for how these jobs would work. Jake wouldn't be surprised if the easy option had been to just deliver a letter in a mailbox, with the medium option being something in between that and what Jake had to do.

Jake's takeaway from the first job was that he had to be careful while delivering stuff, as it was pretty damn easy to mess it up and fail the delivery. It also made a lot more sense he wouldn't lose one of the three lives if he did mess up, as it would have been so easy. In fact, Jake would guess quite a few would just have given the package to the young man who appeared to be working in the jewelry store. The only reason Jake had been suspicious was because of the very minor clues the young man had given off and the fact he remembered the dwarf calling the one he had to deliver to "old man Polsted."

Unless calling him an old man was some weird inside joke between the dwarf and Polsted, Jake had a strong feeling something shady was going on.

After being done with the job of delivering the diamond to Polsted and teaching another robber the literal definition of the phrase "if looks could kill," Jake headed back toward the Guild for another job. On the way, he also took the time to reflect a bit on the newly upgraded mythical rarity Primal Gaze. He hadn't really had a good opportunity to test it since the upgrade, and he had to admit it had gotten a lot stronger than before, especially when it came to the soul-killing part.

In truth, he hadn't thought it would actually work. He had just hoped to either do some serious damage or knock them out, but the skill turned out to do a bit more than that. True, he had used it with the intent to kill, so it wasn't like he felt bad about the outcome. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Killing someone around twenty levels below him with a single look was damn good. Before, killing any C-grade outright wasn't easy, but now it had worked effortlessly, and he got the feeling it would still have been lethal even if they had been a few levels higher. They were pretty weak for their levels, yes, but they were also enlightened and tended to have a bit stronger souls than the average monster. The source of this content is **novel•fire●net**

Then again, it wasn't like killing them without Gaze would have been hard. A single well-landed stab with Eternal Hunger on each would have gotten the job done just as well. An arrow from a few dozen kilometers away would definitely have, too. But Primal Gaze was definitely the best way to kill them for a few reasons, one more important than the other.

First of all, it was as fast as a kill could be, making it by far the most efficient. Secondly, killing someone with a look had a damn great intimidation factor, and convincing the young man to not only tell him where Polsted was but even turn himself in for his crimes to the guards had been easy as pie after seeing his two friends die from a glance each. It also helped that Jake very much implied the young man could share the same fate as his friends if he didn't go to the guards.

Third, and most importantly, with the way Primal Gaze worked, Jake would effectively pit his own soul against someone else's when using the skill. This was actually pretty good exposure training for his own soul to potentially experience a bit of growth simply due to the practice, though he wasn't sure how much it would help, especially when the targets were so weak.

Oh... and finally, one incredibly vital reason: killing with weapons was messy, and Jake was a good Courier who didn't also leave the client with an extra unnecessary clean-up fee.

As Jake was still deep in thought, he arrived back at the Guild. It had only been a few hours since he left the first time around, with the only reason it took so long because he had to deal with guards who came to Polsted's place for a statement after everything was done.

Entering, he went to get a number as the same dwarf he had talked with the first time called him over.

"Hey, new Courier, over here!" he yelled.

Jake didn't need to be told twice that he could cut the line as he hurried over. Surprisingly, nobody gave him any nasty stares. The dwarf seemed to notice Jake's surprise and explained as he arrived in front of the desk.

"People give some extra respect for Couriers; it's a dangerous job, after all, and few want to walk down that road but prefer to just do other odd jobs," the dwarf explained. "Something I am sure I don't need to tell you after that last job of yours. Things got nasty, eh?"

"Definitely did," Jake confirmed. "Say, can you tell me a bit more about this odd treatment of Couriers? I also noticed how the guards seemed weirdly... I almost wanna say hands-off with me and just told me that you guys at the Guild would handle it."

"Because they are hands-off," the dwarf said. "For someone who entered the Courier industry, you sure know little about it. Oh well, you are promising, so let me give you a quick rundown. Couriers are neutral, unaffiliated individuals who do not answer to or work for any specific faction outside of the Guild. This means you have some levels of diplomatic immunity dependent on the rank of your Medallion, and the Guild is in charge of taking care of any potential trouble you get into. Of course, there are limits, so do control yourself, but in a case like this, you acted in the interest of your client and didn't go overboard, so things are fine. Just know that if you do go too far, the Guild itself may send an enforcer... you don't want the Guild to send an enforcer."

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"I'll be careful... but I've also been wondering, what exactly is the Guild?" Jake also asked, knowing full well that if he was a native to this world, he would have just outed himself as either a complete moron who had lived under a rock his entire life. Or maybe it would have outed him as a transdimensional traveler. Well, or, you know, someone just doing a Challenge Dungeon inside of a World Wonder.

Luckily for him, the dwarf didn't at all comment on Jake's lack of any common knowledge but just answered:

"The Guild is a massive organization that operates on every single continent, has affiliates in every major city, and has managed to remain entirely neutral despite the political turmoil. Not to say there aren't internal problems, but those aren't for you to deal with. Suffice to say, the Guild has enough power to rival any faction and we are quite respected."

"This is a bit cheeky of a question, but who is the strongest in the Guild?" Jake asked for fun, wondering if he could take them.

"The Founder," the dwarf said with a sense of respect. "An absolutely legendary adventurer. Rose to power about forty thousand years ago after he managed to single-handedly beat back the dragon tribes, even slaying the the Dragon King in the process. He made the Guild after retiring and still rules it today and is one of only five known S-grades in the world."

Jake was nodding along mentally to the explanation until he got to the end. There were fucking S-grades in this world. That meant there were also plenty of A-grades and B-grades around. All of this is to say that fucking around could quickly lead to finding out if he somehow managed to piss off the wrong people. This was definitely good to know.

It also left him with one other important question.

"Any gods?"

"Gods?" the dwarf asked. "Well, some people do refer to the Founder as a godlike entity, but I am not sure if calling him a god is right despite his overwhelming power."

"I see," Jake nodded as he conducted a minor test. Purposefully, he began to let out a bit of aura from his Shroud of the Primordial. It was the part that signified his Blessing as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. The aura with divine quality slowly seeped out, but the dwarf didn't at all react as he just looked at Jake, who stood there quietly.

"So... any more questions? I also got some more clients waiting if you wanna take another job, or do you perhaps want to take a rest first?" he asked after Jake hadn't said anything for several seconds.

Jake fully retracted his aura and smiled. "Yeah, let me look at the jobs available.

His small test had naturally been regarding Blessings. He wanted to see if others could feel his Blessing, as that could potentially have allowed him to use it to mess with people at some point. However, it seemed not a single soul could detect it, making Jake believe the Wyrmgod had cut off using divine auras from being a thing. This restriction was probably for the best. It would be an absolutely massive advantage for those with Blessings as they could use the aura to intimidate practically everyone, especially in a world with no actual gods. Jake could only begin to imagine the ways one could exploit Blessings... and he wasn't even that crafty compared to others who could have no doubt found far more ways to take advantage.

"Here ya go, three more jobs available," the dwarf said as he took out three papers. Right as he did so, three system messages also popped up in front of Jake's eyes.

Courier Job 2 (Easy): Deliver five letters to their respective destinations within the city.

Courier Job 2 (Medium): Deliver the shipment of Minor Vitae Ruby to the Merchant's Union within the city.

Courier Job 2 (Hard): Go to the Firesteel Blacksmith and pick up the Governor Blade. Then, deliver the Governor Blade to the Governor's office. Both locations are within the city.

After skimming them all, still working on getting a better idea of how this entire Challenge Dungeon worked, he naturally picked the hard option again. The only new revelation here was that old jobs would disappear if he didn't pick them and that a Courier Job could be chained. That is to say, have multiple steps and not just a point A to point B delivery.

The dwarf once more infused Jake's Medallion before the newly appointed Courier got to work. The second job turned out to kind of be easier than the first one, with the only added difficulty coming from Jake having to enter the Governor's Office which was well-defended. The defenses were at least a lot better than elsewhere, with guards around level 250, and they gave off decently strong vibes for their levels. The magical formation protecting the office was even better, likely laid down by a high-tier C-grade.

This job took a bit of socializing, but not enough to put Jake off. If he had to guess, this entire mission was to hammer home the concept that Couriers had a unique political position in this world. Just flashing the Medallion was enough for the suspicion of most to fall away, and while Jake didn't get to meet the Governor directly, he was attended by a direct aide and seen immediately.

With another job done, Jake saw no reason to stop as he headed back to the Guild again and accepted a third hard job that required him to deliver items to three different people across the city. That seemed easy enough... except this one was on a timer as it was an urgent job.

Alright, it was still easy as hell, Jake not having to rush at all. This Courier Job did teach Jake that Couriers were allowed to fly freely, even within cities. So that was a nice snippet of information to get as Jake completed the rush delivery to all three clients.

Like this, the Courier Jobs continued for several days as Jake stayed within the first starting city for all of them. Every new job introduced minor new elements or twists to add to the difficulty or teach him new job concepts. One of the Courier Jobs was even to deliver a person. No, not some fucked up slavery shit, but an escort mission as someone had to enter the slums and didn't feel safe going there. Mind you, there wasn't anything in the slums that was actually dangerous. The client was just a posh lady who acted entitled throughout, with the biggest difficulty during this job coming from resisting just punching her in the face and leaving.

Besides that, it was a lot of small interesting twists. In one, he had to find the client he had to deliver the item to himself as he had gone into hiding. In another job, he had to deliver a letter without being seen by any of the neighbors of the client, but Jake's favorite one was a job where he was attacked by a dog in a yard.

That one sure brought back memories from his old delivery job days, and the same solution he used back before the system also worked wonders here. Needless to say, Jake couldn't and wouldn't hurt a dog that was just protecting its territory as it was supposed to, so he always just made dogs back down by staring them down.

Sure, Jake did know staring into the eyes of a stranger's dog was heavily advised against, but in Jake's case, it had always been a great way to make the dog go away. His Bloodline was truly versatile even back then.

By now, Jake had completed nineteen jobs already, and he was honestly beginning to feel more than a little bored despite the new elements introduced. It honestly just felt like a normal job, which even made him suspect that the initial Courier Jobs being this mind-numbing was also part of the experience somehow.

However, when he returned to job number twenty, something finally changed.

"Back again, I see," the dwarf said with a big smile. "You are definitely the most hard-working Courier I've seen in a good while! Listen, the third job this time around is a bit different from those prior... it will require you to leave the city for a while."

That's right, Jake was finally allowed to not just act as a small-time in-city delivery man, but had graduated to become a... not in-city delivery man? Jake wasn't sure there was a term for it, but damn, did it feel good to finally be let outside.

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Chapter 833: Nevermore: Special Delivery

Actual traveling.

Who would have thought that the job as a Courier would include traveling? Sure had Jake fooled after he only ran around a city for several days. Sure, it hadn't been the worst, and there was plenty of diversity thrown in there to make it entertaining.

Nevertheless, Jake was glad that phase of the Challenge Dungeon was over as he proceeded with Courier Job 20. It wasn't like he had to go far, but it did feel good to

finally be out in the open. He had traveled around a bit in the House of the Architect while in the worlds there, but he didn't go full speed most of the time as he had to actively scout out the environment and couldn't just focus on speed.

Now, speed was the only thing that mattered. Jake used One Step repeatedly as the city had long turned into just a blip on the horizon. Every single step passed around a kilometer of distance, having improved quite a lot during all his time in Nevermore. He was still quite a bit from passing a thousand miles like the name indicated it technically could, but with the sheer speed he could trigger the skill, that wasn't really a problem.

Jake had experimented a bit with actually trying to increase the distance a lot, and it was possible. His record was about a hundred and thirty kilometers – or eighty miles or so – with a single step. However, that step had taken him well over a minute to perform and had been done under perfect circumstances with nothing in between him and his target destination. This is to say that if Jake just wanted to travel quickly, smaller but faster steps were far more effective. Also a lot more efficient, as a One Step taking him a hundred and thirty kilometers consumed way more than a hundred and thirty times more stamina than those taking him only a single kilometer.

With his speed, Jake was the fastest in his Nevermore party when it came to purely traveling, though Sylphie beat him thoroughly in shorter distances. His relatively high stamina pool and constant supply of potions also meant he wouldn't really ever run out of energy as long as he didn't push himself too hard.

For his very first job outside of the city, the Challenge Dungeon had even picked something super exciting, too. Jake had been tasked with – wait for it - delivering a tax form for a local small mayor to fill out. He even had to bring it back again once it had been filled, making it twice as exciting!

Alright, yeah, the Courier Job sucked ass, and it was clear the entire intent of this was for Jake to travel a longer distance than usual. Jake wouldn't really call it long-distance travel, though, as it only took him a bit over five hours to reach the small town in question. It would probably have taken longer if any of the wildlife in the way dared get in his way, but luckily, they were all on their best behavior, as blasting his aura pretty much worked like a max repel.

Reaching the small town in question, Jake saw that there were two guards at the entrance, both barely in C-grade. They looked tired with slightly damaged armor, and observing the area, it looked like they had been struggling quite a bit with monster attacks recently.

I can almost smell it...

Entering the town by flashing his Medallion, Jake headed to the mayor's office straight away without any problems and delivered the tax form to a secretary there. Right as he

did so, the mayor himself exited his office and saw Jake, and it looked almost as if a wave of relief washed over him.

“Ah, you’re the Courier, am I right?” the man said with a bright smile. “Thank you for the delivery. Tax papers, right? I will get to it immediately so you can bring it back, but...”

Here it comes...

“... we have recently been dealing with excessive monster attacks from a nearby monster nest, which have put a strain on the guards. Seeing as you made it all the way here safely, you look like you can handle yourself, so would it be possible to look into it while I do the form?”

A side quest!

Right as he thought this, a system prompt appeared before his eyes.

Courier Side Job: Eliminate the nearby monster nest.

Objective: Monster nest eliminated (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

Jake had no reason to refuse as he nodded. “I’ll take a look at it in the meantime. Do you know where this nest is located?”

Courier Side Job Accepted.

“Thank you!” the mayor said, relieved. “I believe the guards mentioned all the attacks usually come from the north, so I reckon it is in that direction. As for any details, I couldn’t possibly tell you the exact situation; we simply haven’t had the resources to send out a scouting party.”

“It’s all good; I’ll find it,” Jake said reassuringly. “Just have those forms ready by the time I return!”

“Most certainly,” the mayor said with a small bow as Jake headed out of the office again. On the way, he released a Pulse of Perception and about a hundred and fifty kilometers to the northeast, he saw a big collection of monsters gathered around a few small hills and rock formations. The monsters all looked to be of the insect type, but with their small number, they definitely weren’t of the eusocial type. If they were, Jake also doubted the town would still be around.

It definitely looked like a monster nest, and Jake decided to make this an express delivery of death to the monsters.

Jumping, Jake summoned his wings as he shot into the air and flew up a few dozen kilometers. Once he reached a good height, Jake slowed down and pulled out his bow. He could see the monsters quite well from this high up, and using a few quick Identifies, he saw they were all in the 210-220 range. This made Jake feel like one wasn't necessarily meant to fight the robbers in the first Courier Job if this was supposed to be the first job with semi-mandatory combat.

Not that it mattered to Jake either way. Nocking an arrow, he took aim and let loose, firing a quickly-charged Arcane Powershot. Right as the arrow was released, Jake nocked another, which he charged ever-so-slightly longer before letting go of the string.

He did this with five more arrows before he felt like it was good enough. Jake didn't see a need to wait as he began flying downwards, and as he did, the first arrow arrived and split into dozens right before it hit the monster nest. Due to the difference in charge between each Powershot, the next arrow arrived nearly at the same time, followed by the remaining five.

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A few seconds later, as Jake was flying downward, he got a system notification along with all the other kills messages.

Objective: Nest eliminated (1/1)

With a smile, Jake quickly made it down to the ground again and reentered the mayor's building, having only been gone for a handful of minutes. He did so fully expecting the mayor to still be busy filling out paperwork, but to his surprise met the man in front of his office, the signed form in hand.

"Thank you so much for the assistance!" the mayor said with a bright smile. "Here is the form, all filled out! Once again, I cannot express the depth of my and the town's gratitude for your help, and I wish you luck on your way back. Of course, should you wish to rest after dealing with the nest, you are more than free to stay at the local inn."

Side Job Completed!

Side Jobs Completed: 1

Jake stared at the guy and notification a bit before just nodding. "I only did as I should, and thanks for the offer, but I will head back immediately."

"Of course, of course," the mayor said with a sense of admiration. "Truly a man of duty! Even after a grueling fight, he does not delay a job." Read full story at

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“Yeah, sure,” Jake said as he said his goodbyes and headed out, successfully suppressing a laugh from the comments on Jake’s harrowing battle with the local monsters. Right as Jake exited the office, a few local townsfolk thanked him, and even the guards at the gate gave him words of gratitude as he began heading back to the city.

Jake had so many questions, even if he knew the true answer to all of them was probably dungeon-fuckery.

How the hell had the mayor known the nest was eliminated minutes after it had happened? How had he filled out the form so fast? How did everyone else in town also instantly know? What were these Side Jobs actually for? What did they give? Actually, to extrapolate on that point... what did any of these jobs give?

Jake had carried out twenty Courier Jobs now and had yet to earn a dime. No one had even mentioned any payment. Was he doing charity work or something without knowing? How the hell did the Courier industry even work? Wait... maybe he was meant to be an independent contractor who had to send his own invoices?

Of course, the ultimate answer was just that none of this mattered. Side Jobs and Courier Jobs most certainly just gave more Nevermore Points and a better achievement at the end of the Challenge Dungeon. Simple as that. But Jake did still like to imagine the utter lunacy of a world like this existing where society was only held together by unpaid Couriers.

Making it back to the city again took a bit less time than the way to the town as Jake hurried back. Turning in the tax records to the dwarf, Jake picked up another quest to go visit a town, and from there, it continued as Jake became the dedicated Courier for the local area, visiting most of the cities one by one.

By the time he had done thirty jobs, even the easy-difficulty Courier Jobs required him to leave the city. The difficulty also went up a tiny bit as he went to more and more dangerous territories monster-wise. There were also a few cases of trickery here and there, such as someone whom Jake was supposed to collect money from upon delivery claiming he had already sent the payment prior and thus didn’t need to write a check right then and there. This was despite Jake’s job making it pretty clear he had to return with the aforementioned check.

Instances like these were honestly pretty normal, and in most cases, it didn’t end in violence. Just a bit of pressure was enough to make most people crack in this early part of the Challenge Dungeon, and the slightest mention of the guards would have the merchants suddenly talk about everything being a misunderstanding.

In regards to Side Jobs, Jake didn’t always get one, but they were becoming more numerous. From what he gathered, these Side Jobs were jobs not directly related to delivery but were auxiliary tasks. Many could even be completed during the Courier Job,

such as one time Jake was asked to kill a certain number of monsters on his way to a town, or another where it was requested if he could check out a certain area to see if a new powerful beast had made the place its home. All while running to a town anyway, making them pretty much free.

Nothing was difficult for Jake at all so far. Even the timed missions were just a joke. Giving Jake three days to get somewhere he could reach in three hours was honestly just sad. Alas, he was in the easy part of the Challenge Dungeon right now, and hopefully, the difficulty would step up soon.

A bit less than two weeks after arriving in the Challenge Dungeon, Jake had completed Courier Job number 35 and returned to the same Guild as always to speak to the dwarf he had gotten pretty damn friendly with by now.

Walking in, Jake gave the man a smile as he didn't even bother taking a number.

"Job's done," Jake said.

"I saw," the dwarf gave Jake a big smile. "Here, let me have your Medallion."

"Huh, why?" Jake asked as he nevertheless placed it on the table. The dwarf didn't even try to pick up but just pointed at the item.

"Now take a look at it."

Jake instantly realized what the dwarf was getting at, and a quick Identify confirmed it.

[Courier Medallion (Common)] – the second-lowest rarity of Courier Medallion for a relative newcomer to the field who has begun to get some experience under his belt. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

Finally, Jake was no longer running around with an inferior rarity Medallion! Alright, it wasn't that big an achievement, but Jake was happy it happened. It also "only" took 35 Courier Jobs. This made Jake wonder if he would have had to do more easy jobs to upgrade it... maybe 50 easy Courier Jobs and 40-something medium jobs? It didn't really matter, but Jake liked to tell himself he had saved time.

"Congratulations are in order," the dwarf said, clearly happy for Jake. "Less than two weeks, and you're already beginning to no longer be a complete novice. If you keep this up, you may just become a real top-tier Courier who can take on the truly dangerous and rewarding jobs!"

Jake wasn't sure about the rewarding part, considering he was an unpaid worker, but he still smiled in response. "Thanks, mate. Now, just because I went up in rank doesn't mean I'll stop my momentum. So hit me with the next round of jobs!"

"Yeah... about that," the dwarf said, his mood fading a bit. "I have good news and bad news. What do you want first?"

"Alright... hit me with the bad news, I guess."

"After getting promoted, you can go to one of the small-sized cities to do jobs – rather than here, which is rated as a smallest-sized one. Usually, you would do this through the teleportation gateway... but... there was an accident," the dwarf explained with a big sigh. "So now it is no longer operational as the space-locator or something has been broken."

... yeah, this is one hundred percent a scripted event, Jake very quickly concluded, as he already knew where this was going.

"And the good news?"

"In order to get the teleportation gateway up and running again, we need to do either one of two things. Either we can call a space mage to come to fix it here, which will take about a month... or someone has to bring the currently broken space locator thing to the mages in the small-sized city, and they can fix it remotely from there to get the network up and running again," the dwarf explained as he looked at Jake. "I don't think I have to tell you who this someone would be?"

"Not sure how this is considered the good news," Jake questioned.

"It's a Special Courier Job," the dwarf said in a serious tone. "The trip there will be a lot more dangerous and take a lot longer than the jobs you have done so far, but if you succeed, you will already be well on your way to upgrading your Medallion again. I also need to warn you that as your Medallion upgraded, I can't give you any properly challenging jobs if you stay in this city, which may delay your next upgrade, but the choice is naturally yours."

As the dwarf finished his sentence, a system prompt expectedly popped up.

Choose your next action:

Accept Special Courier Job 1: Transport the Space Magic Locator to the small-sized city.

Or

Continue doing regular Courier Jobs in the smallest-sized city for 1 month (30 days).

Needless to say, Jake was going on a cross-country road trip because there was no fucking way he would stay back and do regular boring Courier Jobs for another full month.

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Chapter 834: Nevermore: To Make Work Interesting

The Courier Dungeon, as Jake had dubbed it, had an extremely simplified and straightforward societal structure. Everything was split into tiers, it seemed, with even the cities being very distinctly separated. The first city Jake arrived in was a smallest-sized city, which meant it had below a certain population threshold. Half a million based on what Jake gathered.

In the hierarchy of cities just ranked above the smallest-sized cities, one found the small-sized ones, which had between half a million and five million. Up from there, mid-sized cities with between five and twenty-five million, then large-sized with twenty-five million to a hundred million. Cities above a hundred million were pretty rare and were classified as giant-sized cities. There was no upper limit to these, and the only giant-sized cities Jake quickly became aware of were the capital cities of some of the many different factions.

Below cities were towns and villages. Anything below fifty thousand was a town, and below five thousand a village. Towns and villages did not have any teleportation circles in them and weren't connected to the network. Jake found it incredibly dumb they weren't considering the relatively low investment it would be to connect them and how it would make life for everyone so much easier, but the in-world reason was that it was for safety, as anything that wasn't a city couldn't protect the teleportation circle adequately.

It was a pretty dumb reason, as they could just have the circle self-destruct or something if they ever got invaded. Then again, if the infrastructure had been that immaculate, Couriers would have way less work and could just teleport everywhere, so it made sense for the theme of the place.

Back on topic, these towns and villages were all tied to the nearest city, which held governance over them and responsibilities such as tax collection and whatnot.

Now, having this kind of structure within a single faction kind of made sense. If it was something organized from the top down and enforced, Jake could see it appear even outside of Nevermore by someone with a management fetish.

However, it made no bloody sense every single faction in the entire Challenge Dungeon world had decided on the exact same structure. Shit, even if it was just the enlightened factions, Jake could get it, but even the monster-focused factions had the exact same city-town-village structure, even down to the numbers.

On that note, yes, Jake did come to learn there were far more factions than he first expected. Jake had appeared in the human-focused enlightened faction, while several more existed, all in conflict with one another. Other factions were the dwarves, elves, Risen, scalekin, demons, one more with a mix of enlightened ones, and finally, three different monster-focused ones. If there was a common race in the multiverse, Jake was pretty damn certain it could be found in this Challenge Dungeon within one of the ten factions.

Jake also had a theory that other Nevermore Attendees would appear elsewhere based on their race. Someone like Sylphie would likely appear in one of the monster-focused factions, while someone like Irin doing the dungeon would appear in the demon faction. Now, where the Fallen King and someone like Dina would appear was a bit of mystery as neither of them had a race with a faction directly related to them, but Jake reckoned it didn't really matter either way. As a Courier, race no longer mattered, and from what Jake saw, despite these factions being race-based primarily, there was plenty of diversity everywhere with no discrimination going on.

All of these things Jake had learned shortly after he completed the first Special Courier Job and arrived at the small-sized city with the Space Locator. The trip to the city had taken Jake just a bit over a day and a half, and honestly, it was as uneventful as could be. A few times, Jake encountered what he believed to be pre-scripted ambushes and whatnot, but in every instance, the monsters abandoned their attack the second they detected Jake's aura. Ah, but he was attacked by bandits once, who all ran away after he killed their leader.

In the small-sized city, Jake had gone to the next Guild and met an elven woman who became his next go-to attendant. He quickly began taking on new jobs, one of which required Jake to collect a number of books and return them to a library. The twist with this job was that – just like in the real world – people sucked ass at returning books. The worst was that one of the people who had to return it was a guy who had accidentally placed it in his own personal library and needed Jake to help look for the damn thing. Sphere helped a bit, but sadly, as he could only see the shape of the book and not read the cover with just spatial perception, he had to actually look at the books himself.

When Jake had returned all the books, he stayed with the librarian for a while and learned some world history and about how the Challenge Dungeon worked. That is where he learned about the cities, got some tidbits about every faction, and was told that as a Courier, he wouldn't need to worry about anything as he would be welcomed

with open arms wherever he went... dependent on the job that is. If he was transporting something for an enemy faction, he could very easily have a target on his back.

After his talk with the librarian, Jake had gone back to the Guild for another job, which he promptly accepted. Even the hard jobs sometimes took place within the far larger, small-sized city. Yes, the name was a bit dumb to call it small, considering it in Jake's mind was pretty damn big, but in-world, it probably made sense considering the city was several times larger than the smallest-sized one. Many of the jobs naturally also required him to head outside of it to the towns and villages, and these tended to take longer simply due to the travel time.

The small-sized city turned out to not be that much different from the smallest-sized one. The difficulty still wasn't really there. The social challenges he faced were also easy enough for someone like Jake to handle. Even if Jake wasn't the most socially adept person, in a multiversal context, he was actually pretty damn good. He wasn't overly naive and trusting, which would definitely be a huge weakness in this Challenge Dungeon. Not being very precise when listening to the language of jobs could also get you in trouble, and a lack of patience with shitty clients was pretty much a death sentence for an aspiring Courier.

For this reason, Jake could easily see many so-called geniuses struggling. An ultra-talented fighter, groomed and trained from an early age by experts, always viewed and recognized as someone with high status and a genius, definitely wasn't trained in dealing with a guy arguing that making half of the metal in a shipment of a wrong kind shouldn't be a problem as they were "pretty much the same anyway."

Yep, Jake could definitely see a few of them lose their cool here and there. This was definitely part of the Challenge Dungeon test, too, and truthfully, the most overpowered thing one could have in this dungeon was to have worked a retail or other customer-facing low-wage job at some point.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the young geniuses never really had to deal with stuff like this and would find themselves completely out of their comfort zone. They didn't ever have to deal with being an employee but were always the ones giving commands. One would think that Jake also wasn't very good at dealing with entitled and arrogant assholes, but surprisingly enough... he found it kind of fun.

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In Jake's opinion, the worst part about work before the system was the monotony of it all. It was its sheer predictability and lack of challenge in everyday tasks as he got used to them. It was the lack of anything truly interesting happening to shake up the monotony... the lack of anything memorable on a given day.

However, despite work sucking most of the time, there were also good days. The days with something exciting happening. It didn't even always have to be something major, but just something exciting to shake up the usual monotony.

Jake fondly remembered a day when the sprinklers in the office had gone off unexpectedly, and Casper had been asked if he could figure out how to turn them off temporarily until the company responsible for maintenance got there. Jake had been dragged along, and together, they had been completely drenched before finally finding a way to turn off everything. The office had, of course, already been turned into an utter mess at that point, and the rest of the day was spent cleaning up, figuring out which electronics had been saved in time, and listening to Jacob's frustrated call with the maintenance company that claimed the fact they had missed three consecutive inspections definitely couldn't have been a factor in the malfunction.

That day had been so unpredictable. It had been one twist after another, and even so many years later, Jake remembered the day so clearly. Especially the end, with Casper and Jake sitting on the rooftop drinking soda while claiming they were trying to dry and save some keyboards. It had been a good and memorable day.

In some ways, this entire Challenge Dungeon reminded Jake of that day. Being a Courier was like work, yes, but rather than monotonous tasks, it was more like a job where no task was ever straightforward. It wasn't just delivering a box and leaving for the next house again, day in and day out. Instead, it was more like those special delivery jobs you only had once in a blue moon, but every single time.

It was that one memorable work day, over and over again. Jake didn't doubt that the unpredictability of what you would face at every job was frustrating to many, but for Jake, it just made it more engaging and kept him interested. Definitely far more interested than the Test of Character, where Jake was just a passive observer most of the time. At least here, Jake could work on his movement skills while traveling and meet a bunch of insane and interesting characters when talking to the people there.

Finally... compared to all his prior jobs, there was one core difference in this world. Here, you were allowed to bitch-slap the people trying to scam you. It was the most cathartic experience for anyone who had ever had to deal with customers like that, and based on what Jake saw, it had no negative influence on his performance. Which kind of made sense. What could they even do about it? Stop hiring free Couriers? Yeah, fat chance.

All of this is to say that Jake quite enjoyed this Challenge Dungeon, and that was reflected in his speed of doing jobs. He felt excited to get to the point where the jobs weren't only interesting but also offered a genuine challenge when he had to fight stuff, so while he didn't recklessly rush through the jobs, he did very much speedrun them.

Only three weeks after arriving at the small-sized city, Jake completed job number sixty-five, which surprisingly enough was enough to earn him yet another upgrade. Standing

within the even larger Guild in the small-sized city, the elven attendant flashed him a huge smile as she congratulated him.

"I read your file right as you first came here, and in truth, I believed your evaluation was highly exaggerated, but seeing your work ethic, I believe it was just the opposite," the elf said with a bow. "It was definitely a conservative estimation, that's for sure! I cannot remember having ever worked with a Courier who has been promoted this fast ever before."

That's right, Jake's Medallion had rapidly gone up yet another rank.

[Courier Medallion (Uncommon)] – A Courier Medallion of a respectable rarity for a relatively experienced Courier. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

The description change was slight, but it was there. And, hey, it was nice to be recognized as a relatively experienced Courier after only about a month on the job. It was definitely a faster promotion rate than any prior job Jake had ever had, and if he kept working hard, he was sure he could earn a senior position within a year.

"So, what happens now?" Jake asked. "Got more jobs for me, or...?"

As predicted, the elf's mood shifted a bit as she took out a piece of paper from below the desk. For some reason, this paper had a golden outline and wasn't anything Jake had seen before. She looked almost a bit nervous as she handled it and looked to both sides before speaking.

"Listen... we got a Special Courier Job in just today. It isn't anything you have to do, and it's a pretty risky one... so before I even present it to you, I need to know if you are interested?" she asked with a low voice.

Jake mimicked her serious mood as he leaned in slightly. "What are the details of the job?"

"I'll take that as you showing interest. Alright, so about five years ago, the Infernal Baron – a powerful B-grade - created a bounty reward for anyone who could capture a certain kind of elemental he needed. I didn't think something like that would ever become relevant here, but just a few hours ago, a band of adventurers returned with the exact elemental he had requested. Now we need someone to deliver it to him in the closest medium-sized city."

"Alright, pretty straightforward so far," Jake nodded. "But I guess there is a twist."

The elf nodded. "Three problems. First of all, the elemental is right now sealed within a containment device, but as it is still very much alive, and due to the nature of the containment device, it cannot be put into any spatial storage. This brings us to the next problem: it needs to be delivered covertly because his enemies cannot know he obtained the elemental, and as the teleportation gateway scans any living being that passes through, it will need to be delivered directly without the use of gates."

"Alright, so I would have to travel there on my own. What's the final problem?"

"The adventurers who captured the elemental... well, they weren't the best. The containment device they used was poorly made, and the seals on it are less than stellar, so by our expert's evaluation, it won't last more than a week. So it needs to be delivered directly within a week while making sure no one finds out what is being transported," the elf finished explaining. "I know it is a lot to ask of someone who just got promoted, but your progress so far and the fact you could make your way to this city by yourself that quickly makes me believe you are up to the task and have the required travel speed."

As she finished, a system message popped up in front of Jake.

Accept Special Courier Job 2: Transport the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron in the mid-sized city without your cargo being discovered. Time limit: 7 days.

Or

Use the Teleportation Gateway to travel to the mid-sized city and forfeit the Special Courier Job.

"Can't keep the Baron waiting for long, now can we?" Jake promptly answered with a smile. "I naturally accept the job."

"Great!" the elf said with relief as she took out a table-tennis-sized metal ball and placed it in front of Jake. He used Identify on it quickly before taking it and hiding it away.

[Sealed Elemental (Unique)] – A sealed elemental of the fire affinity can be found within. Due to the shoddy work of the ones who sealed it, this item is slowly deteriorating and will reach critical failure in a week (7 days). Any attempt to interfere with this item may result in the seal breaking prematurely.

"Remember, be careful," the elf insisted. "Even if we have hidden the fact we obtained the elemental well, I am not sure the adventurers were as good at keeping their mouths shut, so it may have spread, and enemies of the Baron may attempt to impede you in your travels. While they will not know what exactly you are transporting, as even the adventurers have no idea as to its value, they will be more than keen to find out, and I doubt their methods to do so will be peaceful."

"I'll be wary," Jake nodded seriously as he turned to leave. "I'd better get going. Thanks for everything so far."

"It has been my pleasure," she smiled and bowed once more as Jake exited the Guild... and instantly felt a few hidden gazes on him.

Yep, this job is definitely not gonna be a peaceful one. Original content can be found at *novel·fire·net*

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Chapter 835: Nevermore: Package Police

Jake felt like perhaps this would be the first "real" job. It gave him a different feeling compared to all the ones he had done prior, and after accepting it, he was more sure than ever these Special Courier Jobs were a bit like those special fights in the Colosseum. In more ways than one.

Based on the words of the Guild attendant, Jake suspected that all of these Special Courier Jobs were linked. A part of a longer quest chain of sorts. He believed he had only been offered this job because he had made the run with that Space Locator, and it was even probable his speed at having done so factored in. In fact, Jake wouldn't be surprised at all if these jobs changed based on how a person performed beforehand, and Jake would have gotten an entirely different – or maybe just slightly easier – job if he hadn't been as fast as he was.

If all of this was true, it made sense the difficulty had a big spike with this job where he even had to potentially interact with a B-grade. Of course, Jake didn't believe for a single second he would have to fight one, as that would just be insanity, but he could see himself being thrown into a situation where he had to not make the wrong dialogue choice.

Returning to the job at hand, Jake found himself standing outside the Guild, four sets of eyes on him. That in itself wasn't out of the ordinary, but the fact two of them followed him even after he walked away from the Guild proved they weren't just the usual observers who kept track of all the adventurers and Couriers coming and going.

Not wanting to have a few tails, Jake sped up and quickly weaved in between the many buildings and streets. Within only a few minutes, he felt that no one was keeping track of him anymore, making him duck into the upper floor of a house with an open window no one was currently in. Yes, this was most definitely trespassing, but if someone broke

into your house and trespassed, but you never noticed anyone had ever been there, did it really happen?

Inside the house, Jake started out by making his mask visible, hiding his face. So far, he hadn't worn it a single time throughout the entire Challenge Dungeon. It tended to have a negative effect when making conversation, so he had purposefully gone without. However, things were a bit different now, and he was totally fine with coming off as intimidating as he doubted anyone who would want to talk to him during this trip did so with kind intentions.

Next up, he changed it so Shroud of the Primordial once more hid his level and didn't just tell everyone he was 211. As a final touch, he infused a bit of mana into his cloak, making the shadowy thing almost seem alive as it began to ripple a bit, like a flickering shadow. He also considered using his stealth skill but decided against it. It may sound weird, but he wanted people to know he was leaving.

With all his preparations done, Jake checked himself over and confirmed everything was as it should be.

Definitely looking a lot less approachable now, he thought happily as he exited the house he had trespassed into once more, making sure to remove any traces he had ever been there.

Checking the compass on the Medallion, Jake saw the direction to the mid-sized city and got going. He wasn't going to relax at all with this job as he, quite frankly, didn't have the leeway to do so. When he was checking out the library, he also studied the local geography and memorized a few maps, which made him know the distance to the mid-sized city was a bit over twice what he traveled to the small-sized one. With the first trip taking him one and a half days, this one would take at least three.

This was another reason Jake felt confident this Special Courier Job was the first mission with some real difficulty because he seriously doubted someone like the Fallen King could even make the trip within the required seven days. He simply wasn't fast enough. The Sword Saint would also struggle, but Jake believed he would be able to make it quite comfortable if he wasn't disturbed too much on the way, while whether Dina could do it or not was a total toss-up. Sylphie would naturally be able to easily, being the fast little bird she was... assuming she didn't get scammed by someone.

Flying through the air, Jake quickly exited the city limits, feeling a few new curious eyes on him during the flight. Those who were just curious about the hooded figure flying around weren't what bothered him, as gawking was a pretty normal reacting, but a few lingered for a bit too long. He even felt that two skills reminiscent of his own Hunter's Mark were attempted to be placed on him, but Jake rebuffed both. One of them tried again, but Jake once more defended as he sped up and seemingly got out of range.

This was definitely the most attention that had been placed on Jake for any job thus far. Far behind him, using his Pulse, he even saw the two who had tried to mark him fly into the air and look after him, both holding some devices in their hands... likely for communication.

That about confirms it... this flight is gonna have some turbulence.

Alas, there wasn't much Jake could do about it right now. As he flew, he took out the Sealed Elemental from beneath his clothes and observed it a bit more closely. As mentioned, it was about the size of a table tennis ball and pretty smooth. Inspecting the magic circles on it, Jake confirmed what the Guild attendant had said. He had no way to extend the duration of the seal. In fact, the entire structure of it was almost as if it was made to collapse. If it was on purpose or not, Jake didn't know, but he wouldn't rule it out... though the ones he suspected of being behind this faulty seal weren't necessarily any bad actors, but could just as likely be the Wyrmgod who designed the job.

Jake considered for a moment where best to hide the item if a fight did break out and decided that the safest place would be somewhere it couldn't ever fall out and had a way smaller chance of accidentally getting hit. Using his arcane mana, he covered it on a thin but firm layer of protection before popping it into his mouth and swallowing hard. Inside muscles inside his body that weren't really something normal humans had access to, Jake stopped it before it even fully entered his stomach, where it could sit nicely for the duration of his travels.

Sure, eating it was a risk, and he even considered using Palate on it, but he didn't wanna risk it due to the stomach being a bit too close to a spatial storage. Besides, he was busy nurturing one of the ten legendary rarity Blightroots in there. A natural treasure filled with death affinity energy he had gotten as a present from the Risen during his Chosen Ceremony. It had been in there ever since the stomach healed from the whole Dark Witch debacle and had been a great help when making all his necrotic poison. He still didn't feel confident working with the root, but there was definitely much to be gained from it... especially as it seemed to contain traces of the Blight affinity created by the Viper's fellow Primordial, the Blightfather.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

Back on topic, Jake had eaten the Sealed Elemental for a few reasons despite the risk. Having it inside of him would shield it from most detection and divination magic capable of specifically searching for it, and if someone was nearby, they would always have a way harder time sensing it. There was also just that it made Jake feel safer knowing where it was and that he didn't have to think about it falling out while fighting. Yep, he definitely ate it solely for logical reasons... and no, he didn't want to think about what would happen if the seal broke while he had the thing inside him.

With the Sealed Elemental in his stomach, Jake continued his journey as he summoned his wings and used One Step in between wing flaps. This was his fastest method of

movement and allowed him to truly build up momentum as he flew and teleported through the air while flaring his aura to keep any monsters who got too curious at bay.

After about half a day of travel, Jake spotted something in the distance. It was a village from the looks of it, and for a moment, Jake considered making a pit stop there as he doubted its placement right in the path to the mid-sized city was an accident but decided against it. Besides, as he got closer, he got the feeling he wouldn't even have to go greet the village. In fact, it looked like the village would be more than happy to fly out to greet him! With quite a few people, too, for a wonderful unwanted welcome party to a village, Jake didn't even plan on visiting. How nice of them.

For a second, he thought about flying around and avoiding them but stopped himself and just continued flying toward them. He wasn't sure what they had up their sleeve, but he got a feeling he would regret it if he didn't go to them directly.

As he got closer, the group that consisted of about thirty people fanned out, clearly to block his path. Getting the message, Jake stopped as a human man with a large beard wearing full, heavy armor flew slightly forward to greet him. Using Identify, he saw the man wasn't dangerous in the slightest, though he was one of the higher-level individuals in the group.

[Human – lvl 249]

"Hello there!" the man said with a reassuring smile as he projected his voice to Jake while still keeping over a hundred meters distance between them. "Real sorry to bother you, but we have had reports that smugglers carrying illegal substances have recently been through this area and have been tasked with putting a stop to it. Due to the crackdown, they have even begun to use Couriers... you wouldn't happen to be a Courier recently out of Hillspring City, would you?"

"Drugs, really? Damn, that sucks. Luckily for me, I am not carrying any drugs, so no reason to bother me," Jake said with a smile as he felt the use of a skill on him. It didn't work, but Jake recognized it as similar to the one Silas from Neil's party had that was capable of detecting lies.

"Ah, you must have missed me asking... but I need to confirm if you are a Courier or not," the man insisted.

This was probably a crucial moment where one could attempt trickery... but Jake didn't feel the need to. "Yep, Courier here straight out of Hillspring less than a day ago." This chapter is updated by [novel•fire•met](#)

The plate-wearing man likely expected some kind of information from the person detecting lies, but even if he didn't get told anything, he didn't miss a beat. "Is that so? I am really sorry to bother you, but were you tasked by the Guild to deliver an item to the Infernal Baron? That is the cover currently used by the smugglers to trick Couriers, and

the Baron himself isn't involved at all. They are even sophisticated enough to change item descriptions and make the delivery look like something it isn't."

Jake, acting shocked, gasped in an exaggerated way. "Shit, really? I am transporting something to that Baron!"

A big smile crept onto the man's lips. "Good thing we caught you then, or you could have gotten in real trouble once you arrived at Infernal City with your delivery! The Baron would have had your head, even if you are a Courier! Tell you what, I do know this seems fishy, but let me share this... the crackdown on this particular substance to the level where every gateway scans for it. That's also the reason you were forced to make the trip by yourself and not just take the gate. What's more, due to the nature of the substance, I even heard it cannot enter spatial storage."

"You're describing exactly what I was asked to transport," Jake confirmed enthusiastically.

What Jake was doing right now could seem risky as the Special Courier Job required the cargo to not be discovered... but Jake felt very confident discovery wasn't just them knowing he had cargo for the Baron or even what it was. They clearly already knew. No, it was to ensure no one could identify exactly what he was transporting. Shit, he even felt confident that should someone discover it and die before they could report it to anyone, he still wouldn't fail the job. In conclusion... it was probably only these "enemies" of the Baron that couldn't discover the Sealed Elemental.

"I see," the plated man said with a sigh. Jake wondered what his next response would be as the man smiled. "I know this is a lot to ask, but could you show me the goods in question? I would hate for this to be a false positive and to have made false accusations. Of course, if it is as we suspect, we would more than gladly take the illicit goods off your hands. Naturally, we will make sure the Guild is properly notified of everything, too, and we have the express permission of the Infernal Baron to produce a letter of annulment for the Courier Job."

Honestly, the more the guy spoke, the more believable he sounded. Not even necessarily because of what he said but because of the powerful mental manipulation skill he was applying. This was likely why he had been the one to walk forward and speak.

"That all sounds great, mister package police!" Jake answered with a big smile behind his mask. "Sadly, I got my orders, and even if everything you said is correct, I got a reputation for being reliable, you know? Besides, everything you just said is total bullshit, so it isn't like there is much to consider."

The man's smile faded instantly when he heard Jake's response. Yet he didn't outright attack. "Look, this is a far more complicated matter than you want to get involved in... there are people you do not want to make your enemies. So just hand over whatever

you need to deliver to the Infernal Baron and be on your way... or things could get tricky for you."

As he said this, an aura erupted from down in the village as a figure flew up. Jake had noticed this person long ago, throwing them a glance and Identify as they joined their mates.

[Scalekin – lvl 311]

Jake smiled, now finally knowing why he got the feeling he would regret not clashing with this group directly.

Seeing the lack of a response, the bearded man seemed to assume that Jake was shocked or something as he spoke again. "We have nothing against you and would prefer to settle this without unnecessary bloodshed. Yes, this is very much a threat, but we are under orders, same as you. So just make the easiest choice for everyone involved and live to see another day."

"Thank you," Jake said, entirely ignoring the man as he looked at the scalekin in the back. "You know, it feels like it's been so long... probably because it has."

"What the hell are you going on about?" the bearded guy continued as Jake also continued to ignore him, and he instead held out his hand as a bow appeared in it. Between the many Challenge Dungeons he had done, he had truly missed something like this... especially after having just done the House of the Architect.

"Can I ask you to do me a favor too?" Jake asked the scalekin directly.

As a response to Jake's words, and probably also the fact he had pulled out a bow, the scalekin released their aura as a wand appeared in one of their hands. Jake felt the aura and grinned even more than before. *Not weak... not weak at all.*

"I was gonna ask you to put up a proper fight as it's been so long since I had a proper one... but it looks like that's freely included already."

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

Chapter 836: Nevermore: "Pretty Good Fight."

Jake didn't relax for even a moment as he immediately activated Arcane Awakening at its stable 30%. A level 311 humanoid was simply not anyone he could take lightly, and if he let his guard down, things could quickly get hairy.

In response, the bearded man and all of the lower-leveled people did something surprising. Rather than attack, they all turned on their tails and backed away at impressive speeds as the scalekin was the only one who slowly floated toward Jake.

At least they have a proper sense of when fighting is a bad idea.

Looking at the scalekin, Jake tilted his head. "You gonna remain silent and mysterious?"

As an answer, the scalekin pointed their wand at Jake as magic began to gather. Jake also quickly nocked an arrow and prepared to shoot as a white flash erupted from the wand. It wasn't an attempt to blind him, but instead, just the air around the scalekin mage getting bathed in mana as what looked like fragments of silvery metal began floating around them.

With Sense of the Malefic Viper, he quickly identified the affinity. *Some kind of metal affinity... with... oh fu-*

Jake released the string of his bow right in time before he had to dodge to the side. A loud explosive sound rocked the airspace as a silvery bolt of lightning flew past him. Before Jake had time to try and nock another arrow, a second thundershock sounded as another bolt was released.

Dodging this one, too, Jake kept flying upwards to get some distance. The range of the lightning was limited, and Jake believed he had an advantage at longer range. As he began flying upwards, the arrow he had loosed during their initial exchange also arrived, but the mage summoned a large tower shield and blocked it, only getting pushed back slightly when the arrow exploded.

However, the blast did do something. It made the hood of the scalekin fly back, revealing what looked like an albino lizard of some kind, with what Jake recognized as clear male traits of this particular species. Did it matter that Jake figured out if it was a male or female scalekin? No, not at all.

Continuing his upwards flight, the mage below made another move. The air around him shimmered as the metal fragments began collecting into dozens of spears, and, at the same time, a magic circle of some kind appeared below him. A few of the metal spears were shot toward Jake, but he dodged all of them as they flew past him and into the clouds above, the attacks thrown haphazardly as the scalekin focused his attention on the magic circle.

Jake didn't want to see what the scalekin was cooking up if he could avoid it and began to pelt his opponent with arrows. Likely because he knew he had a low chance of hitting Jake, the scalekin decided that rather than use all the metal spears to attack, the

scalekin could use them as counters to Jake's arrows to buy him some time. At least he tried to.

Shooting a series of arrows in quick succession, Jake controlled each of them as their flight patterns became unpredictable. The scalekin seemed surprised and blocked one side with a shield and used the spears on the other. Sadly for him, Jake wasn't playing around, as right before the arrows hit, they split into dozens each, exploding before they even hit him or the shield. The resulting explosion sent the scalekin staggering back as the magic circle began to flicker as its caster lost focus.

Taking advantage, Jake released a Powershot he had begun charging when he shot the Splitting Arrows before. With the scalekin not entirely focused, he failed to react fast enough as the arrow hit him and blasted him down through his own magic circle, breaking it apart in the process.

Nocking another arrow, Jake was prepared to follow up but suddenly, his danger sense warned him. Turning around, Jake summoned a barrier of stable arcane mana as a white bolt of lightning struck him from within one of the clouds. With his sphere, he saw the spears he had dodged earlier had all stopped in mid-air behind him, and one by one, they began to transform into pure energy as another spear turned into a bolt of lightning.

Below him, the mage had also gathered himself, and it seemed like he was done playing around. The robe covering his body was already mostly ruined due to Jake's attacks, and through the mage's own power began to slowly disintegrate as pristine silvery armor revealed itself beneath, covering everything besides the scalekin's face. At least it was for a brief moment before a helmet began to grow out of the armor, covering his face and leaving no obvious openings.

Dealing with the final lightning bolt from above, Jake turned to look at the mage. He looked like a full-plate warrior tank, and Jake didn't doubt he was one tough bastard, considering the armor hadn't taken any noticeable damage yet. To make matters more annoying, the mage had overcome one of the usual weaknesses of heavy armor – low speed - by firing incredibly fast lightning bolts.

Spreading out his arms, the scalekin summoned even more mana as what looked like metal blades appeared. Jake's response was to nock another arrow as he decided to also take things up a notch. Arcane Awakening intensified as he activated the offensive fifty percent, aiming to dodge every blow and focus on dealing damage for now.

Shooting an Arcane Powershot, the mage responded as he held up an open palm, and from it, a speartip appeared before getting blasted out. It hit Jake's arrow, and both exploded mid-air. As a follow-up from the mage, dozens of blades were also shot toward Jake, all crackling with lightning energy.

They met a barrage of arcane arrows in their path as the air filled with explosions of arcane energy and lightning. The mage kept summoning blades, and Jake kept shooting arrows as neither refused to back down, while both controlling their attacks to hit the others, when they didn't try to have an arrow or blade sneak by. Occasionally, an attack on either side would make it through, but Jake easily dodged those while the mage blocked.

The attack speed on both sides slowly began picking up as Jake shot faster and faster, and he felt the strain. He also got the feeling this status quo was not good for him as he was burning through resources faster than he was comfortable with. One also had to remember that his foe was more than fifty levels above Jake, resulting in him likely having a deeper mana pool, especially seeing as he was a dedicated mage and not a hybrid like Jake.

Not all was bad, though, as Jake was also cooking something up. However, rather than do it with an obvious magic circle, Jake had a Protean Arrow getting slow-cooked within his quiver. Still, Jake would prefer to change things up, so he did just that.

Rather than continue their duel of blades versus arrows, Jake stopped shooting and instead began charging an Arcane Powershot. Without anything to impede their path, the blades reached him in less than a second, ready to slice him apart, but Jake was ready with his best counter to every attack.

With light movements, Jake dodged and swayed as the many blades flew by him. Some of them left lightning trails that tried to singe him, but his cloak and armor took the brunt of whatever went through, allowing Jake to keep charging.

He had gambled that the mage had stopped controlling every blade manually but was just firing them in his direction, and he had been right. The scalekin mage quickly realized his strategy wasn't working but didn't seem particularly bothered as he stopped summoning them.

Jake was ready for some other form of attack, but the scalekin just stood there as Jake charged his attack. Even if Jake was confused about why the scalekin was doing that, he wouldn't abandon his attack but kept charging the Powershot to its full potential before releasing the string. The source of this content is [novel✕fire✕net](#)

A shockwave of energy erupted as what little lightning energy clung to Jake was pushed away, and the arrow descended, surrounded by a dense wave of pure destructive arcane energy. As it went downwards, Jake saw the scalekin merely raise a hand as the silvery metal mana began to gather into a shield, which was when Jake realized why the mage had stopped attacking.

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The arrogant asshole was confident he could just block whatever attack I was charging... yeah, fuck that.

As the silvery mana had nearly formed a solid shield to block the arrow, all the mana suddenly stopped moving. Up above, Jake stared down as two glowing eyes were visible through his mask, unleashing a Primal Gaze, freezing not only the body but the energy of the scalekin.

The freeze only lasted for a fraction of a second, but it had entirely thrown off the scalekin's timing. The unfinished shield shattered instantly when the arrow hit it, and even if the scalekin became able to move again, there simply wasn't enough time to react.

Jake blinked rapidly to remove the blood dripping from his eyes after using Primal Gaze on a far higher-leveled foe and saw the scalekin get blasted downward at impressive speed as the arrow hit him. From his Hunter's Mark and Sense of the Malefic Viper, he felt that the attack had done some damage. Not wanting to miss his advantage, he nocked another arrow and released an Arrow Rain as the sky filled with arrows.

The rain of destructive arcane arrows hit the ground soon after as everything exploded. Jake was happy they were pretty far away from the village because if not, there wouldn't be much left of it as he stared down at the hundreds of craters below.

Despite the devastation, Jake clearly saw the silvery figure below stand back up, now sporting a nice hole in his otherwise pristine armor. He looked more annoyed than anything as he took to the air. Seeing no reason to let the scalekin do so in a relaxed manner, Jake decided to give him a few arrows along the way, but the scalekin still had his shield and managed to deflect them as he tried to get closer to Jake.

Jake felt the energy within his opponent begin to build up as the air around him quivered. Audible cracks could be heard as small sparks of lightning began to appear just as the mage pointed toward Jake and released a barrage of exploding metal fragments. Jake retreated as he saw the mage raise his shield toward the air with one hand and the wand with the other.

Not wanting to let him do his weird mage stuff, Jake chose to take a few scratches from metal fragments and shoot a quickly charged Arcane Powershot. He did this fully expecting the scalekin to dodge, but his opponent didn't move at all. The arrow hit the same hole in the armor as last time, piercing the scalekin square in his chest and making him flinch... but he also managed to finish casting his spell.

Jake's follow-up arrow was blasted to pieces as the mage shot a humongous lightning bolt into the air. An absolute pillar of pure power burned into the sky and even the ground below as Jake felt like something happened within it... which turned out to be kind of true.

When the light faded, what appeared wasn't the mage but a massive pillar of pure metal in his place. It pierced kilometers into the sky and even deep into the ground, and Jake wondered what the hell was happening until the entire thing started moving slightly.

Parts of it began to turn into cubes and fall off, but mid-fall, they started to warp even more, forming spikes or other sharp metal objects. Soon, the entire pillar began to crumble as metal weapons rained down and covered the ground below, with the mage's form soon being revealed, now sporting an entire cube of pure metal that surrounded and shielded him.

Well, isn't this guy one tough nut to crack, Jake thought with a smile.

On the ground below, the many metal weapons began to stir as faint crackles of electricity surrounded them. Jake looked down and then at the mage in the cube as he sighed a bit. He had a plan, but it would take a bit to modify a certain arrow, so for now, he really only had one choice.

The very next second, weapons shot into the air, flying straight for Jake. Thousands of swords, axes, spears, arrows, and all sorts of other spiky things either went straight for Jake or formed a maelstrom of metal around him, sealing his movements.

Knowing there was no room to hold back, Jake went all-out as Arcane Awakening finally fully activated. The weapons came from all sides, but Jake was ready as he entered super-dodging mode. It reminded him a bit of some of Minaga's trap rooms as attacks came from everywhere, but with a few well-placed barriers, arcane explosions, and two katars to deflect blows, he found the openings he needed as he remained relatively unharmed even as the attacks intensified.

Lightning bolts began to jump between all the weapons, sometimes also shooting for Jake, forcing him to summon his scales to handle the constant attacks. However, even with his scales and passive arcane barrier from Awakening, he still took some damage, as avoiding every attack simply wasn't feasible, and the lightning bolts were pretty damn strong, especially considering how many there were.

This continued for nearly a minute as the pressure kept mounting. Jake didn't doubt this was some killer attack the scalekin mage saved for a tricky situation as he sat inside his metal cube, hiding while controlling everything. The mana cost for the assault had to be extreme, but Jake didn't bet on his opponent running out of mana. Besides, he was a Courier on a job and couldn't drag out the fight too long... and by now, he was ready to finish it.

It took some extra time due to the focus he had to dedicate to not losing a limb, but soon, Jake's preparations were ready. After dodging and finding a small opening, Jake released a large blast of arcane mana to give him a moment to act. Reaching out with his hand toward the metal cube, it began to glow dark green as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated to awaken the poison within the scalekin.

His opponent had been hit by two arrows, with especially the second one delivering a good dose. Sadly, Jake hadn't had time to make any of his Heartrot Poison quite yet – okay, he had kind of just forgotten to – but it wasn't a problem as he would most likely have used his Sleeping Night Toxin anyway.

While the scalekin had some impressive defenses, his pure Vitality didn't strike Jake as very high, which was proven true when the poison was activated. Within the cube of metal, the scalekin coughed up blood and lost concentration as all the weapons flying around Jake stopped moving.

A large Protean Arrow appeared in Jake's hand as he began flying toward the metal cube and charging a Powershot. The scalekin within was still struggling with the poison and its explosive activation of it, but he quickly noticed Jake approaching and gathered himself as the many weapons started moving again.

His reaction was commendably quick... but not quick enough. Shadowy energy surrounded Jake's body as a second version of himself flew out of him toward the metal cube. His Eternal Shadow, with katar in hand, unleashed a Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang into the metal cube. A blast of lightning was released from the cube in response, dispersing the shadow, but the attack had gone through.

The piercing effect left a hole but didn't go fully through, but it left just the opening Jake needed. Right before all the weapons reached him again, Jake released a string as the Protean Arrow flew forward and struck the same hole just made by his shadow, further amplified by Jake pouring in what little Hunting Momentum he had been able to build up.

When the Protean Arrow hit, the attack activated in two steps. Firstly, a large blast of arcane energy shot forward, blasting a hole in the cube for the rest of the arrow to pass through. The mage was partly hit by this arcane energy and moved to defend himself within as the second part – the arrow itself – struck him.

Within the cube, Jake saw the mage be penetrated straight through the chest as the arrow pierced him and pinned him to the back side of his own cube. After barely having to dodge a few weapons coming for him, Jake triggered the arrow with a mental command, and the entire thing exploded, with the cube serving only to amplify the power of the explosion.

It also turned out the cube was a lot weaker to getting attacked from the inside. The large arcane explosion left cracks all over the cube as it began to crumble and fall apart. Fragments began dropping to the ground, along with the many weapons and the mage himself.

Jake raised his bow and took aim again. The mage was badly injured and had even lost one of his arms in an attempt to contain the explosion, but he still tried to block Jake's arrow as he summoned his shield again. The first arrow curved slightly just before it hit,

striking the shield at a weird angle and making the mage spin in the air. To throw him further off, Jake even activated the Arcane Charge from his mark, making the mage's entire body flash with destructive arcane energy, making him utterly unable to respond to the next attack. The second arrow hit the spinning mage in the back, sending him reeling even more as the third struck him square through the thin gap in the armor at his neck, piercing straight through.

Five more arrows followed as the scalekin remained in freefall, every one of them coated in poison. Jake had kind of expected the mage to have one more card to pull out, but before the scalekin even hit the ground, he felt all signs of life fade as he got a system message.

****You have slain [Scalekin - lvl 311 / Aluminium Magister - lvl 334 / Luxmetal Alchemist – lvl 288]****

Jake read the notification quickly and was a bit disappointed at the confirmation he indeed didn't get any experience in this Challenge Dungeon either.

It wasn't all bad, though.

"Pretty good fight," Jake mumbled to himself as he turned to look toward the village. Right before the bearded man had left, Jake had thrown a subtle Hunter's Mark on him. He was hiding away in the village, or at least he had been, as Jake now saw him begin to be on the move, likely after seeing the result of the fight.

After quickly flying down and depositing the body of the scalekin in his storage in case it would come in handy later, he began flying toward the village, ready for a second conversation with the fake package police.

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Chapter 837: Nevermore: Branching Paths

The scalekin sure hadn't been the most talkative, so Jake hoped to get some information out of the bearded man who originally greeted him. He and all his friends were trying to run away right now after the mage had died, knowing that they didn't stand a chance even if they got involved. New novel chapters are published on [novel♦fire♦met](#)

Power differences, especially at higher grades, weren't just a simple math equation. Two people with half of Jake's stats wouldn't be equal to one Jake, and even if a few

hundred of them came at him, Jake was confident in smacking them all down. There were certain conceptual gaps caused by higher stats and grades, resulting in far less damage being dealt by those who were a lot weaker.

Jake had ways to close the gap between himself and someone at a higher level, but such a thing was generally considered quite rare based on what Jake had seen. Likely because, in order to get stronger against higher-leveled opponents, you had to get used to *only* getting anything out of higher-leveled opponents.

All of this is to say that despite there being around thirty of them, the fact Jake could fight, let alone kill, the scalekin mage meant they wouldn't be able to even touch him, Assuming he was in a condition to fight, of course. Jake did have the minor problem that he was on a timer as he flew toward the village.

Arcane Awakening had been suppressed down to the more stable 30%, but he had to keep it going, or he would enter a period of weakness. While he could re-trigger Arcane Awakening even while in this period of weakness, it would lead to an even worse backlash afterward, so he would very much prefer to avoid that.

Chasing down the bearded man didn't end up taking long, especially with the stat boost active for some more stats. On the way, he also manipulated his cloak to entirely cover his body, and after a bit of quick cleaning up, he made sure to look like he hadn't even taken minor wounds but was entirely uninjured after the fight. That should add a bit to his intimidation factor.

The man and his companions had fled through an underground tunnel to a hideout disguised as a small hill about ten kilometers from the village. From a distance, it looked entirely normal, as the ones who crafted it had transformed an actual hill and then placed all magic formations on the inside. Quite clever and a lot harder to spot that way, and most C-grades would definitely miss it.

Reaching the hill, Jake pulled out his bow again, nocked an arrow, and drew the string as he yelled, infusing his voice with mana and Willpower. **"I will count down from ten. When I reach zero... well, you can guess what happens. Ten, ni-"**

Before Jake could even say nine, the bearded man along with two others, flew out from within the hill, their bodies phasing through it seamlessly. They all had their hands up above their heads, and Jake didn't feel the slightest threat from any of them. "Don't shoot!"

Jake slightly relaxed the string but didn't withdraw his bow immediately. "See, that wasn't so hard. Now, I believe we have some things to discuss, including why you decided that attacking a Courier who is just trying to do his damn job was a good idea."

"We... we got a job... I am not sure about the details, so-"

"So you're gonna tell me everything you do know? Great!" Jake said in a cheerful tone as he kept his eyes on the three of them. He also looked inside the hill, wondering if they were maybe trying to set up an ambush, but they were all just hiding... potentially hoping Jake thought only the bearded man and the two who exited with him were hiding there.

"We're just middlemen. Adventurers," the man hurriedly began to explain. "I don't even know who the job is from! That mage was the one who brought everything and hired us for his bosses. He had a letter with instructions, part of the payment, and everything like that. We were just here to make the presence of the Silenced less suspicious."

Jake took in what he said, as that word toward the end stuck out due to the emphasis the man put on it. "Silenced what? I know the scalekin wasn't a big conversationalist, and I didn't get anything out of him besides the occasional small grunt, but I'm not sure making his lack of talking his defining trait is polite."

The bearded adventurer looked a bit confused at Jake for a moment as he stammered. "Do... do you not know what a Silenced is?"

It sounded like Jake was really meant to, so he tried – and failed – to play it off cool. "Remind me."

"Someone from the Silenced Order. Slaves who have had their ability to speak or even properly communicate entirely sealed away and are primarily used by those who want them to accomplish tasks they really don't want anyone to talk about or for anything to be tracked back to them," the adventurer explained. "Rare to see any C-grades of the Silenced Order, though. Mainly due to how expensive they are and their limited availability. Especially a late-tier C-grade, as after becoming Silenced, progress pretty much stops as their Paths are ruined."

The explanation almost felt too long and thorough, making Jake think he had hit some intended dialogue option. Especially the last part that struck Jake as unnecessary added information. Alas, it told him everything he needed to know.

"So, in summary, someone unable to communicate came to you with a letter telling you to stop me in my path, and you did so without thinking that maybe, just maybe, the Courier wasn't just some pushover?"

"Not just stop you. Stop any Courier coming out of Hillspring and going this way, and yes, the fact the Silenced couldn't handle you was not part of the calculations... but we were never necessarily meant to kill you! Just incapacitate and intimidate. Look, all I know is that you are transporting something someone really doesn't want the Infernal Baron to have, or at least not come in possession of, without this employer of ours knowing what it is. We didn't even necessarily have to obtain what you are transporting, but just confirm what it is and report it," the adventurer elaborated, once more saying more than Jake thought any good contractor should about a clearly confidential job.

Also, for someone just meant to incapacitate, the scalekin mage sure did like to go for his vitals.

"And how exactly were you supposed to contact this employer?" Jake questioned, feeling this was the good dialogue tree to go down.

"The Silenced knew a ritual to contact the employer..." the man said, afraid that Jake wouldn't like the answer as he suddenly remembered something. "Ah! But we can contact the broker who put us in contact with the Silenced! He should be able to at least find a representative of the employer! I have a token to do it that should work even at this distance."

"See, that sounds like a workable solution," Jake said with a smile beneath his mask as he decided to put his bow away and, with a single step, teleported down in front of the bearded man, making him flinch. "Do it. Now."

Stolen story; please report.

Without missing a beat, the man did as asked, pulling out a token that looked like a metal slate of some kind. He infused some energy into it as a semi-transparent screen appeared in mid-air. Seconds passed, as the bearded adventurer looked more and more nervous, hoping the broker on the other side would pick up.

After half a minute, there finally was a response. The screen began to warp and got big enough to show an entire person as a figure appeared. The person was hooded, and when the bearded adventurer saw the person, his eyes opened wide.

"Who are you!? Where is Elmin!?"

The figure barely reacted to his outburst, but instead, Jake felt the figure on the other side turn and look him over.

"The Courier, I presume. I see you failed. How unfortunate."

Jake couldn't discern if the voice was male or female, and the hood hid any clues as to the answer. The bearded man seemed even more agitated than before as he yelled loudly.

"What the fuck did you do with-"

"He had served his purpose... and so have you served yours."

Without any warning or even giving Jake the time to react, some energy came alive within the bearded man as he exploded like a popped balloon. The two at his side followed suit as Jake saw even the people in the hideout suffer the same fate. Within

less than three seconds, all of them had died, and in the environment, Jake felt a faintly familiar concept.

Karmic magic... well, fuck me.

"Now, as for you, Courier..." the figure said, keeping their attention on Jake, who had just been standing there even as the blood splashed over him. He hadn't flinched for even a second, and he wasn't going to do so now as he stared at the figure on the other end. He didn't doubt they were, at the very least, well into B-grade, if not higher. At least he made that guess, even if he couldn't feel their actual aura.

"What?" Jake asked, trying to sound almost annoyed. He took this attitude very much on purpose for one simple reason... they couldn't feel how powerful Jake was through the token either. Same as Jake couldn't feel their power. So he would prefer to front that he was maybe stronger than he actually was. Seeing as the token also only relayed sound and visual information, he also slowly prepared for his escape as the stealth skill slowly began to activate.

"Taking an antagonistic attitude will earn you nothing, Courier. Our quarrel is not with you, and we are not your enemies."

"Oh really? Tell that to the little lizard you put in my way," Jake scoffed. "Seemed pretty damn antagonistic to me when he began to throw his metal sticks."

"The Silenced was merely following orders and was perhaps a bit... overzealous in their approach. Capture was ordered as a preferential resolution, but it seems like that was far beyond the capabilities of the Silenced,"the disembodied voice answered. **"However, that matter has already concluded. Rather than dragging out this needless topic, let us proceed with something more productive. Business. You are delivering something we want, and we are willing to compensate you for it."**

That they wanted to strike a deal with Jake instead of just issuing threats was a good start, as Jake crossed his arms. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"Continue your journey as normal. None of our agents shall get in your way, but when you arrive, do not seek out the Infernal Baron. Instead, go to the Guild and inform them you lost the delivery on the way. We will then send someone to find you, and once the item is confirmed, post a Courier Job you are to accept. It shall be ensured that there will be no negative impact on your reputation. If you do this, there will also be a substantial reward waiting, along with new and highly valuable allies."

"Hm," Jake said, looking deep in thought. "I will need to think about it, so give me a few days. I planned on making a small detour on the way, so I wouldn't arrive in the city

before in ten day's time anyway. I assume this is all good on your end? That should also help sell the story if I do wanna go with saying I lost the delivery."

The figure had a brief pause, almost as if consulting with someone, before the voice answered. **"Very well. You are to take this token and use it to contact us once you have an answer. We give you five days to respond, or you will come to regret your-."**

"You know what? I thought we were doing business, not that you suddenly decided you're my boss and can order me around. With that attitude, I guess you'll know when I arrive in the city what I want to do," Jake scoffed. "I'll be in touch."

"Wait, take the-"

Jake's attempt to front himself as someone more powerful than he actually was had entered its final stage. He waved the figure off as he turned around and began walking away while he, at the same time, triggered two skills.

Firstly, Eternal Shadow of activated as a shadowy version of himself casually continued Jake's walk. The real Jake stopped mid-walk as he fully activated his stealth skill, and instantly, he knew it had worked. The projected figure lost sight of the real him as the shadow perfectly replaced Jake, only to disappear into cursed smoke a few steps later.

Jake stood completely still, looking at the projected figure for a few seconds. He couldn't read anything concrete from the person, but it looked like they were discussing something with someone. The figure took a final look around, and five seconds later, the projection disappeared with the token cracking down the middle. A second or so later, the entire token began to crumble entirely into dust and got scattered by the wind. The only evidence of their interaction remaining was the splatters of blood covering the ground.

Not wanting to take any chances, Jake began to fly a good distance away. There was a small forest of sorts nearby, consisting of just a few thousand trees total, but it was a nice spot for Jake to lay low for a while. After he got there, Jake found a nice hidden spot, sat down, and deactivated his boosting skill as the period of weakness washed over him. He could still have held on for a while more, but doing so would only have extended the time he would have to wait.

Entering meditation, Jake reflected on his conversation with the projected figure. Through it, he had confirmed a few things. First of all, they didn't seem like they had any information on Jake as a person at all. If they did, there should have been some surprise that someone registered as barely in C-grade had killed a late-tier C-grade. None of that had happened, making Jake pretty sure the Guild didn't have any information leaks on him, at least.

Secondly, they genuinely had no idea what he was transporting, for if they did, there is no way they would have agreed to him waiting ten days to arrive. The Sealed Elemental would get out of its seal within less than a week, and while it was a possibility this organization or whatever just didn't want the Infernal Baron to have the item, they clearly also wanted it.

Finally, this organization was powerful. Based on how the figure acted, Jake got the impression he hadn't spoken to the big boss but just a subordinate, and if a subordinate was capable of applying karmic magic to trigger some remote bombs placed inside all of the adventurers, the ones actually in charge were definitely not anyone Jake could mess with.

At least not directly. Right now, one of his big advantages was that they also didn't know how strong Jake was. With Shroud of the Primordial, he could hide everything about himself, and even if he showed himself to be in C-grade, many stronger people could hide their grades like that. The mere fact that anyone, even an S-grade, would only see ??? when trying to Identify him would definitely help.

Adding on the fact they were clearly careful in regards to anything with the Guild, Jake believed he had a legit shot at bluffing them. Assuming he wanted to bluff them, that is. There was also one more thing. Jake wasn't even sure if this second path to the Special Courier Job wasn't actually a legitimate option... especially not after he had gotten a system message right after talking to the projected figure.

Special Courier Job 2 updated.

Special Courier Job 2: Transport the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron in the mid-sized city without your cargo being discovered OR Transport the Sealed Elemental to the mid-sized city and instead deliver the Sealed Elemental according to the plans of [Unknown]. Time limit: 7 days.

That's right... a branching quest with multiple outcomes. Actual decision-making was required.

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Chapter 838: Nevermore: Infernal Baron

After recovering from using Arcane Awakening, Jake didn't continue his journey right away. Instead, he took a small break inside the miniature forest to prepare some things.

During the House of the Architect, he had learned to craft both a better poison and to make acid, but after exiting, he had made neither.

Both of those would honestly have been useful in the last fight, especially the acid. If Jake had a good amount, he could have tossed it on the cube or even put some of it into the Protean Arrow he created to more efficiently destroy the scalekin mage's defenses. If he would have used the Heartrot Poison or not was a bit more of a toss-up as the Sleeping Night Toxin was still damn effective, though.

Either way, Jake wanted to at least have the option. Besides, he had improved his general crafting skills and wanted to make a new batch of Sleeping Night Toxin to ensure he had the best poison he could make to prepare for what was to come. There was no doubt in his mind this wouldn't be his only combat encounter with a powerful foe in this Challenge Dungeon.

With regard to the decision Jake had to make regarding where to make his delivery, he didn't really see it as a real choice. In Jake's mind, he had been hired to do a job, and he was going to do that job. It wasn't really about doing what was right or wrong in his head or choosing what was most beneficial to him. Jake just felt like one should stick to an agreement already made, and he wasn't the kind of person to be bought off by someone else.

That isn't to say there was nothing that could make Jake change his mind. If he arrived in this mid-sized city and found out that the Infernal Baron was some psycho who liked to roast and eat children or some other fucked up shit like that, he could totally see himself going to this other organization merely out of spite. Not that he thought the organization was much better, considering they had a propensity to kill everyone Jake had seen them working with so far. Not to mention that they also used slaves based on what Jake heard about this Silenced Order, making him less than positive toward them.

When Jake was done crafting all his poison and two full barrels of acid, he continued his journey. Jake also decided that for the rest of the trip, he would keep his stealth skill active. Due to the main cost coming from activating it, he could have it up pretty much indefinitely. Doing so should also help him appear more mysterious, as the organization wouldn't know how he had gotten to the city in case they had scouts placed on the path. Assuming none of those scouts were high-tier Perception-focused C-grades or B-grades, that is.

The entire encounter with the scalekin mage, projection, and his crafting session had put him back ten or so hours, but Jake believed it would be worth it down the line. He did hope that he wouldn't have any more interruptions for the rest of the way, and hopefully, the stealth skill would help with that.

Days passed uneventfully as Jake got in some good practice with regards to using his stealth skill while also moving quickly and using both One Step and his wings. The system assistance did most of the job for sure, but in just a few days, Jake did manage

to remove some very minor clues as to his presence when using One Step. It was mainly that there were some very minor ripples due to space effectively compressing around him whenever he used the skill, but with some slight tweaks, he also hid those far better. A talented space mage would probably be able to feel them, but the average person definitely wouldn't. At least they couldn't, based on how the beasts didn't react at all despite Jake stepping down practically right next to them.

After a bit over three days of total travel, the mid-sized city appeared in the distance as a small blip. It still took him another seven hours to actually reach it – one of the downsides of extremely high Perception and flying high up in the air – meaning he had used a bit less than half of his allotted time when he finally arrived.

This city was a lot bigger than the small-sized Hillspring, and Jake doubted there were only a few million living there. At least not if one counted the thousands of farmsteads and buzzing villages surrounding the large city itself.

Checking his compass, Jake saw it was pointing toward the very center of the city. From a distance, Jake could see a castle atop what looked like it had once been a volcano, with buildings constructed up its cliffside. While it was a bit on the nose, it definitely looked like the kind of place someone known as the Infernal Baron would live.

However, Jake didn't go there immediately. He stopped a bit outside the city and landed close to the gate entrance so as to not fly inside. If this organization had powerful scouts waiting, flying into the city was a lot more suspicious than using the gates, as only influential and powerful figures could fly into the city according to the laws. Well, them, and of course, Couriers.

That didn't mean Jake would enter officially, though. He kept his stealth skill up as he went through the checkpoint, easily spoofing the magic circle of detection covering the entire city with Shroud of the Primordial. The guards at the gate were all around level 250, which was another decent step up, but none of them looked particularly strong. Jake did sense a far more powerful C-grade inside one of the offices close to the official entrance, though.

When inside the city, Jake considered if he should go to the Infernal Baron immediately or check out the Guild first. Both things seemed risky, though. If the organization had placed people capable of detecting him, it would definitely be at either of those places. Ultimately, he settled on going to the Baron directly.

I need to enter the Baron's place without raising suspicion... Jake thought to himself as he walked casually through the city streets. Just going there directly would definitely be suspicious. As it was on a mountain, he could easily watch from down on the streets how many took the winding path up to the castle gates, and so far, he had seen no one go. As for those flying to the castle, he also only saw a single beast do it.

Jake was considering for a while what to do until he got an idea. The problem wasn't anyone knowing he entered the Baron's castle... it was that they knew it was him entering it. As of this moment, the organization only knew a few things about Jake. They knew how he generally looked, and they knew he was a human, so Jake was thinking... what if he just changed both of those things?

Shroud of the Primordial was a borderline cheat, and with it, he could easily change how he was Identified. As for his looks, while simply wearing a mask would hide any skin, Jake decided that he would be far more suspicious if he tried to fully conceal his identity. So, he had a far better plan.

Finding a building close to the path leading to the Infernal Baron's castle, Jake made sure he wasn't followed as he dipped in and got to work. First, he changed his race and level to display him as a level 270 Scalekin. The level was chosen to show off he was pretty strong but probably not strong enough to have been the one to beat the mage.

As a final touch, Jake switched his clothes to something a bit more casual he shamelessly stole from whoever lived where he had broken in. Once he was fully clothed, he activated the final part of his disguise as dark green scales covered his body, courtesy of Scales of the Malefic Viper.

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Granted, Jake still looked pretty human due to his features, but it wasn't anything egregious. There were many scalekin who just looked like humans with scales covering them, primarily those who were children of a human and a scalekin.

Finding his new looks adequate, Jake exited the building again. Before, he had told himself he wouldn't just fly to the castle as that would be far too bold if there were scouts looking for him... which was exactly why that was exactly what he would be doing.

Taking to the air, Jake did not summon his wings as he just flew using regular energy manipulation. The instant he went into the air and began to make his way toward the castle, dozens of eyes were upon him. Most disappeared a few seconds later, but a good few remained. Some of them even felt pretty damn powerful, but even so, they didn't stand a chance at piercing his Shroud.

Luckily, there was no killing intent within any of them either. Soon enough, Jake also felt some attention land on him from within the castle. Jake was ready for someone to fly out and greet him, especially when he entered the range of a large magic circle covering the entire castle.

His prediction of someone flying out turned out to be slightly off as his senses warned him something was coming. The air around Jake began to slowly solidify as space itself

froze, and Jake felt the presence of a powerful space mage. Choosing not to fight it, Jake stopped flying as a voice spoke in his head.

“This is the Infernal Baron’s personal residence. State your business or turn around,” the voice spoke in his head. Through the mana and the presence in the voice, Jake felt pretty darn certain he was dealing with a B-grade.

“I come for an audience with the Infernal Baron,” Jake answered, kind of hoping he wouldn’t have to say more. While he doubted that is how it worked, the job explicitly stated Jake had to deliver the Sealed Elemental without others finding out what it was, and this could also include some mage working under the Baron. Well, it was also possible this space mage was a plant from the organization, but Jake wouldn’t really bet on it.

“For what purpose?” the voice answered, making Jake curse internally. Saying he was a Courier could give the gig away, especially if the mage demanded to see the delivery. Ultimately, Jake decided that he would try and stay as professional and tight-lipped as possible.

“A matter concerning only the Baron himself. I cannot say anything more than that, but I can swear that should you not allow me this audience, the Infernal Baron will be greatly inconvenienced,” Jake tried.

This was another place where choosing his level to be 270 could come in handy. The Infernal Baron was in B-grade, and no matter what tricks the space mage believed Jake could have up his sleeve, he simply wouldn’t be able to pose any danger.

A few seconds passed while Jake really hoped he would be allowed through before he finally got an answer. *“The Baron has agreed to meet you, with the condition that should you be wasting his time, this will be the last audience you will have with anyone.”*

“He will not be disappointed,” Jake quickly answered in the affirmative. A bit childish with the death threat if Jake was just a fanboy trying to waste the man’s time, but alas. He was the client, and as the saying goes, the customer is always right. Unless when the customer is a fucking idiot, in which case they are probably rarely right about anything.

The space around Jake loosened as a portal appeared right in front of him. Jake took the cue and entered, finding himself standing in what looked a bit like the throne room soon after. There was no throne, though, but a cozy-looking set of armchairs with a small table between them. On one of these chairs sat a woman who still gave off some space mana, making him certain she had been the one to summon the portal.

On the other was a human who looked to be in his twenties, a bit younger than Jake expected. He had a thin red beard and deep red hair, and just being in the room as him, Jake felt the temperature increase. Both of them also gave off B-grade auras, and not just early B-grade either.

“So, you wanted an audience?” the man said, leaning back and raising an eyebrow. “I sincerely hope for you this is not a waste of my time.”

Jake looked at the man and woman as he answered. “I believe it would be best if this matter is only discussed with the Baron.”

“Oh?” the Baron smiled and turned to the woman. “Heard that? He wants you gone.”

Before the woman could even respond, Jake sent a telepathic message to the Baron, one the B-grade luckily didn’t reject.

“I am a Courier, and I believe I have something for you.”

His facial expression didn’t change in the slightest as the Baron kept looking at the space mage, who answered with a small scoff. “Quite rude to come in here and begin to make demands.”

“But also ballsy,” the Baron pointed out. “Look, let’s play along, eh? I will be sure to tell you all the funny details later.”

The woman looked at the man a bit perplexed, but eventually nodded. “As you will.”

Standing up, she gave Jake a single more glance before she disappeared from the room in a ripple of space magic. The Baron waved his hand right after as a barrier encased the entire room, hiding their conversation from any curious listeners. At least, that is what the Baron probably believed it would do.

“So, what do you-“

“There is still a third party capable of hearing us,” Jake warned the man telepathically. This chapter is updated by **novel**  **net**

The Baron had stopped himself mid-sentence and stared at Jake before asking out loud. “How do you know that?”

At this point, Jake had to assume the man was trying to be unsubtle on purpose, as he just answered normally. “I have my ways.”

Narrowing his eyes, the Baron stared deeply at Jake. “I know who is listening, and it is fine. However, do tell me...”

Without Jake reacting in the slightest, a magic circle appeared below him, as the Baron let out a bit of power and used his presence to try and partly suppress Jake. It was just intimidation, really.

“Who exactly are you?”

“A Courier here to make a delivery,” Jake answered in a calm tone.

The Baron scoffed. “Are you daft? I know the information on the Courier I hired. Early-tier C-grade human male. The only one of those things you are is a guy, so do not make me repeat myself a third time... who are you?”

Sighing a bit internally, Jake had to confess he hadn’t expected the man in front of him to be so careful. He had wanted to hide who he was from others, but hiding from the client hadn’t been part of the plan.

“I am exactly the one you hired,” Jake responded as he took out his Courier Medallion. “Look, the job is infused into this Medallion by the Guild itself. Currently, I am just in disguise as I met some... trouble along the way.”

To prove his point, Jake had the scales slowly recede and disappear on his face.

Staring at the Medallion, the Infernal Baron seemed to be capable of telling Jake was at least telling the truth about that.

“Assuming I believe you, do you have the goods?” the Baron questioned.

“Before that, I believe it pertinent to know who this third-party observer is,” Jake answered, not showing the slightest sense of fear despite the magic circle still beneath his feet, ready to erupt in flames that would burn him to a crisp. “The job was very clear on the fact that I was not to allow anyone to know of this delivery besides the Baron.”

Narrowing his eyes, the Baron waved his concerns off. “I already told you it’s fine.”

“The order was clear,” Jake insisted.

“Do not test my patie-“

“**Enough,**” a voice cut through the room, and Jake had to hide a small smile as the third person finally revealed himself, at least in part.

Between Jake and the Baron, a figure made out of pure flames appeared. He was not there in person but was using some form of projection skill. The moment he showed up, the Baron hurriedly stood up and fell to his knees, not even looking up. Jake naturally remained standing.

The man who had just appeared looked just like the Baron in front of him, except a bit older. His aura was also different, not just in power. Jake felt the man’s innate authority. It stemmed from something Jake hadn’t really cared a lot about or dedicated much attention to... the nobility system. Something pretty rare, considering many who claimed themselves kings or nobles did not have the actual system title to back it up.

“Let us not bother a man simply sticking to unparalleled professional ethics,” the figure of flames said in a playful, scolding tone as he kept his eyes on Jake. Instantly, Jake knew the man in front of him was on a whole other level compared to the Baron.

A-grade... close to S-grade, probably...

“Allow me to introduce myself, Courier. I am known as the Duke of Flames, the father of the one who hired you, and the true client of this job,” the man who revealed himself to be a Duke answered as he flashed a big smile. **“And I believe you might just be what we’ve been looking for.”**

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- Chapter 839: Nevermore: Special Side Job

Chapter 839: Nevermore: Special Side Job

Jake definitely felt like he had unlocked some secret quest chain or something. Delivering to a B-grade through a Special Courier Job this early on was already a pretty big achievement, but now even an A-grade had appeared before him. Plus, because Jake did know a bit about the world he found himself in, he understood how important someone like a Duke was.

The specific country Jake found himself in had only three total dukes and one king. All the dukes and the king were A-grade, with the strongest fighting force of the entire kingdom being part of the duke factions or directly under the king. This is to say, someone with the Duke title was pretty much at the top of the Challenge Dungeon world both in power and influence.

There were also some S-grades out there, but they were few and far between. Some were hidden Lord Protectors, some were like the Founder of the Guild and did their own stuff, while others were in isolation or had left the world for the stars, with no one knowing where they were.

However, despite all this, there was still one tiny problem with the Duke showing up.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Jake said with a nod. “But I still have to make my delivery first... and despite you being his father and the true client, my job doesn’t specify any of that. Would it be possible for you to give us a moment alone? I am certain we can discuss after.”

The Duke seemed taken aback as he looked Jake up and down for a few moments. The Baron also stared daggers at Jake, and looked like he wanted to blow up the magic circle beneath Jake any second. There was definitely tension rising until the Duke let out a slight chuckle that turned into a full-on laugh.

"Good! Even before me, you refuse to compromise in the slightest! Very good! I shall do as asked and give you a moment. My son here will signal me when we can return to the true discussion at hand," the Duke said as the flaming figure faded away, and a second later, Jake confirmed he was no longer peeking, actually sticking to his word.

"You are lucky you weren't reduced to a mere pile of ash," the Baron said with a scoff. "To dare show such disrespect toward the Duke..."

"I showed no disrespect, merely the professionalism I was hired to display," Jake said in an as professional voice as he could. "Now that it is just the two of us, let us confirm the delivery."

Waving his hand, Jake took out Eternal Hunger. "Let me just retrieve it right quick."

Considering Jake had eaten the item, he also needed a way to get it out again. While forcing himself to throw it up was certainly one possibility, he felt like it was a bit too nasty to show in front of a client. Stabbing himself in the stomach and pulling out the Sealed Elemental direct was definitely more polite, right?

The Infernal Baron looked on as Jake gutted himself, frowning a bit when Jake pulled out the orb. Jake assumed he was just nervous that the item had been ruined, which was almost offensive. He was no amateur Courier who would ruin the delivery in such a reckless manner. Shit, Jake even made sure not to spill a single drop of blood on the Baron's floor but kept it all inside, and what little did drop out was burned away with destructive arcane mana before it ever reached the ground.

With the item successfully extracted, Jake quickly removed the stable layer of arcane mana around the Sealed Elemental and used Identify on it just for good measure... because the result definitely took him by surprise.

[Sealed Elemental (Unique)] – A sealed elemental of the fire affinity can be found within. Due to the shoddy work of the ones who sealed it, this item is slowly deteriorating and will reach critical failure in less than a week (6 days). Any attempt to interfere with this item may result in the seal breaking prematurely.

The seal on the item was meant to last seven days in total. However, despite around three and a half days passing, it said the seal would still last another six days. Jake suppressed a frown as he didn't outwardly display any of his surprise. Internally, he did wonder what was going on, though.

Wait... maybe it's a bit like those items the Nalkar vampires tried to preserve back in the Order? he considered after a bit, and the more he thought about it, the more right he thought he was.

Every item decayed with time. Even equipment would lose its enchantments if long enough passed, just turning into inert objects worth less than the raw materials it was made up of. It would take a long time, with equipment pretty much always outlasting the lifespan of whoever originally wore it, but it was inevitable. With maintenance, an item could be kept active for an even longer period, if not nearly indefinitely, by effectively replacing the enchantments with new identical ones, using the same framework set by the original creator. If one could get an equally skilled crafter with a similar Path to the original creator, of course.

Some items were a bit harder or complicated to maintain. In the case of the Nalkar vampires, they didn't want to re-enchant anything, as that would effectively destroy the original items as it was, while other items simply couldn't be maintained. This mainly happens with items of legendary rarity or above. Finding someone capable of re-enchanting these items was often borderline-impossible due to the Records in the item and the difficulty of finding a crafter with a similar enough Path. Luckily, they would last a long time by themselves anyway, but even they would lose their power with time. In these cases, the best way to preserve them was to simply make sure they didn't degrade as fast.

The vampires used complicated formations to make this possible, each creating a beneficial environment for every individual item, but for some, all they could do was isolate it from all outside influences... which was exactly what Jake had done with the Sealed Elemental.

Jake's stable arcane affinity was really fucking good at isolating things. In all honesty, Jake hadn't expected it to work as he assumed the item was breaking down primarily due to system-fuckery, but seeing it work was a pleasant surprise nonetheless. He knew that even with total isolation, deterioration would still exist, but to see how effective his stable arcane affinity was with just a simple barrier was nice.

"Let me see it," the Infernal Baron said as he waved his hand, and the ping-pong ball-sized item flew toward the B-grade. Once he had the item in his hand, he made a small hand motion as sparks flew, and a big smile appeared on his face.

"Great, and it's in an even better condition than I expected," the man said, looking incredibly pleased. "And now that I have the item, I presume you have no more complaints if the Duke rejoins us?"

"My job here is done," Jake shrugged.

Snapping his fingers, a faint pulse of mana was released, and less than a second later, the flaming figure of the Duke of Flames flared back to life. **"I assume all is well now?"**

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"Yes, father," the Baron said as he held up the item. "An early C-grade fire elemental variant."

The flaming figure nodded as he turned his attention back to Jake. **"Now for you, Courier. I remember you saying you met some challenges along your journey. Would you enlighten me as to the details?"**

Jake considered for a moment if he should explain everything or not and in the end, saw no good reason not to. Plus, based on the words the Duke of Flames had said about Jake being what they had been looking for, he was pretty damn sure this was the start of a major quest chain, and withholding information could potentially lead to him missing out.

"Very well..." Jake said as he briefly explained what had happened. He included how he had met the adventurers, fought and killed the Silent scalekin mage, and the subsequent appearance of the shadowy figure that used – or had someone use – karmic magic to kill every witness. To finish with, he informed the Duke of Flames and the Baron of the offer they had made him to give the elemental to them instead while noting that these people did not seem to know what Jake was actually delivering.

"I see... things were much as we had expected," the Duke of Flames said after Jake was done talking. With a serious gaze, he looked directly at Jake. **"Let me ask you first, Courier... are you willing to take on work that may be more risky than any you have encountered prior? Jobs that may very well prove lethal if the slightest mistake or slipup is made?"**

Jake was more sure than ever that he had just stumbled across a special quest chain and quickly nodded. "If the job is worthwhile doing, I see no reason to reject it. Of course, I will need to know the details first."

The Baron glared at Jake again, clearly not happy he would even insinuate he wouldn't downright agree with anything his father wanted. The man in question, on the other hand, didn't seem offended in the slightest.

"I expect nothing less from a Courier of your level," the man said with a smile. **"Do not worry. Everything I will ever ask you will naturally go through the Guild. You are a Courier, after all."**

"In that case, I will temporarily agree," Jake said.

"Good. Now, allow me to get you up to date as to why I may need your assistance," the Duke of Flames began as Jake felt a big lore dump and quest description incoming. **"The elemental you have just brought us is not for me or my**

son, but my daughter. Our Legacy revolves around consuming elementals to progress and refine the powers of our flames, and the more powerful and higher-tiered the variant of the elemental, the better. Many do not agree with this Path, some of which you encountered on your way here.”

Jake nodded along. He did know such things existed, and there were even quite a few alchemists who consumed numerous Soulflames. Actually, wasn't Jake a bit like this? Just that instead of eating elementals to progress, he could eat poisons.

“This organization, as they call themselves, has been hounding my household for the last century or so. In the beginning, they were just a minor nuisance, creating some ultimately inconsequential challenges, but in the recent decade, they have grown in power at a frightening speed. Especially the last year has resulted in more trouble than ever before. I believe powerful forces have gotten involved, but I cannot prove anything or have uncovered any evidence... I need someone like you to help me with just that,” the Duke of Flames explained, giving Jake a good background for the upcoming quest chain. He did have one burning question, though.

“I fail to understand why you would need a C-grade Courier that badly. Are there not more powerful and skilled people available already working under you?” Jake questioned.

“I cannot make any moves myself. As a Duke, everything I do is closely monitored. I cannot even leave my residence in peace without potentially causing a conflict with another faction, and as you come to learn more details of what I need your help with, my limited abilities to act will become even clearer. My family, for the most part, also suffers the same fate of inability to assist, as does all those officially part of the dukedom. While I do have some hidden cards, their affiliation with this kingdom is impossible to hide. You, however, I have looked into. You are related to no one and nowhere. A clean slate that even my best spymaster nor the Guild could find a single detail about before you appeared and signed up to be a Courier. That is exactly why I need someone like you.”

“I take it this organization causing you trouble is based in another country?” Jake guessed after hearing what the Duke had to say. It made sense based on everything else the man said, especially when he mentioned his inability to act directly.

The Duke smiled. **“That is correct, but alas, things are not that simple. If it was just a faction from another country, I would have been able to make some moves, but the last time I tried to, I found myself blocked by an unknown power. Coupled with the recent rise in power of this organization, I can only reach one conclusion. Someone from this kingdom has gotten involved with them, and if I am right, it is one of the other dukedoms, if not the royal family themselves.”**

“Assuming you are correct, why would they choose to ally with an organization actively trying to sabotage one of their fellow nobles, especially one from a different country? Purely internal politics?”

“Some politics, yes, but primarily fear. The other dukes and even the king himself have stagnated. The Lord Protector is peak A-grade but failed to evolve even after so long, and his lifespan is running out. If the Lord Protector dies, I will take the top spot as the most powerful person in the kingdom, something a lot of people don’t want. My problem is that all of them are publicly supporting me, and there are even talks of naming me Grand Duke,” the A-grade continued. **“Meanwhile, behind the scenes, I already know many of them are subtly trying to keep me in check, as I am the only one remaining who has a legitimate chance at reaching S-grade.”**

Listening to the story, Jake honestly thought all these other nobles were either short-sighted or just downright dumb. Sure, if they were talking about the kingdom in isolation, it was more understandable to try and keep the competition down, but if everything the Duke of Flames said was true – which Jake got the feeling it was – wouldn’t they just leave themselves in a vulnerable situation after the Lord Protector died if they had no one to take their place?

Jake also didn’t like the entire notion of keeping others down to remain strong in comparison. In his opinion, those dukes and the king should just get their shit together and stop being wussies who had “stagnated.”

Stagnation was just a bad excuse for having stopped trying to progress. It was something people who had taken the “easy” route said when they stopped being able to pick the low-hanging fruits and didn’t dare to try and climb the tree itself. Any of these A-grades could stand up right now and seek out whatever powerful beings lived in this world, or maybe just fly into the starry sky and look for the monsters roaming in space.

“I am still not entirely certain what exactly you want to hire me for,” Jake said after hearing everything the Duke of Flames had to say and better understanding the situation.

“It is a lot to ask... but I need you to get an in with this organization, and you have already been presented with a golden opportunity,” the Duke of Flames answered as he threw the Infernal Baron a glance. The Baron nodded and tossed the Sealed Elemental back to Jake.

“Take the delivery and give it to them, just as they asked,” he explained. **“In truth, we don’t really need this particular variant much. Getting a Courier into the organization is far more valuable, at least. Of course, we have to ensure they do not know you are doing this with my knowledge, so you need to find a way to hide it before meeting them in order to not raise any suspicion. Are you up to the task?”**

As the man asked this, it finally appeared. The kind of system message Jake had been waiting for.

Special Courier Side Job: Assist the Duke of Flames in delivering the Sealed Elemental to [Unknown] without letting them know you have met with the Infernal Baron yet.

Objective: Package delivered (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

With a nod to the Duke, Jake accepted the system prompt, too. Jake had many thoughts about what this Challenge Dungeon would be about, but in all honesty, he had never expected him to get a job as a double agent in a political game while working for a late-tier A-grade Duke.

It was definitely a novel experience, and Jake was all for it. Follow current novels on *novel·fire·net*

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Chapter 840: Nevermore: Infinite Loop Agent

Mission: Mysterious Organization Double-Agent Infiltration went much more smoothly than Jake had expected. After he left the Baron's place, Jake went and just relaxed in the city for a day as he sat down and did a bit more crafting. After this day, he left the city again, still disguised as a scalekin.

Once a good distance away, and when he was sure no one was watching, he changed himself back to looking like – and Identifying as – a human before flying back toward the city with his stealth skill active while also wearing his usual getup. Once he got close to the mid-sized city again, Jake dispelled his stealth skill while still flying up in the air, instantly feeling many gazes on him.

This time, he showed no subtlety but just flew into the city. During the conversation with the mysterious hooded figure, the person had told him to go to the Guild and say that he had lost the package during transportation, and while Jake wasn't a fan of doing that, the Baron and Duke assured him they would still report the job as completed successfully to not impact Jake's reputation negatively.

However, as it turned out, this wasn't even necessary...

Shortly after Jake entered the Guild, and before he even had a chance to approach one of the employees, a regular-looking guy sitting off to the side of the room sent him a telepathic message.

"Excuse me, you're a Courier, right? Might you be coming out of Hillspring City? I have an aunt living there, and I heard some bad news..." the person said. Disregarding how weird it was to send a telepathic message to say something like that, Jake knew this was just a probing question.

"I am indeed. The trip was long, but when you have an important delivery to an even more important client, you cannot slack off too much," Jake replied. *"One in high places, both figuratively and literally."*

"You have arrived earlier than I expected," the person said when he affirmed Jake was the one. *"I am here representing a mutual friend. Please play along."*

Due to the speed of telepathy, Jake had barely entered the Guild as the man sitting close to the door stood up and opened his arms wide. "Bloody hell, you're finally here! Lizzy has been on my ass since she heard you were coming. Good to see you, buddy."

The man went over and dragged Jake into a hug, Jake naturally playing along. "You know how it is with work and everything. Can't always know my schedule ahead of time, but hey, I'm here, aren't I?"

"That you are! Now, let's get going before she rips both of us a new one!"

Jake did as asked and nodded as the two walked out together while making idle chatter. No one seemed to care about the reunion of two old friends, and Jake and the other guy quickly got away from the Guild as they headed toward a large mansion close to the outer walls, no one following them.

The man Jake had met was barely C-grade, and someone Jake later came to learn was pretty much just a middleman who worked for a wealthy lady – Lizzy - in the mansion. However, in order to appear less suspicious, the two of them acted as if they were in a relationship. These were the first two people Jake met, who he confirmed were part of this organization, even if they were auxiliary members who pretty much carried out direct orders without questions while knowing pretty much nothing about the organization that employed them.

Once in the mansion, Lizzy and the man introduced themselves and, after some probing questions, fully confirmed Jake was who he said he was. Jake was subsequently led into a cellar beneath the mansion, where he was left alone with a token and surrounded by quite a powerful barrier. One definitely not made by the two C-grades living there.

Down in the cellar, Jake activated the small token the pretend-couple had given him, and soon after, a familiar hoddied figure appeared.

"I am glad to see you are reasonable, not only in your decision to take us up on the offer but by not delaying your arrival needlessly,"the figure said right away, not even saying hello or anything.

Jake had already taken out a chair before he used the token and was currently sitting in a relaxed pose. Very purposefully, mind you. He had been fronting himself as a powerful individual with this organization before, and he was going to keep doing so.

"Eh, I thought I might as well get things done quicker this way," Jake shrugged.

"Nevertheless. It was a wise choice, and I hope you continue to make wise choices," the figure answered. **"Now, could you confirm the nature of the item the Infernal Baron wanted you to deliver? Show it to me?"**

"Patience, patience. Before all that, let me just explain things a bit from my viewpoint," Jake said as he leaned forward and looked directly into where he suspected the eyes of the hooded figure would be. "I am right now stuck between two factions. Some nobleman Baron, and a shadowy organization that has been semi-threatening me from the get-go. I am entirely neutral toward this Baron as I, quite frankly, don't know shit about him. Meanwhile, you have made less than a stellar first impression, which I would heavily advise you to address. Especially as I also get a strong impression you want more than just to buy a delivery from me. So, how about we start with some honesty before we proceed? Who exactly are you?"

The figure was silent for a few moments, Jake getting the feeling the person was consulting with someone. After a few seconds, they spoke again. **"Very well... how much do you know of the Infernal Baron and the family he belongs to?"**

"Fuck all," Jake shrugged.

"Then allow me to enlighten you..."

Jake got his second lore dump of the last two days as the figure explained most of the same things the Duke of Flames had. It mentioned how it was a big family, how their patriarch was a duke and near the peak of A-grade, and how their Path included consuming – thus killing – elementals as part of their Path. Of course, the tone of the explanation was a lot different than the Duke's.

While the Duke of Flames had presented everything with a sense of pride and matter-of-fact, this figure had a lot more emotion. It was clear they didn't like the family at all. Fact-wise, things were pretty much the same, though, and Jake got the impression neither party was lying about anything. They just had their own spin on things.

"As for our organization... we oppose the Duke of Flames and the actions of his vile spawn. They are a scourge upon this world, and cleansing it of their presence

would be a blessing,” the figure finished. “As for details... I will need to see if you truly have the delivery in question before saying more.”

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By now, Jake thought he had done enough to not appear like a pushover. He hadn't been entirely subservient, which was exactly how he wanted things to be. Same as with the Duke of Flames. Jake was a contractor, not an employee, so the person who hired him wasn't allowed to say jack-shit about how Jake did things, and he wanted to make it very clear he always had the option of giving them the middle finger and quitting, if just out of pure spite if they tried to fuck him over. This text is hosted at *novel•fire•net*

“Alright, fine,” Jake said as he dug into a pocket in his cloak and took out the Sealed Elemental, which he had re-cast a stable arcane barrier on. Quickly erasing the barrier, the shadowy figure used Identify on the item, confirming its authenticity but making no moves for Jake to hand it over.

“The genuine delivery indeed,” the figure said with a nod. “Thank you for trusting us with this... but before we continue, may I ask you. If you were to choose between supporting the dukedom that I told you about or an organization you knew borderline nothing of but who opposed this dukedom, who would you support?”

The question sounded genuine, but Jake didn't really appreciate the fact that the barrier he was standing within apparently also had the ability to discern lies. At least the figure tried to find out if Jake was lying using it, naturally failing upon encountering Shroud. It would under usual circumstances, that is, but this time around, Jake let it go through as his honest answer was one he was fine with the organization knowing.

“I would support whoever offers me the most. I became a Courier to challenge myself and to gain as much recognition as possible as I grow my reputation and rank. Who I work for doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things as long as I benefit,” Jake answered genuinely. Of course, he didn't include the part where he only did all this to get a lot of Nevermore Points and a great Grand Achievement, but hey, they didn't ask.

“A purely selfish approach where pragmatism takes precedence, I see... but let me ask. What do you think of elementals? How do you see them?”

“With my eyes?” Jake said with a smirk. “But in all seriousness, I can't tell you how I feel about an elemental before meeting them, now can I? People are different, and I am sure some of them are assholes.”

Once more, Jake allowed the lie-detector skill to fully work. Based on all the context clues, Jake was pretty damn sure this organization was very pro-elemental and cared a lot about them, so making himself appear sympathetic toward them would prove

beneficial. Also, it was pretty easy to say he didn't have anything against elementals, considering he didn't.

"You referred to elementals as people... I hope you realize how rare that is," the figure said.

Shrugging, Jake kept up his casual demeanor. "I mean, considering I have a niece of sorts who is an elemental, it would be very weird for me not to consider them people."

Alright, technically, Sylphie wasn't just an elemental but a weird mix between beast and elemental, but that did make her at least partly elemental, which made Jake's statement not a lie.

"I see... I believe I can explain a bit more about who we are and what we stand for, and with this explanation, you will understand who you should truly support..."

Once again, it was lore dump time. As expected, the group that hated the Duke of Flames could be summed up as a hardcore elemental rights organization. Not the peaceful protest kind either, but the type to actively try and kill every single member of the dukedom in what they felt was a justified position. The figure even explained how killing anyone who helped the dukedom in any way was the right thing to do. Even if that help only came in the form of being a poor E-grade farmer.

That is when Jake learned that the "inconsequential challenges" the Duke of Flames talked about them doing for nearly a century were things like this elemental rights organization slaughtering thousands of E and even some D-grades in the Duke's territory in what were effectively terrorist attacks.

Something the Duke evidently didn't give a shit about. He only started to care when the organization began to mess with his ability to collect rare elemental variants. Oh, by the way, rare variants tended to also be the sapient sort and not the regular mindless elementals, so... yeah.

After listening and assuming everything he had learned about this scenario was true, Jake reached a conclusion:

They both fucking sucked.

Alas, Jake was not in the Challenge Dungeon to pass judgment, and he was in no position to. At least not yet...

Luckily, the shadowy figure was finally finishing the lengthy explanation of the organization's goals, and just in time before Jake decided the Grand Achievement wasn't worth listening to the extremist speech.

"... and once the elemental race can once more roam freely, fearless of the monstrous Duke and his spawn, only then will our quest be complete. Only when the Path is driven to utter ruin and every single person of that horrible Lineage dead is it time to celebrate. When their legacy is nothing but a bad memory! So let me ask you, Courier... are you willing to be on the side of justice?"

"If justice is the one who offers the best terms, then yes," Jake said, not buying into the extremism. "But hey, if it's also fighting the good fight, that's just a nice bonus."

"I understand you do not share our conviction, but not to worry, that is no requirement. As a Courier, let your actions speak. So let me request of you your first mission. We need information on the Duke of Flames from an insider, and we believe that you could become that insider. Be our agent at his side who will assist us. Of course, to do that, sacrifices must be made, and while it is a shame that a young Soothfire Elemental will meet its end in such a horrific way, the Sealed Elemental must be delivered in order to not raise suspicion. So, are you willing to assist us?"

As the person said this, not one but two notifications popped up. One saying he had completed a side job, and one giving him another.

Special Courier Side Job Completed.

Special Courier Side Job: Deliver the Sealed Elemental to the Infernal Baron.

Objective: Package delivered (0/1)

Accept Side Job?

So... yeah, Jake had to head back to the Infernal Baron again to deliver the Sealed Elemental for the second time to the same person. It was a bit silly, but Jake was pretty sure he had just gone from being a potential double agent to now potentially being a triple agent.

Also, Jake learned that somehow, the organization knew the name of the elemental within the Sealed Elemental item... which made him suspect they maybe somehow knew all along? In either case, shit was getting complicated, and Jake hoped he would be able to keep up with all the nonsense going on.

After Jake left the mansion, he headed straight for the Infernal Baron's place again. He still went through the trouble of disguising himself and whatnot, pretty much just putting on a show as he felt people keep an eye on him – showing the organization still wasn't super trusting quite yet – as he made his way to the Baron.

Of course, the Baron also knew that Jake could be under surveillance, so everyone acted as if it was Jake's first time going. Once he was finally in front of the Baron and re-delivered the Sealed Elemental, the questioning began.

Jake only gave half-truths as he explained his meeting, ending with the organization potentially wanting Jake to join. He purposefully didn't mention anything about them wanting Jake to infiltrate the Duke's faction but did throw in that he believed that was something they could want down the line.

So, to summarize, Jake was now working with the dukedom to infiltrate the elemental rights organization that wanted Jake to work with the dukedom, who wanted Jake to infiltrate the organization, who wanted Jake with the dukedom... both sides believing they were the smart cookies who had thought up this wonderful plan, not knowing the other party had the exact same idea.

Where did this leave Jake? Well, from an outside perspective, he could now openly associate with the dukedom faction. He also didn't need to be careful if he ever met with the organization, as that was what the Duke expected Jake to do. Yep, things were definitely a mess, and Jake was looking forward to what kind of high-octane mission he would receive as what he would describe as an infinite loop agent.

"The first step has been taken, but we still need to work through the Guild, seeing as you are a Courier. We will need some time to organize things, and we will contact you soon. However, to ensure that you qualify for the next task, it would be pertinent to work on improving your reputation as a Courier and upgrade your Medallion," the Duke of Flames said as their meeting finished, pouring water all over Jake's hopes and dreams.

That's right... it was back to grinding regular old Courier Jobs, showing that even when one moved up in the world to become an infinite loop agent, one still couldn't quit the grind.

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Chapter 841: Nevermore: On the Grindset

"You two had a lot of fun with this one, huh?" the Viper commented as he watched Jake perform Courier Job after Courier Job. Despite it not being outright confirmed yet, he had the strong impression that both Minaga and the Wyrmgod had been heavily involved with this particular Challenge Dungeon.

"Fun? Do you have any idea how much work it was?" Minaga said with a sigh. "Out of every Challenge Dungeon, this one took by far the longest. Well, besides the Test of Character, but I wasn't much involved with that, so it doesn't count."

"I take it Nevermore itself also got quite involved with the balancing?" Vilastromoz further inquired.

"The sheer complexity of having so many starting points, all the quest paths, and keeping it all dynamic and adapting to the Nevermore Attendee required far more work than initially estimated. The original plan was to have this Challenge Dungeon ready last era, but we had to delay it primarily due to Nevermore and the system not accepting the balancing," the Wyrmgod explained; many gods who were capable of listening in very interested in getting some insights into the World Wonder.

"Not certain I would call this balanced," the Blightfather decided to chime in. "Seeing Azal also doing the Challenge Dungeon pretty much confirmed the lack of critical thinking from many of the characters. They are too trusting and, in certain cases, either too easily fooled, while in other instances, getting any kind of advantage is borderline impossible."

"We are well aware," the Wyrmgod sighed. "However, it was necessary to do it like this. If we tried to adhere to realism too much, the time required to unlock any high-level quest path would simply take far too long, so we had to tweak the logic of the world quite a lot. With the aim of the Challenge Dungeon taking around two years on average for the high-performers, this is the solution we settled on."

"Also, you cannot argue that some individuals aren't simply this trusting, even among the higher grades. People can get blinded by their goals and consider what they do so important and justified that they automatically assume everyone else will share their opinion, thus seeing no need to be critical. Having the ability to identify these people and distinguish them from the less fanatical is most definitely a skill worth learning,"

"Even so, it teaches many unrealistic lessons along with the healthy ones," the Blightfather insisted. "Additionally, it makes little sense to remove all status from everyone. As a variant Risen of the highest echelon, Azal should have been recognized, yet the denizens of the Challenge Dungeon seem incapable of doing so, even daring to treat him like a lesser. It goes against their very Records to act like that."

"Race isn't something that should give an advantage in this dungeon, same as Blessings, and even the status as a Bloodline Patriarch or Transcendant also won't offer any notable advantages," the Wyrmgod argued back.

"Such a fundamental change to social dynamics for certain races shouldn't be taken that lightly. How would you view it if..."

Vilastromoz remained quiet, not really having much to add as the two Primordials discussed openly for all to hear. It was rare for such a lively discussion to appear, and while both of them went at each other, the Viper also knew both enjoyed it. As sad as it sounds, it was rare to find people even willing to argue back who wouldn't just take anything you said as gospel, so to get pushback was almost novel.

The Viper considered getting involved just for the fun of it but decided against it as the topic didn't overly interest him. The only thing he really cared about was the information that the Challenge Dungeon was new, and it being new meant one thing:

It was exploitable.

All the Challenge Dungeons had obvious exploits that got fixed with every new iteration. Minaga's Labyrinth and how he improved his special mist was a prime example of this, with every one of the Challenge Dungeons having similar improvements and "nerfs" to certain Paths every new era. Seeing as this was the first, it meant many things had yet to be fully ironed out, as it was simply impossible to account for every Path without some live testing. The only reason the system accepted it despite the flaws that would be revealed was that every attendant who competed had the same circumstances and the same opportunities to take advantage.

As for what specific exploits were to be found... well, Vilastromoz already had one minor oversight in mind. One he was certain Jake would be able to take full advantage of, even if he did so unknowingly. In fact, he had already been exploiting it despite not realizing it yet.

No one else seemed to have really noticed either, making the Viper smile to himself. *This should be a good one...*

--

Time quickly passed as Jake was back on the job, on that grindset. The Courier Jobs were similar to the ones he had done before, but there was a slight twist. After Jake had done exactly twenty, he was contacted by the Infernal Baron, who informed him that an important job was upcoming and that Jake would need to upgrade his Medallion within three months to be able to accept it. So, he had some more pressure on him to get promoted in time... alright, not really. Jake had plenty of time.

He completed the jobs incredibly quickly and efficiently, and he never once really ran into any problems. It was to the level where Jake questioned what was actually being tested, as the scams he was exposed to all seemed way too obvious to Jake.

Then again, maybe it was just because Jake had grown up on Earth where one could – for some inexplicable reason – sell through social media with little oversight or regulation, with every second seller just being a straight-up scammer. From that, Jake

learned some basic lessons about making deals like this and was taught some damn common sense.

His number one rule was to always stick to the agreement, almost to a fault. Oh, did the client want to change the delivery location last minute? Nope, Jake would go to the original place. Someone else was sent to pick up the delivery? Not gonna happen; only the client would get it. While this did make people mad, Jake wasn't going to risk things needlessly. Sticking to just a few basic principles like this seemed to serve Jake very well, and in the instances where he did have to show some flexibility, he believed he managed well and showed proper caution.

In the end, the time limit indeed didn't prove an issue, as he, well ahead of time, got his Medallion upgraded along with yet another promotion at work.

[Courier Medallion (Rare)] – A Courier Medallion belonging to an experienced Courier who is beginning to build up quite the renown. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

With his promotion, Jake could finally get Special Courier Job 3. As for this one... well, things just liked to get more complicated, as the Duke of Flames was the first to give Jake a task.

"There is a political conference taking place in the Phoenix Wing Empire. We of the Human Kingdom will naturally send a delegation. I need you to deliver something to someone I have working in an outpost in the Empire before the delegation arrives and work with my subordinate there to uncover any potential people related to this organization who may attend the conference. But for now, go to the organization and see if you can discover more and report to my subordinate once you arrive in the city of the conference. We will post an official job tomorrow morning for a Courier to deliver a package of important documents to the outpost, so make sure to accept it."

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Right after Jake had gotten this task, he naturally went straight to the elemental rights organization, which Jake had decided to rename the People for the Ethical Treatment of Elementals organization for no particular reason. PETE, for short. Yes, it was a very original name that Jake had thought up entirely on his own without any inspiration whatsoever.

Anyway, Jake naturally informed PETE of what the Duke wanted him to do, and they, of course, also had a task for him.

"Some of our core members will also attend this conference, just as he suspects, and we will need you to ensure they are not discovered by the Duke of Flames. Go to the Phoenix Wing Empire as the Duke wants, and once there, make contact with one of the members and work with them to keep them safe, and while you're there, attempt to discover if the Duke has any allies within the Phoenix Wing Empire. Also, we believe the Duke may be suspecting some of the plants within his dukedom working with us. Try to find out who he suspects so we can extract them in time."

It was two tasks that weren't mutually exclusive, and Jake naturally decided to kind of do both.

He kept up his act as an infinite loop agent as he made executive decisions as to what information he would share, giving just enough to keep both sides happy. PETE wanted Jake to help extract those the Duke suspected? Alright, Jake would help the majority of them get away, not telling them that the way the Duke located them in the first place was due to Jake.

By the way, the city Jake had gone to for this conference was another mid-sized city, but one slightly larger than the one the infernal Baron had been at, showing Jake was truly moving up in the world. For this entire conference, only C-grades were present, likely because no country wanted a bunch of B-grades and above to be in their lands due to how big of a security risk it was. They would still communicate using projections, but all of the powerful people worked from home.

This second mid-sized city in the Phoenix Wing Empire differed vastly from what could be found in the Human Kingdom. The architecture was much more vertical, with large hollowed-out trees sometimes serving as buildings, with the general architecture taking heavy inspiration from nature. Population-wise, it was still a mix, but it was clear this Empire had a lot more beasts and beastfolk compared to the Human Kingdom.

What they also had were elementals in human form, all of which were more than antagonistic toward the Duke's people. They were oddly fine with Jake, even when he was with the Duke's people, showing how overpowered the status of a Courier was.

When it came to the job at hand, the entire conference was a bit of a mess, if Jake was being honest, but he did discover many exciting things he disclosed to both PETE and the dukedom, making them trust him even more than before. During the conference, he even completed four entire Side Jobs by sneaking around and discovering stuff others wanted to keep hidden... oh, and one job where he had to convince a noblewoman not to get married by finding evidence that some guy was only after her because of her family. It had fuck-all to do with anything else he was doing, but Jake had done it for some bloody reason anyway.

After the conference was done, Jake remained in the Phoenix Wing Empire, with the Duke thinking he had successfully infiltrated PETE further, while PETE believed Jake was working with foreign agents of the dukedom to get them more information, both of which were one hundred percent true.

Seeing as Guilds were in every major city and that both sides said he should await the next time they needed him, Jake returned to doing regular Courier Jobs. Weeks turned to months as Jake kept completing jobs before the next Special Courier Job came in, which he also promptly completed, and through it, he finally met one of the higher-ups in PETE for the first time. It was the shadowy figure he had spoken to many times, and she turned out to be a B-grade Marquise from the Phoenix Wing Empire.

More and more snippets of information were revealed as Jake got further ammunition to use on either side, only letting a bit spill here and there to keep both happy with his work. Jake still wasn't certain what his endgame would be, but the more he learned about both sides, the less and less he liked them. New novel chapters are published on *novel* ♦ *fire* ♦ *net*

After about two months in this mid-sized city, Jake had done about one hundred jobs there, and with it came yet another promotion.

[Courier Medallion (Epic)] – A Courier Medallion belonging to a highly experienced Courier with a strong reputation. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

Jake had now worked for several months, and even if he was rapidly getting promoted, he had yet to see a single payslip. He was definitely being exploited, even if things were a bit... weird. PETE kept talking about rewarding Jake handsomely for his help, and the Duke of Flames said the same thing, but nothing ever came of it. This was despite even the Guild attendants sometimes noting how some jobs "gave quite a lot!" but when Jake turned in a completed job... nothing.

So, yeah, Dungeon-fuckery galore. He sure as hell hoped the final reward would set things right, or he would have to sue for unpaid wages.

When Jake was done in the mid-sized city, he got a Special Courier Job to go to a large-sized one in yet another country. This job wasn't directly linked with the Duke of Flames or even PETE, but when he got to this new city, Jake discovered both had a presence there, primarily because PETE just followed the dukedom wherever they had any people.

More Courier Jobs followed as Jake worked his ass off, not even taking lunch breaks or accounting for unpaid overtime. He was definitely also breaking a lot of work safety rules with the way he did the Courier Jobs, but so far, he had luckily avoided a fine.

A few more Special Courier Jobs came in while Jake had an epic rarity Medallion, each Courier promotion taking longer than the last. Jake also kept learning more about his two biggest clients until he finally discovered a *very* juicy piece of information that also kind of answered something he had been wondering about.

The Sealed Elemental Jake was meant to deliver had an elemental inside that PETE already knew about, despite Jake thinking they shouldn't be able to. This elemental was meant to be delivered to the Infernal Baron who would then send it back to his little sister to assist her in her Path. What Jake didn't know was that the one who had requested this specific elemental was the daughter of the Duke and that she had made the request at the behest of PETE.

In this large-sized city, Jake even came to meet with the girl, where she spilled her heart out about how she hated her family's Legacy and didn't want to consume elementals to progress, which was also why she was still only in early C-grade despite not even being that much younger than the Infernal Baron. Quite the plot twist that she was working with PETE, and definitely not something her family knew about.

Except, it turned out she wasn't really working with them but was just being taken advantage of. Despite her assisting them, PETE still hated her guts just because of her family and wanted her dead alongside everyone else in the dukedom. So she was pretty much just an idiot being fooled.

But wait! That wasn't actually true either! She had figured out they were trying to take advantage of her a long time ago and was now working with a third party, which was where Jake came into play as she also began to offer him jobs to destroy both the dukedom and PETE.

In another huge plot twist, the daughter of the Duke was the one who had gotten another dukedom of the Human Kingdom involved to take down the Dukedom of Flames as they called it. In the process, they also wanted to eliminate PETE using the Duke of Flames to do so, weakening the Duke of Flames in the process.

The mess had turned even messier, and Jake was smack in the middle, now effectively working for three factions at once. Was he still an infinite loop agent? Jake wasn't sure at this point... in fact, he even considered if perhaps a fourth party should get involved.

Nevertheless, Jake kept chugging along, and soon, over nine months had passed since Jake entered the Challenge Dungeon. Hundreds of regular Courier Jobs had been completed, along with eleven total Special Courier Jobs, and who even knows how many Side Jobs and Special Side Jobs. The plot was also thicker than ever, with even

more intrigue, Jake finally beginning to get a clear picture of everything. With all these jobs done, the Guild naturally also recognized his efforts.

[Courier Medallion (Ancient)] – A Courier Medallion belonging to an extremely experienced Courier with an excellent reputation. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). Will automatically upgrade as Courier Jobs are completed and your reputation grows.

Requirements: Soulbound

With another upgrade under his belt, Jake got a Special Courier Mission to return to the capital of the Human Kingdom. He knew the leader of PETE – an early A-grade – would also be there, along with every other dukedom in the country along with the royal family. Powerful people from other factions had also snuck in, and Jake felt a final showdown would soon occur.

As for Jake's role in this final showdown... well, that was yet to be decided, but considering he hated every faction he had met so far, he reckoned things were about to get even messier, and Jake would gladly be there to take advantage.

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Chapter 842: Nevermore: A Twist to the Twist

The lines were drawn as the palace in the Human Kingdom capital rapidly filled up. The three Dukes would be in attendance, and not just with projections either, but their real selves. Borderline every noble of any influence had shown up, and when the king also entered along with his wife – a mid-tier A-grade – things got even more intense. Especially when the old man following behind the two of them was seen. He was slightly hunched over, and had a frizzled beard and no hair, with an overall weak-looking demeanor, but his aura told a whole other story.

Jake, who was also taking part in this “party,” if one can really call it that, stood on a balcony and overlooked as these people entered. His gaze temporarily landed on the Lord Protector, as he was called. While he was no Snappy, in the context of this world, he was definitely one of the strongest. A peak A-grade existence that Jake saw even the otherwise arrogant Duke of Flames approach respectfully as he bowed to the old man.

Now, while attending this party was wholly expected based on the trajectory of all the special missions he had done thus far, the way he had gotten his invite was a bit... off. Not because he had gotten one but because Jake had ended up getting four separate invites. One from the Duke of Flames' daughter and the dukedom she worked, with another one from PETE, a third from the Duke of Flames, and the final one from the Guild itself, which gave Jake a Special Courier Job to attend the party. It didn't specify what Jake had to do once there, just to attend it.

He wondered if the Special Courier Job was a failsafe if someone failed to get invited or if it was something everyone who had gone down this same quest path received. Then again, everything else revolving around the party was Side Jobs from all the different factions. So maybe he was meant to always get this Special Courier Job? In either case, Jake found it pretty funny getting all those invites, especially as he had to go through a complex "vetting process" before he got each, where every faction wanted to ensure Jake was truly on their side.

How the hell he had passed every single one of them, Jake had no idea. All of them used lie detectors, and Jake even ended up meeting the person who had killed those adventurers who had been with the scalekin mage. It was the Duchess of the dukedom that the Duke of Flames' daughter had allied with, and an A-grade in her own right. She was a powerful karmic mage, and she also used her magic to scan Jake throughout their entire vetting process, and ended up walking away with the conclusion Jake didn't have any positive karmic relations with the other factions. She did point out how Jake didn't have a particularly good connection with her and her husband's dukedom either, but Jake easily excused that by saying he was being a professional and just working with them. They were still a bit suspicious, but after he passed a lie detector confirming he wasn't "working for the benefit" of any of the other factions, they approved him and gave him an invite.

This process was pretty much the same with all of the factions, though their means to confirm Jake was, at the very least, not working with the enemy varied a bit. Jake was honestly kind of lucky in this entire process because he could truthfully say he held no positive feelings toward any of the other factions and that he didn't work to support them. They couldn't ask if he was working with them, period, because as an infinite loop agent, he naturally was, so as long as he didn't support them, that had to be good enough, right? For original chapters go to *novel*  *met*

Jake also came to learn that apparently, Couriers were even respected in royal courts. Alright, the low-ranked Couriers probably weren't, but Jake was considered a highly respected professional by now with lots of experience. Never mind the fact Jake hadn't even had the job for a year.

As he was standing and overlooking all the guests arriving, Jake considered what his next move would be. The king organized this party, but at the request of two of the three dukedoms because they all wanted to use it to "expose" their enemies. As for how they

would expose them? Well, they all had the exact same plan that could be summed up in one word:

Jake.

Not only was he their star witness, but he was also the guy with all the evidence. All of them had asked him to get an ancient rarity Medallion before this meeting, as with it, his trustworthiness would be even higher. Who wouldn't give a high-ranking Courier with an impeccable track record at least some trust and hear him out?

The problem was that Jake still didn't like any of them. Exposing PETE's leader, as well as the fact they worked with another dukedom that hatred the Duke of Flames, seemed like the easiest solution to causing a big conflict. Of course, he could also expose the fact that the Duke of Flames was running an illegal drug and weapon trade in collusion with an enemy country to fund his endless hunger for elementals or maybe that the daughter of the Duke of Flames liked to "punish" those who helped her father for fun behind his back.

PETE was the easiest to deal with. They were the weakest stand-alone faction by far, and Jake had a hard time not seeing them burn to the ground no matter what he did to expose them. He had learned that nobody, not even their allied dukedom, knew the true identity of their leader, so that was something Jake could expose to get rid of them.

However, Jake had begun to form another plan.

What if he just exposed all of them at once to the king and just sat back as he watched the world burn? What if he made some false statements to involve the third dukedom that otherwise wasn't part of anything? Or maybe even a foreign country?

As Jake was still deep in thought and saw that the final guest had just about arrived, he noticed someone walk up beside him. Jake was leaning on the railing of the balcony, and this person joined him in looking at all the esteemed guests below.

"Quite the gathering," the man said with a smile.

"It is indeed," Jake said as he glanced at the newcomer. He gave off the aura of an early B-grade and looked on the younger side. He had long, combed-back hair and gave off a confident demeanor, and while Jake didn't recognize him, he already knew who it was as he picked up the presence the man was disguising.

Ah... there it is... Jake thought to himself. He had been waiting for the final twist to reveal itself, and here it was. During all this time when Jake had worked with all of these different factions, there was one place that did know everything Jake was up to. Not his thoughts or plots, but they did know he did work for all of them at the same time.

He was naturally speaking of the Guild itself.

"I heard you are quite the distinguished guest today," the man stated as Jake subtly felt the area around them shift as a sound-isolation barrier appeared without anyone around noticing. "Many friends in high places."

"Not sure I would call them friends, but my work indeed takes me around, and I am here for work today as well," Jake said with a shrug. "I am a Courier, after all. Completing jobs is what I'm meant to be doing."

"And quite a Courier you are. Within a year, you went from a total newcomer to someone so highly respected," the man said with a big smile. "I even heard that you have a borderline perfect track record, never really messing up any jobs, despite what hiccups you may have encountered."

"Just doing my best," Jake said as he kept leaning and looking down at the crowd while talking to the man who did the same.

"That I believe... the question is, what will you do now?"

Jake turned and looked at the man as he answered. "I don't know quite yet... does the Guild Founder have any suggestions?"

That's right, the plot twist was that the Guild Founder was also going to at this party and approach Jake! Had he kind of predicted this would be the case? Not fully, but he did suspect there would be one more twist, and the Guild Founder revealing himself during this party would be entirely on-brand for the Challenge Dungeon.

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However, Jake didn't want to lose his agency and momentum by having the Founder reveal himself at an inopportune time. Besides, Jake being able to recognize the S-grade despite his technique to hide who he was, even from the peak A-grade, had to impress him, right?

The Founder frowned at Jake's question. "Guild Founder? I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression, but I have no idea what you are talking about."

Jake smiled a bit as he turned back to look down at the crowd, who were far too busy socializing to notice the two of them. "You know, none of those people down there can recognize you, so I understand why you question how I could. It wasn't anything you messed up; I just have a little something that is also part of the reason I am a good Courier: Good intuition."

"So you believe I am this Guild Founder just because of some gut feeling?" the man who was totally the Founder questioned.

"No, I *know* you are the Guild Founder because of my gut feeling," Jake answered in a confident tone. "You have hidden your S-grade aura well, good enough to fool pretty much everyone in this world... but not me."

"Quite loose reasoning for such an impactful statement," the man said with a light smile, seemingly not really trying to hide who he was anymore.

"My instincts are more trustworthy than anything anyone can ever tell me," Jake shot back.

"In that case, what are your instincts telling you to do in this situation where you look down upon the people gathered here, knowing you hold the power to upend the entire political landscape with nothing but words?" the Founder asked in a serious tone, having dropped the act.

"They aren't telling me to do anything, but they do make me fully aware that things are, for the lack of a better word, fucked. Powerful nobles are fighting while the uninvolved people just living in their territories suffer, and everyone is doing shit under the table, trying to get one over each other all the time, never daring to openly confront anyone," Jake said with a sigh.

The Guild Founder slowly nodded as he spoke. "It is shameful, but yes, things are indeed a mess. Tell me, do you know why the Guild was initially established?"

"Enlighten me," Jake offered as he felt another option to resolve this entire mess of a storyline slowly materialize. He remembered the dwarf attendant in the very first Guild he ever entered telling him the Founder had made the Guild around forty thousand years ago, but never the reason, so he was also a bit interested.

"Back in the day, before the Guild, all of the enlightened races were united to some extent to fight back the monster factions led by the dragon tribe. The borders were open, there was free travel and trade, and friendly meetings between monarchs were frequent. Despite the constant conflict with an enemy faction, it was a more peaceful time for the regular citizens back then, living far from the battlefield," the Founder began explaining the lore of the Guild.

"It was a tough time for those of us who did live close to the frontlines, though, and I grew up right on those borders. I found out at an early age I had potential and quickly rose to power with the sole intent of finally bringing peace by defeating the Dragon King and ending the war. When I made it to S-grade, I challenged the Dragon King and managed to come out on top. The dragon tribe crumbled after that, and the monsters united under the tribe scattered, some forming their own factions that stand to this day. I genuinely believed my actions would be the end of conflict... but in the world of politics, there always needs to be an enemy, it appears."

Jake nodded along. Having an enemy meant you had something to unite against. In fact, Jacob's father, Arthur, had used this strategy to gather the United Cities Alliance against Jake and those with divine factions, making a boogiemane out of them.

"The once peaceful alliance between the enlightened races fractured, and the lines were drawn. Borders closed, wars began to brew, and things were looking more dire than ever. No one talked. Everyone expected others to plot against them, as they, too, were plotting against someone else. I at first tried to calm everyone, but I was treated with nothing but fear and heard nothing but false promises and platitudes. Something had to be done, and in the end, I settled on making the Guild."

"You did it to create a neutral faction that could operate across borders to get people talking?" Jake questioned.

"Precisely," the man smiled. "At least at first. The scope of the Guild's dealings only expanded from there until it became the organization you see today, but the original plan was for Couriers to be wholly neutral parties whose primary job was to travel between countries to lessen the information gap. This did help, as some line of communication was opened up between the different factions... but that was then. Things have changed yet again, and it seems like the idea of what a Courier is has faded from memory. At least what the status of a Courier used to mean."

Jake remained silent, but he was beginning to get a good idea as to where this entire thing was going, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

"And you... you are a prime example of this change," the Founder said with a hint of disappointment in his voice. "The intent was for Couriers to remain neutral, not getting too involved in politics, but now, nearly every force with any influence actively exploits the Courier system for their own gain. They make Couriers work with them despite that being contrary to what they should be doing. I was truthfully disappointed when I looked into you. Your track record was so brilliant, your word ethic impeccable, and I believed you were one of the most promising Couriers I had ever seen... yet you have chosen to work with these factions and gotten yourself so deeply embroiled in their factions, supporting them and-

"Wrong on that one," Jake quickly cut him off.

"Hm?" the Founder exclaimed with a frown. "Are you claiming you haven't completed Special Courier Jobs for these factions in droves, each Courier Job submitted to further their goals?"

"That isn't what you said. You said I supported them. Have I worked with them? Yes, but supporting would mean I helped them more than I hurt them, and right now, I think I'm pretty even on that one with all of them."

The frown on the Founder's brow deepened. "What are you saying?"

Jake turned to look at him directly again. "That I don't support any of them. Also, don't get it twisted; I wasn't the one who chose to work with them. The Guild did. The Guild accepted all these Special Courier Jobs. Shit, I got involved in this entire mess because of one such job, and now here we are. Or are you going to fault me for accepting jobs offered to me?"

Not gonna lie; Jake was a bit offended at what the Founder said, and he got the feeling he had to dispute it. He also just didn't like the insinuation he was allied with any of the assholes in the hall... but from the looks of it, this Founder didn't believe him at all.

"Have you truly deluded yourself that much, or are you simply trying to fool me for whomever you support? I know why you are here today, and I know of this internal conflict in the Human Kingdom. I also know you have come to assist one of the factions present in this hall," the Founder said, shaking his head.

Before Jake had a chance to react, the man placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. Some form of magic activated as the man infused a smidgen of power into Jake's body, as Jake felt it search for something. "Even if you attempt to deceive me, I am far from new to this game. Your clear karmic connection with... with..."

The Founder just stared at Jake for a second before he cleared his throat. He lifted his hand slightly and placed it down again as another bit of energy was infused. "As I was trying to say, karma cannot be hidden even if... if..."

His words tailed off as he stared at Jake with wide eyes. "How is this possible? There is... nothing... what's going on?"

Jake was also confused for a moment until he understood what had happened, and a lot of things suddenly fell into place. Without even thinking about it, he checked out a certain skill... and there it was in the description of Shroud of the Primordial.

"...The karmic threads in your wake, an endless web impossible to unravel..."

So... well... it turned out that no one being able to detect his karmic connection was pretty damn good when trying to hide who he had any connections to.

The Malefic Viper smiled as he saw the horrified look on the Wyrmgod's face as he realized what was going on at the same time as Jake. Minaga only flashed a giant grin filled with schadenfreude as he pointed at the Wyrmgod.

"I told you using karmic magic to detect faction allegiances was going to be a problem!"

"It is the most reliable way a person could detect something like that... and with them being A-grades and above, no C-grade should be able to block or avoid it..." the Wyrmgod answered in a defeated voice.

That's right... in truth, what Jake had been doing this entire Challenge Dungeon was a horrible fucking idea for anyone normal. Fence-sitting and trying to get one up on everyone would have been discovered a long time ago by any of the many A-grade karma mages working for all of the larger factions. Simply lying wouldn't be enough, and the second they detected Jake sewing good karma with any of the factions through efforts that helped them in any way he hadn't been expressly told to, he would have been discovered.

But with Shroud of the Primordial, they simply couldn't see anything. Mind you, Jake formed karma just like everyone else; Shroud did nothing to block any of that. But it sure as hell did make it impossible for a bunch of mortals to see jack-shit and coupled with their simplistic and over-tuned level of trust... yeah, it was a recipe for disaster, and the Malefic Viper was all for it.

"Wait..." Minaga suddenly said. "Won't this also mess up the-"

"No spoilers," the Viper interrupted him, enjoying this more than he probably should. "Let us all just enjoy the show as you take notes for fixes in the next iteration."

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Chapter 843: Nevermore: Best Courier Ever

Jake, of course, knew about Shroud of the Primordial. He used it all the time during this Challenge Dungeon to block so people couldn't tell when he was lying while manipulating it, so it didn't block whatever truth-telling ability was being used when he told the truth. He didn't know how to make Shroud display his lies as true answers, only to block it from giving any response at all... but he did have a feeling this was something he could learn to make the skill do at some future time. But considering it took him many decades to learn how to manipulate the responses from Identify, this definitely wasn't the time or place to try and self-teach himself that ability.

However, one part of the Shroud he had borderline forgotten was its ability to block anyone's ability to detect karma-related stuff. One had to remember that Shroud's primary function was to hide Jake so people couldn't find him unless he allowed them to. It was a counter to divination first and foremost, but in the process of blocking that, many other things were also included. Karma included.

In many ways, it had to be, considering karmic magic was a huge part of most forms of divination. Plus, if someone could track Jake's karmic threads, they would be able to track him simply by following them. While the phrase "karmic thread" was very much

used as an analogy, many karmic mages actually saw literal threads of karma using their skills. It was simply the conceptual understanding they reached, likely even because of this common phrase and the way others taught the concept of karma. That being the case, it would be pretty easy to just follow a thread from someone related to Jake straight back to him, so of course, Shroud had to block that. It had to tangle these threads into a web that no one could make any sense of, and the karmic threads never truly led back to Jake.

All of this is to say that while Jake did form karmic connections with everyone he encountered, to any karmic mage trying to analyze these threads, nothing made sense. As these threads were very much conceptual in nature, and the way most karmic mages – the Guild Founder included – saw them was only by looking for something particular.

As everyone had endless karmic threads leading out from them, karmic mages pretty much had to look for a specific thread or connection in mind. If they didn't, they would just see every single karmic thread a person had. In Jake's case, that would include every single person he had ever met or influenced, both directly or indirectly... in other words, billions of people at the very least. The Founder was an S-grade and could search Jake for karmic connections to the limited scope of the room they were in, which was why he was so confused when he didn't see what he had expected. He had likely assumed seeing Jake have a powerful karmic connection with one of the factions while having an antagonistic one with others... not simply having his skill say Jake had no positive or negative karmic connection with any of them at all. New novel chapters are published on movel.fire.net

The only way for this to be the case was if Jake truly didn't have any strong connection with any of them, either good or bad, period. Well, that, or if Jake, a mere C-grade, was capable of blocking the skill of the Founder, an S-grade, and one of the strongest people in the entire world. One of these was definitely more believable than the other, and the Founder looked at Jake with genuine astonishment.

"You... are truly telling the truth. No, even so, how is this possible? Some karmic connections should have been formed no matter what, yet I can't find anything," the man said with a deep frown as he considered matters further. "What exactly are you? How did you accomplish this?"

"Beats me, I don't know anything about karma magic," Jake shrugged truthfully. He only knew what little he had read here or there about karma, which was enough to make him decide that it definitely wasn't a school of magic for him. "Have you considered that I was telling the truth regarding my actions? That I heavily considered the implications behind everything I did?"

The Founder was silent for a moment before nodding slowly. "Now that I think about it... it's true that your deceit would have been discovered a long time ago by one of the many other karma mages working for these factions if you did try to trick them. Due to

their incredible abilities in the areas of counterespionage and scouting, the Path has flourished in the last many millennia, and every faction has plenty of A-grades who would have been able to see straight through the actions of a C-grade Courier no matter how smart he tried to be...”

Jake kept silent, same as the Founder, while he considered these words, while internally, he had a minor panic attack. *Fucking hell, I got lucky with Shroud, or things could have ended very badly...*

While everything Jake had done seemed like it could work out on the surface, especially considering how dumb the natives of the Challenge Dungeon were, in reality, it should have never gone as far as it did. Under normal circumstances, Jake would probably have been discovered the very first time he became an infinite loop agent if not in the job right after.

Shroud was the only reason Jake was still alive and could continue as he did. It wasn't just a matter of Shroud of the Primordial being a skill capable of hiding karma, either. Jake was sure many other factions also had abilities to hide karma-related stuff, especially those like the Court of Shadows... but their skills wouldn't work for shit in this Challenge Dungeon. The skills could hide karma, yes, but if the one searching for it was an A-grade? Even if they walked around with mythic-rarity karma-hiding skills, it would be seen through simply due to the sheer difference in power.

The only reason Jake was fine was due to how Shroud worked. When someone tried to pierce Shroud, they didn't merely try to pierce the hiding abilities of a C-grade. They competed directly with the Records and power of the Malefic Viper. That was why it could hide him even from any but the most powerful of gods in the multiverse and why a bunch of A- and even S-grades didn't stand the shadow of a chance. Even if the Founder had been a Godking, he would have been unable to see anything.

Of course, this wasn't anything the Founder would ever reasonably conclude. So he went with the most reasonable conclusion he could... that Jake had somehow managed to avoid any kind of strong karmic connection with any faction, meaning he hadn't chosen to side with anyone but had managed to remain one-hundred percent neutral, even to the concept of karma.

A few seconds passed with the Founder just standing there before he finally smiled, lowered his head a bit, and nodded to himself. “I see... I see...”

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He then looked up at Jake, a bright smile on his lips, with the entire mood changed as he even went as far as to bow slightly. “I apologize for my offensive statements, and I hope you can forgive me. For me, as the Founder of the Guild, to offend one who truly walks the purest of Paths as a Courier... it's truly shameful.”

Jake just stared at the man for a second before he mentally shrugged. *Yeah, sure, I can roll with this.*

"I simply did what had to be done and acted as I saw fit of a Courier," Jake responded, trying to sound as genuine as he possibly could.

"And you have exceeded all expectations anyone could ever have of you," the Founder said, looking a mix between relieved and happy. "However, things are still not as they should be. Do you know why I came here today?"

"How could I possibly read the thoughts of the Founder?" Jake responded. "But if I had to guess, it has something to do with me and the way the Guild has been used and abused by many of the factions present."

"Your guess is correct for the most part," the Founder nodded. "I originally wanted to expose them, using you as the showcase of what they had done wrong, and set an example of what happens to Couriers who willingly assist factions, along with punishing the factions who used you... but I now realize my wrongs. You truly never had any interest in politics but merely carried out the Courier Jobs that the Guild gave you. How can I possibly blame you for that?"

Jake felt a bit of cold sweat on his back as he couldn't help but ask: "Say... when you say you would have punished the Courier who did what you thought they did, what do you mean by that?"

"I planned on stripping you of your title as a Courier, taking your Courier Medallion, and dependent on your actions, and if you refused to truly repent and see your wrongs, ended your life right then and there. With repentance, perhaps you would have even been allowed to become a Courier once more, but you would have naturally started from the beginning," the Founder explained. It was definitely a potential scenario that Jake very much didn't like the sound of.

One had to remember that the objective of this Challenge Dungeon was to complete Courier Jobs, so if Jake was stripped of his rank, he would no longer be able to progress. Starting from the beginning would also suck major ass, as based on what Jake guessed and what would just be logical, the higher-ranked Courier Jobs would give more Nevermore Points for a better final score and Grand Achievement.

"Heh," Jake slightly laughed as he scratched the back of his head. "I guess it's good I am not the kind of person who would get involved politically with different factions, and definitely not the type to have my own plots and plans."

Yep, Jake would never do any of that. How could he? He was the best and most genuine Courier ever!

"It is indeed fortunate," the Founder nodded. "And perhaps this outcome is even better. I was the one who made the Guild invite you today for my original plan to ensure you would go. However, with what I know now, I am even happier you are here. So, let me ask you, Courier... would you be willing to assist me in exposing this corruption and punish those who abused the Courier system and Guild?"

"Before I answer, could you elaborate a bit more on what exactly these factions did wrong in your mind?" Jake questioned as one thing had been bothering him a bit. "Every Special Courier Job I was given by them went through the Guild. Isn't the Guild also to blame for all this happening? The Guild accepted all these jobs and gave them to me, making everything appear official. If what the factions did was truly against the rules, wouldn't the Guild have rejected the jobs?"

The Founder sighed loudly at Jake's question as he looked down. "They should have if everything was working as it is supposed to. It is normal to vet every job, but that simply hasn't been done in any of these cases. The nobles used the Guild as an arm of their own factions and threatened the employees into accepting any job they wished to assign them. To make matters even worse, I even have records of them manipulating the documentation behind the jobs and falsifying reports regarding completed jobs. Let me just confirm... have you had promises made to you that they would "ensure" you wouldn't suffer reputational damages even if you failed a job, as long as your failure benefitted them?"

Jake recalled quite a few instances as he nodded. "More than once."

"As I expected," the Founder nodded. "Perhaps it is all my fault. I have been hands-off for too long, and their respect for the Guild and what we stand for has deteriorated with the generations that have passed. Few remember who I am, and even the executives of the Guild have fallen into corruption. I plan on doing a heavy clean-up, but to start properly, we need to remind everyone what the Guild truly stands for and why we used to be so respected."

"Alright, I'm in," Jake agreed. He wasn't sure if this was the best quest path, but it seemed like a good idea to ally with one of only a few S-grades Jake had ever heard of in this world. Plus, the guy didn't seem all that horrible compared to the others he had met. His biggest crime Jake knew of so far was inaction and laziness in regard to addressing the problems the Guild faced, and who was Jake to blame someone for not watching their own faction properly? He sure as hell was guilty of the same crime.

While it wasn't necessarily a flaw, the Founder was also a bit of a softie, considering how he said he wouldn't even have killed Jake if he had been a willing pawn of one of the factions and willingly repented.

"Thank you," the Founder said with a pleased nod.

"So, what's the plan?" Jake questioned.

“I believe there have been enough plans and plots already. Rather than continue down this track, we shall be direct and forthcoming with our objective,” the Founder said as he and Jake remained looking down on the mass of people in the hall, mulling about.

Despite them standing on the balcony and talking for so long, no one had approached them. Everyone just kept socializing below, almost as if they were waiting for Jake and the Founder to be done with their conversation before doing anything. Jake saw all of the big players already there, and he counted more than fifty total A-grades present in the room. It was an overwhelming force, and Jake doubted many regular C-grades could ever feel comfortable in a situation like this, but he felt pretty calm.

The strongest person present was the peak A-grade Lord Protector. At least, that is what people believed. The old man was swarmed with nobles, nearly as many as the king and queen, who had taken seats on two slightly elevated chairs that looked a bit like thrones.

Jake looked over and saw the Duke of Flames stand confidently off to the side, chatting with some lesser nobles. He saw the Duke’s daughter talking with others, including the A-grade who led PETE. The two other Dukes were naturally also there, along with nobles from a bunch of other countries there as diplomats. Based on what Jake had heard, this was the biggest political conference in decades, so it was definitely a good spot to reveal nefarious actions taken by others to a significant and influential audience.

Of course, that is exactly what several factions in the room wanted to do... none of them knew they were the ones having their actions revealed that day.

“Come... it’s time,” the Founder said as he stood up straight, Jake doing the same. “Let us remind them what the Guild is and what it stands for.”

As he said this, Jake had a system window appear in front of him.

All Special Courier Side Jobs Failed.

Special Courier Job 10 Updated.

Special Courier Job 10: Attend the Royal Conference in the Capital of the Human Kingdom. While there, assist the Guild Founder in revealing the corruption of the noble factions and their abuse of the Guild and the Courier System.

He had failed all the quests to assist the factions and was left with only one objective remaining... and he couldn’t wait to see the chaos that was about to unfold.

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Chapter 844: Nevermore: Miscalculation

Jake wondered what all the nobles he had been working with were thinking when they saw Jake walk down the stairs. He had just failed all of their Side Jobs, though they clearly didn't know this. These jobs had all been about exposing other factions than themselves and had been mutually exclusive, as each required him to betray everyone else... of course, Jake didn't view anything he had done as a betrayal as he never held any loyalty in the first place.

The Duke of Flames had wanted Jake to expose another dukedom for working with PETE and even another country, as PETE was based there. This other dukedom, whom the daughter of the Duke of Flames worked with, wanted Jake to expose the Duke of Flames' illegal activities and the damage caused by his incessant desire to consume more elementals. At the same time, they would also expose PETE to make themselves look like they would never have worked with such an organization in the first place.

Lastly, PETE wanted Jake to also expose the Duke of Flames, but also this other dukedom for working with the Duke of Flames' daughter, as they had heard she would join this dukedom and thus continue the Lineage of the Duke of Flames. They didn't want to see that happen but wanted them utterly eliminated.

The person they all wanted Jake to do his exposing to was the king of the Human Kingdom. He had the backing of the third dukedom fully, the Lord Protector, and the entire royal army behind him, making him the most influential and powerful person in the kingdom... which shouldn't come as a surprise considering he was the king.

From what Jake had gathered, he guessed the king already had a good idea about some of the stuff going on and kind of just wanted everything to be swept under the rug to avoid any open internal conflicts in the Human Kingdom. Any dukedom falling would be bad for the Human Kingdom as their overall power would fall, and with enemy countries on all sides, civil war wasn't recommended.

However, even if the king wanted things to be resolved behind closed doors, the second things were brought forth to the public, he would have to act openly and decisively or risk losing influence and looking like he could be walked all over. This is what all the factions who wanted Jake to expose shit banked on anyway.

Based on the words of the Founder he sent to Jake as they walked down the stairs, he was willing to give the king a chance to right the wrongs in his own kingdom, primarily on account of the Lord Protector. The royal family had never abused the Guild, and what jobs they had commissioned had all been above board. Perhaps because the royal family still held respect for what the Guild stood for... or because the Lord Protector had been one of the people fighting alongside the Founder back in the war

against the dragon tribe and knew that risking making the Founder an enemy was a horrible idea.

As he and the Founder walked down to the main floor, they naturally attracted some attention. Jake had many friendly gazes land on him from the many factions as they each prepared for him to carry out their wish. Probably because he was the only one who publicly worked with Jake, the Duke of Flames stepped forward without any surprise from the other factions.

"Ah, it's great of you to finally join us," the Duke of Flames said, entirely ignoring the Founder beside Jake, who was presenting as an early-tier B-grade.

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"Of course. I am here hired to carry out a job, after all," Jake responded a bit curtly but still keeping it professional.

"Indeed you are," the Duke smiled as he turned to address the king and queen sitting on their throne, along with everyone else present. "Allow me to introduce someone. This is a Courier I have been working with recently, and that I am certain many of you have also come to know of in recent times. A true rising star of the Guild and a man with an impeccable record."

Jake remained quiet, not saying no to flattery when offered.

"I originally hired him with the intent of sniffing out those who have been targetting me recently. You have all heard of them... the terrorist organization that has been wreaking havoc in my dukedom and threatened the stability of this very kingdom with their actions," the Duke of Flames continued with a very holier-than-thou tone. "This hiring was made with little hope... but I had underestimated the expertise and abilities of this Courier, and in less than a year, he managed to uncover those behind the plot targeting our blessed country."

Muttering filled the room as all attention was now on Jake. Many scanned him using different means, with the Founder continually getting ignored despite standing right next to him. Jake especially felt the gazes of a few people present, one of whom walked forward to speak with a magnanimous smile.

"The Duke of Flames speaks the truth. Those who have taken actions to hurt this kingdom and its reputation must be punished, no matter who they are!" said the man. He was the Duke who opposed the Duke of Flames and another person who believed Jake was actually there as his ally.

He also got a telepathic message from the leader of PETE. *"Now is the time to strike... topple both of these monsters from their high peaks and be the arbiter of justice. Be the harbinger of a new age where elementals can live free from the Dukedom of Flames and all those who dared allow their vile existence."*

Jake would lie if he said he felt comfortable as he considered his next words carefully. He briefly threw a glance at the Founder, who nodded before Jake turned to the king and bowed slightly. "Your majesty, I have indeed made some discoveries during my work as a Courier I believe are pertinent to share with the court."

"Before you proceed, I need to clarify something... who are you here working for? Where do your loyalties lie?" the king asked, and from the queen sitting at his side, Jake detected a truth-telling skill. Those skills were really pretty damn common in this world, huh?

The king's question also communicated he indeed did know some internal conflict was going on. Luckily, Jake had an easy answer to his question.

"I am here as a Courier representing the Guild. As for loyalties... I have none but the loyalty I hold toward myself and my dignity. As a Courier, loyalty as a concept isn't something I see the need to consider. I am merely here to carry out a Special Courier Job, nothing less, nothing more," Jake responded. Usually, giving long answers with details and absolutes when faced with a lie-detector skill wasn't recommended... unless you were capable of fully telling the truth when doing so. In these cases, it only served to strengthen your voice.

After a second or two, the queen nodded to the king who looked genuinely surprised at the affirmation Jake was being truthful.

"So you are not here at the behest of any of the nobles of the Human Kingdom?" the Lord Protector, who was sitting a bit off to the side, asked as he directed a sharp gaze at Jake. *Yep, he definitely also knows something. Fuck I am happy I didn't try this shit all by myself without any backing...*

"I was given side jobs by three people present to attend and carry out their will," Jake answered truthfully. "However, I was also given a Special Courier Job by the Guild, which is the one I am here to carry out."

Who knew that things were a lot easier when you could just tell the truth while knowing you had an S-grade at your side, willing to defend should anything bad happen? Because damn, was something bad about to happen as Jake began to reveal a bit too much in the eyes of those who had hired him.

Jake felt three gazes on him filled with hidden bloodlust. All of them A-grades, with the Duke of Flames the most powerful of them. It was warnings... no threats, to carry out what they wanted him to do and not say more than he had to.

"Oh?" the Lord Protector said, continuing the conversation in place of the king. "And what did these three people want you to do here tonight?"

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"To reveal underhanded dealings while exposing the organization that has made moves against the Duke of Flames in recent times, including the hidden backers of this organization," Jake said, feeling the threatening gaze of the Duke of Flames lighten slightly... only for it to return stronger than ever with his next sentence. "This includes the illegal activities undertaken by the Duke of Flames in his attempt to continually acquire elementals to consume to fuel his own Path."

As Jake finished speaking, the telepathic messages began rolling in as Jake ignored all of them and focused only on the Lord Protector and two royals.

"What the hell are you-"

"Shut your mouth, or-"

"Why would you-"

The eyes of the Lord Protector narrowed as he gave the king a look. Seemingly suppressing a sigh, the king's face turned a lot more serious. "These are very heavy accusations... are you sure you can handle what may come from you making them? The consequences if anything you say is revealed to be a lie?"

"As I said, I am merely here carrying out a Special Courier Job representing the Guild," Jake answered. "I am only to share the truth according to the wishes of my client."

The king didn't look all that happy with Jake's answer as he motioned with his hand. "Then proceed... let us hear what you claim to have uncovered."

And hear it, they did. Jake held nothing back as he explained everything he had done for these different factions. How he had worked for all of them at once, effectively infiltrating them while doing all his Courier Jobs. He even sprinkled in some of the physical evidence he had swiped during his many interactions with them, everything he said getting continually checked with lie-detector skills.

Some of his revelations sent shockwaves through the crowd. Especially when he revealed the Duke of Flames' daughter had worked with another dukedom to take him down and even supported PETE. Jake felt pretty sure a good portion of the room would already have made moves to kill him if the faint presence of the Lord Protector didn't already cover his body, signaling none was to make a move, lest they suffer the consequences.

The only real strategy Jake had in his big revelation was saving the identity of the leader of PETE for last, as he felt pretty damn sure she would make a move the moment he

did. Once revealed, her chances of escaping unscathed were nil, so to at the very least get revenge and kill the Courier who exposed her was only to be expected.

A prediction that turned out to be entirely accurate... as the moment Jake turned and pointed out the leader of PETE, without any warning, her aura exploded as she flew straight for Jake. The Founder stood between Jake and the woman, but he didn't even need to make a move.

Without Jake being able to detect any movement, the old man appeared right above the A-grade woman. She didn't even manage to scream as her entire body imploded while Jake felt powerful ripples of space mana from the old man as he squished her entire body into a small red ball of flesh no larger than a golf ball faster than Jake could even react to her movements. The entire debacle barely even affected the throne room due to the magic used by the Lord Protector being so limited in scope, but it did definitely set the mood to see an A-grade dying.

With everyone looking, the Lord Protector waved his hand as what looked like a spatial ring appeared in it. He infused some energy into it as Jake saw the enchantments begin to break apart, and after a second or two, the old man fished out a few items, including a notebook and some odd crystals.

"This journal lays out plans made by this terrorist organization to sabotage the Duke of Flames... and the crystals are those uniquely found in the Dukedom of Blades," the Lord Protector said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Wait... did that dukedom seriously pay PETE in crystals only found in their territory? Jake questioned, though he kept his mouth shut, as things were going his way already, and there was no reason to ruin it. *Wait... maybe the PETE leader has these on purpose? So if she did die, she would at least take down some people with her using the evidence she was carrying?*

"That woman was also from the Phoenix Wing Empire," the Lord Protector continued as he glared at the Duke of Blades. "Do you have any explanations for yourself?"

Surprisingly enough, the Duke of Blades remained calm despite the accusations as he shook his head. "I truthfully do not... for I have never worked with any such organizations."

"Are you saying the accusations of this Courier are false, despite his testimony already having been confirmed as true?" the king questioned in a sharp tone.

"I am not denying he believes they are true... but I fear he has been led behind the light," the Duke of Blades sighed. "All the truth-detecting skills can see is if the person speaking believes they are telling the truth, not what the actual truth is. I fear that the Courier may have been fooled into believing we were working with this daughter of the Duke of Flames."

"And you're saying you're not?" the king continued questioning.

"Most definitely not," the Duke of Blades said in an offended tone. "Neither would we work with some horrific terrorist organization who targets the innocents. I believe this may all be a plot by the Duke of Flames to undermine my dukedom using his daughter... or, looking at the Duke, perhaps even his own daughter tricked him?"

"I... what are you talking about!?" the Duke of Flames' daughter had an outburst. "You promised that-"

"Silence!" the king yelled as he slammed his fist into his chair, sending a shockwave of energy out. The room became even more tense than before, and while Jake remained silent, he was honestly pretty confused about something...

Why are they not just using any lie-detector skills on this Duke of Blades?

It made no sense they weren't... unless...

"Duke of Flames... do you have any defense against these accusations?" the king asked, looking at the Duke.

"Are you seriously claiming I would have hired a terrorist organization to target my own family and dukedom? That I would willingly commit all sorts of criminal activity simply to acquire some more elementals? Perhaps I have been too zealous in my pursuits, and my subordinates may have taken things too far, and I may even have been blind to the rebellious actions of my daughter, but I am fully willing to submit everything for review," the Duke of Flames also defended himself. "I want us to remember I am the injured party here..."

Jake saw the Lord Protector frown deeply, as the king looked like he was deep in thought. "Hm... this certainly is a matter that must be investigated further..."

"Perhaps, Your Majesty, this is all a plot by this terrorist organization to cause internal strife within the kingdom?" the Duke of Blades chimed in as he looked at the Duke of Flames. "While I and the Duke of Flames most definitely have our differences, I am certain they are nothing we cannot solve behind closed doors with the royal family as mediators."

Without any hesitation, the Duke of Flames nodded. "No one has any interest in seeing us split more than an enemy country, and I, too, am certain we can reach a satisfactory conclusion through negotiation and following proper legal procedures to find out who is truly behind this plot."

What the fuck is going on? Jake questioned as the entire mood in the hall shifted once more. However, Jake soon realized why things were going so wrong... the king was resolute in sweeping things under the rug, and the two Dukes had given him a golden

opportunity to. They just had to play theater, and some faux investigation could discover some fall guys to be arrested and executed while maintaining order.

The two Dukes also knew this as Jake received a message from each.

"What a pathetic attempt... I had high hopes for you, but it seems you are dumber than I thought," the Duke of Flames said. *"Did you truly think your word was enough? That a mere C-grade could lead to my downfall? You overestimate yourself. Ah, but I must thank you for exposing that I had a snake of a daughter and for getting rid of this annoying pest of an organization that has been bothering me. You have proven most useful despite your idiocy. I would recommend for you to stay and enjoy the rest of the party... for this will be your last."*

"You have proven yourself most unwise. It is sad to see someone I was told was so promising invite his own death through sheer arrogance," the Duke of Blades also sent.

Jake had no idea what to say... but he realized his plan had been fucked from the beginning. Even if he had truth and facts on his side, it wouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things, and his strategy of targeting everyone would end with nothing but the death of a C-grade Courier as some fake investigations were carried out, with no one remembering anything about the Courier in a few years.

The king turned to Jake and nodded after the two Dukes had spoken. "Thank you for bringing all of this to light, and we will be sure to carry out thorough investigations to uncover the whole truth."

And that was that... the king had swept things under the rug. From the looks of it, this didn't sit well with the Lord Protector, but he didn't speak up. They had all made a decision, and Jake could do nothing about it. His protests would be viewed as nothing but contempt toward the king's decision and land him in even more trouble. Jake had entirely miscalculated how all of this would go, perhaps only highlighting his political ignorance...

"Now, let us not see the day ruined, but continue to enjoy ourself-"

"Is this truly your decision?" the man who had been standing next to Jake this entire time asked.

The king frowned at getting interrupted as the Duke of Flames stepped forward. "Who are you to question His Majesty's decision!?"

His aura rolled out of him as the temperature in the room increased, and the Duke attempted to pressure the man he believed was an early-tier B-grade... only to find his aura rebuffed as he coughed up blood from the backlash and stumbled back as the Founder's aura exploded.

Jake, not missing a beat, smiled. "Allow me to introduce my client for this job... the Guild Founder."

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Chapter 845: Nevermore: Legendary Courier

Considering there was only a handful of S-grades in the entire world, it didn't take long for the people present to realize who the man Jake had arrived with was. His overwhelming aura suppressed every single one of them, his power simply at a whole other level, even compared to the peak A-grade Lord Protector.

"Ge... General..." the Lord Protector stuttered as the Founder's form also changed. Jake already knew he had transformed his body, so it didn't really come as a surprise when he turned into a slightly older-looking human man. It did surprise everyone else, though.

Also, Jake learned that, apparently, the Founder had been a general back in the day.

"I must admit I find myself disappointed," the Founder spoke as no one else dared open their mouths. "I truly, for a brief moment, believed this could be resolved without my involvement. Alas, I was proven wrong. Despite all the evidence and the testimony of a high-ranking courier with a borderline-perfect track record, your response is to do... nothing."

"We... we will conduct a thorough investi-" the Duke of Blades tried to say but was silenced with a single glance.

"Do you think me a child? That I could not see through such an obvious attempt to suppress the truth by all parties involved?" the Founder shook his head as he looked at the Lord Protector. "Are you also going to tell me I'm an idiot, Colonel?"

"No... no, Sir," the formerly awe-inspiring Lord Protector said as he bowed. "It is just as the General observed."

"At least someone besides this Courier is capable of telling the truth," the Founder scoffed as he turned his attention back to the king. "You, too, lived during the war. Many of those here today did... yet you all seem to have forgotten what happened then and the aftermath. Why I made the Guild in the first place. Do I need to remind you, little king? Remind you of the oath your kingdom swore? The promise you made!?"

The king looked down, almost ashamed. By now, the tides had truly turned, and things were not looking good for the Dukes. The Duke of Flames, who had wiped the blood off his lips, clearly also noticed this as he tried to not be fully suppressed.

"Lord Founder..." the Duke of Flames began as he tried to get his bearings. "I truly apologize for how things turned out... but... is the Guild not also breaking protocol by getting directly involved in an internal conflict of the Human Kingdom? While it is true we were partly to blame, we were also fooled by this Courier as he plotted against us all, and he was the one who initiated today's conflict with his widespread accusations. I can admit I hired him through the Guild to use against my political foes and to get rid of the terrorist organization harassing me... but is that truly so wrong? Is that truly a crime deserving of the Guild Founder's wrath?"

The Founder let out a loud sigh as he looked directly at the Duke of Flames.

"You just admitted to your biggest crime... how you used the Guild. In truth, I do not care for the internal conflicts of the Human Kingdom. The internal disputes of any country, for that matter. But this entire thing has been made possible by exploiting the nature and good reputation of the Guild. For years, the Dukedom of Flames has pressured the Guild into accepting Courier Jobs to hide its dirty dealings, and the other dukedoms are no different. You have viewed the Guild as nothing more than a tool for you to abuse without ever considering the consequences or when things would reach a breaking point... so let me just make it clear. That breaking point was well and truly reached today when you tried to make such an exemplary Courier into your accomplice," the Founder said in a loud voice with an undertone of anger. Jake even saw a few of the people present shiver as a bit of bloodlust emanated from the S-grade.

Jake had to do his utmost to hold himself back from grinning. The people who had been calling him a fucking moron only minutes ago were now shivering because the Founder had shown up. He alone was strong enough to utterly suppress every single person in the room, and in truth, his actual words barely mattered. His arguments were meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

It was the same as when Jake had spoken up. It didn't matter if everything Jake said was the truth. Before a bunch of A-grades, his words simply didn't matter as he was only some C-grade whelp in their eyes. Perhaps this wasn't the lesson one was meant to learn from this Challenge Dungeon, or maybe it was... but it reaffirmed something Jake already knew but had foolishly disregarded during this dungeon. Power still came first and foremost before everything else.

As the Viper had said a long time ago, if you were strong enough, your word became truth. Your interpretation of a situation became the correct one. As a Chosen, Jake was usually capable of always borrowing the influence of the Malefic Viper, and in many cases, people even believed his opinion mirrored that of the Viper, making them take him more seriously. In cases where he interacted with his peers who didn't necessarily care about his status or had an equally high status, Jake was still considered one of the stronger people, so he could still be part of the conversation as an equal.

In this Challenge Dungeon, Jake was no equal to the Dukes he had tried to call out, and it was shown when everyone sided with the A-grades to just sweep everything under the rug. Power meant everything, which was once again shown when suddenly everything Jake had said was given a new level of legitimacy and taken far more seriously because the Founder popped up to tell them to take Jake seriously.

"I..." the Duke of Flames began, as he looked like he tried to come up with a counter-argument, only to have the Lord Protector stop him.

"Do not sully the reputation of the Human Kingdom further with your stupidity," the old man scoffed as he looked at the Founder and kneeled. "I am ashamed that something like this could have happened under my watch... I have been blind to what is happening for too long."

"No, this is ultimately my responsibility," the king also spoke as he, too, promptly kneeled. "I knew many of these crimes of the dukedoms were taking place, yet I did nothing. I even knew they abused and threatened the Guild to do their bidding and used the Guild Founder's institution as if they owned it. I reneged on my responsibilities and can only be ashamed of my own incompetence and failure to do what I must. For this, I can only beg for forgiveness, and if the magnanimity of the Guild Founder allows it, try to better myself and this country."

Jake was honestly impressed at how the king handled the shit that was all the way up to his neck. He didn't make any excuses but just took responsibility while admitting things that had otherwise not come to light already. Finally, he promised to better himself and the Human Kingdom as a whole. Overall, a pretty good apology.

"And how will you take responsibility?" the Founder questioned.

Without any hesitation, the king stood up as he spoke loudly. "Detain the Duke of Flames and the Duke of Blades along with their immediate family and close collaborators."

"Your Majesty, this is-" the Duke of Flames began to argue before the king threw him a sharp gaze and spoke even louder than before.

"Lethal force is permitted should they resist."

For a moment, Jake thought the Duke of Flames was going to fight it out, but he ultimately didn't. Jake had a feeling that should the Founder not be present, the power-hungry Duke would have escaped, leaving behind everything to save his own hide. Even if the Lord Protector was stronger than him, the Duke of Flames was still a close second and was more than capable of getting away, even from a space mage. Of course, with the Founder also there, his chances of escape were non-existent, so he ultimately decided to surrender.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

"Your actions were sufficiently swift... alright, I shall give you a chance," the Founder said, and it looked as if an almost physical weight had been lifted from the king and Lord Protector. "However, I shall remain in the Human Kingdom for now to ensure everything proceeds in a satisfactory fashion. I take it there are no complaints?"

"Having you as a guest would be a great honor," the king bowed as the royal guards and Lord Protector began to escort out the two dukes along with a bunch of other nobles. All of them already had pretty bleak facial expressions, and when the Founder proclaimed he would stay in the kingdom for a while, things only got worse for them. That pretty much killed all escape plans, and especially the Duke of Flames looked like a plan he was beginning to form in his head had already fallen apart.

Throughout this entire debacle, Jake had just been standing next to the Founder. He was pretty much the only person present who hadn't bowed or full-on kneeled at some point, nor carried an unmistakable sense of reverence for one of only five known S-grades. Jake hadn't needed to say anything after he had already done his assignment and laid out the evidence, and that honestly felt pretty good.

He wondered if someone more skilled in the political arena could have handled things better and not necessarily needed the Founder's help. Perhaps it was possible, especially seeing as the Lord Protector wasn't happy with the status quo... but Jake sure as hell had no idea how to make it happen. Alas, it didn't matter because Jake had managed to make a good impression on the S-grade Founder and gotten super fucking lucky the guy was even there in the first place. If not, he would have probably lost one of his lives on this day.

"Thank you for your help on this day, Courier," the Founder said after a bit more discussion with the king. He said this with many nobles and the king still present as everyone looked at them. "Without you, this would have been much more difficult, and your actions helped uncover the depths of this corruption. You truly are an exemplary Courier and fully deserving of the reputation you have built yourself. An example for all other Couriers."

"No, I should be the one thanking you for trusting me with this job," Jake bowed as he kept up his persona as the perfect employee. "And I am just happy when the client is happy."

"I believe you," the Founder laughed as he patted Jake on the shoulder. "I truly do."

Jake smiled in return. This definitely felt like some kind of climax to the story. He had met the Guild Founder himself and worked with him, upended the political landscape in one of the countries, and even had an A-grade killed and several imprisoned. However... for some reason, Jake didn't feel like this was the end, and a feeling of dread began to worm its way into his mind as the Founder spoke once more.

"Ah, but I shouldn't hold you up for too long... you have completed this Special Courier Job flawlessly, and I must thank you once more, but I also know you must be eager to continue following your calling. I am certain many others out there need such an exemplary Courier... and who knows, perhaps you can even reach the realm of Legendary Couriers."

You gotta be kidding me...

Special Courier Job 15 Completed.

"If you go to the Guild, I am sure they have many Courier Jobs available, even for someone of your skill, and as I work to restore order and remove corruption, I may even need the help of a skilled Courier once more. If I ever do need you again... can I trust in your assistance?" This chapter is updated by *novel•fire•net*

Jake really wanted to tell the guy to just fuck off, but instead, he smiled. "As long as there is a Courier Job worth doing, and I am capable, of course I'll be there to help."

"In that case... truly thank you once more. Now, I need to remain here and speak to these fools a bit longer, but you are free to do whatever you wish," the Founder smiled as he gave Jake another pat on the shoulder.

"I shall be heading straight to the Guild then... work awaits," Jake said respectfully as he gave the Founder a small bow and left the royal palace. On the surface, he was smiling, while on the inside, he was cursing loudly. He just thought, for the briefest of moments, he had "beaten" the Challenge Dungeon in less than a year, but it turns out he had just finished one of the goddamn story arcs.

Relax, Jake... just keep going at it, and at some point, you'll run out of jobs or become unable to finish them.

"That could have gone worse," Minaga said with a grin. "A lot worse. Jake is really freaking lucky his strategy worked out somehow... or maybe it's that weird instinct or intuition or whatever that helped him along. Who knows? For my own sanity, I will just call it pure luck."

Valdemar, who usually didn't bother saying much, actually spoke for once. "Luck is also kind of a skill."

Vilastromoz wanted to call that out as bullshit but held his tongue. He didn't deny luck was a thing, but to call it a skill was going overboard... even if Valdemar was known as someone notoriously lucky.

"Luck is just when preparation meets opportunity," the Blightfather chimed in. "Many of those who dare claim others just got lucky are those incapable of even taking advantage of the opportunities they gain."

"But isn't someone who gets more potential opportunities considered luckier then?" the Holy Mother also decided to get involved... likely just to take a jab at the Blightfather.

"Opportunities are more often than not taken, not given," the Blightfather shook his head. "And the definition of an opportunity varies widely. For the talented, they can turn every day into a few opportunities. A powerful beast nearby may be viewed as nothing but a danger to the common person but is an opportunity for the strong to test themselves and claim Records, yet none will claim someone is lucky for choosing to face a beast they have a high chance of dying against."

"Why are we even discussing the definition of luck?" Minaga questioned.

"You started it," the Wyrmgod simply added.

"And now I'm finishing it," Minaga said with a grin. "Anyway, back to Jake. Man, am I looking forward to when he unlocks the final arc. Gonna be so funny."

The Wyrmgod sighed but didn't say anything, as the Viper wondered what would happen... but seeing as Minaga looked so amused, he had a feeling something really interesting... or stupid... was about to happen. After Jake had done a load of more average Courier Jobs, of course.

Jake remembered always finding it incredibly funny in video games how none of your prior accomplishments were properly acknowledged. One could be the divine archmage and emperor of a nation, but some random farmer would still give you a quest to kill rats, and the recruiter of a new faction would still call you "new blood" and act as if you were a total novice.

It was a nice joke and something to laugh about when it happened, even if it could take you a bit out of the story. But surely, this kind of thing wouldn't happen in the "real" world, now would it? Well...

Jake Thayne, Courier extraordinaire and the man who had personally worked with the Founder to expose the corruption of many nobles of the highest rank. A man who had led to the death and arrest of many A-grades, a man even the king and Lord Protector would show respect to, and even a benefactor of the Guild itself, soon found himself busy trying to convince a bunch of children who had "stolen" his package that the toys inside weren't for them, but his client.

After Special Courier Job 15, Jake had gone to the Guild, where, despite all the kind words they had for him, they still gave him regular-ass jobs to do. Was the difficulty higher now, and did he even get into a few fights during some of them? Yes, but it was clear combat wasn't really the core of this Challenge Dungeon. It was instead just the ability to handle different annoying situations while not losing your cool or getting tricked.

Jake had hoped he would only need to do a few more Courier Jobs for something interesting to happen, and he was kind of right? After he had done "only" 50 jobs in the capital city of the Human Kingdom, he was contacted by a Guild employee on behalf of the Founder. Jake was given a Special Courier Job to go to a different capital city and work there for a while to "audit" the Guild before then reporting back after he had done another fifty to seventy Courier Jobs there...

This pattern continued as weeks turned to months, with Jake traveling all over the world inside the Challenge Dungeon. Every new country had unique challenges and different cultures to navigate, but Jake thought he did pretty well as he really got into the groove. Soon enough, over half a year passed since he had gotten his ancient rarity medallion, and Jake had been to nearly every single capital city. Things were a bit stale by now, but he kept up his work ethic as he knew things were bound to end at some point.

Finally, after around eight months as an ancient rarity Courier, Jake met the Founder once more as he attended a ceremony and was given the highest honors as a Courier. His Medallion was upgraded for what he believed was the final time as he stepped into the ranks of Legendary Couriers.

[Courier Medallion (Legendary)] – A Courier Medallion belonging to a Legendary Courier, a title that has only been seen a few times through history and can only be given by the Guild Founder himself. This Medallion will hold information related to jobs and can give general directions to your destination if those are provided (may not be entirely reliable). This is the highest-known rank of the Courier Medallion.

Requirements: Soulbound

As even the description of the Medallion said, this was the highest-known rank, and after getting it, Jake felt as if he was well and truly done with the Challenge Dungeon... but no message appeared. Perhaps it had been silly of him to expect something known as the Endless Journey to have an end, but it had to end at some point?

After the ceremony where he got promoted, Jake was given a week off to relax. However... just two days later, as Jake was chilling and doing a bit of alchemy as he had run out of potions again, a Guild employee suddenly stormed into the room.

"Hurry, you must come!" the attendant said in a panicked voice.

"What happened?" Jake asked.

"Somehow, the dragon tribe returned!"

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

Chapter 846: Nevermore: Never Easy

So... dragons. Dragons were scary, and in all honesty, there was no way in fucking hell Jake was going to be dealing with one. Any true dragon was B-grade and a high-tier variant, meaning even the weakest of them could blast Jake to pieces without him ever really standing a chance.

This begged the question... with dragons suddenly returning, what the hell was Jake to do? Well, he learned that only half an hour after the guild employee had gone to fetch him. The dwarven woman had led Jake to a meeting room where Jake saw quite a few influential figures already gathered. Royals from many different countries had shown up, high-ranking people not part of any country, and Jake even felt the aura of a second S-grade present beside the Founder.

When Jake entered the room, he only got a few glances from the roughly seventy people present. Not a single person there wasn't at least A-grade and either a duke, royal, or leader of some organization. He instantly questioned why he was there, but seeing as no one else did, he decided to just bow slightly and find a seat off to the side.

A dozen or so more people arrived over the next half an hour, all of them also A-grade. No more S-grade appeared beside the Founder and a woman Jake recognized from a poster he had seen in the Phoenix Wing Empire. The Phoenix Wing Empire was the only empire in the world solely because they were the only faction with an S-grade ruler, and the Phoenix Empress stood proudly side by side with the Founder, giving off an aura that, while inferior to his, still outshined everyone else present. Alright, Jake could also try and enter the race, but he didn't really feel like attracting any attention.

"Good, we are all here," the Founder said after a few more minutes passed and everyone had gotten settled. "I believe you are all aware why we are here, so let us not delay needlessly. Our world faces a crisis, and we will need the help of everyone present to weather this storm."

Murmurs filled the room, but no one asked any questions. From the looks of it, everyone indeed knew what this was about as the Founder began to elaborate with a bit of lore and what exactly they were dealing with.

"Forty thousand years ago, I killed the Dragon King, yes... but the queen still managed to flee along with her whelpings and other survivors. No one knew where they went, and despite searching everywhere on the planet and all the local solar systems, not a single trace was discovered. We believed they were gone forever or had perhaps died... but as of a few hours ago, a group of dragons was confirmed in a neighboring solar system, rapidly heading this way. They are led by the Dragon Queen, the now S-

grade Dragon Prince, and three other S-grades, with hundreds of A-grades and over ten thousand B-grade True Dragons, while the number of C-grade dragon spawn, wyverns and dragonkin are impossible to count as they are all being transported in secured barges."

"Moreover," the Phoenix Empress added, "we have reason to believe that some dragonkin and dragon tribe sympathizers have already arrived on the planet and have been here for a while, preparing for the return of the dragon tribe. Now, many of them have begun to make their moves, and we have strong reason to believe even some nobles are supporting them."

The Founder suddenly turned to Jake and motioned toward him. "Recently, as I am sure you all know, there was an internal struggle in the Human Kingdom where some nobles went too far and exploited the Guild. This was all discovered through the vaiiant efforts of this legendary Courier. During the following interrogations with the Duke of Flames, we discovered that the Duke had not only been committing many crimes and exploited the Guild... two centuries ago, he also entered an alliance with the dragon tribe who offered him an S-grade Dragon Flame Elemental for his cooperation in toppling the Human Kingdom and weakening the Guild. It was only due to the efforts of this Courier we were able to learn this and even get an early warning, giving us more time to prepare."

Jake just sat in the corner as all the A-grades and even two S-grades gave him respectful looks for his contribution to the war efforts. He tried to look humble but honestly had no idea what to do or say, so he just nodded solemnly, which the Founder luckily took as an opportunity to continue.

What followed was a long explanation of their war efforts, and to sum it up, things weren't looking good. The plan was for all of the B-, A- and S-grades that could possibly be gathered to come together and face the dragon tribe in space before they even reached the planet. However, even if they gathered a powerful army, the dragon tribe still simply had more powerhouses. From what the Founder said, this Dragon Prince was also more powerful than the Dragon King had been, so even if the Founder had continued to make some progress in the last forty thousand years, he was unsure if he could win. If the other four S-grades were factored in, things were bleak for sure with their side only having two S-grades.

I wonder... if I had sided with the Duke of Flames completely and continued to assist him, could I have ended up on the side of this dragon tribe? Jake considered as all the talks continued. They still had a while before the dragons arrived – the early warning courtesy of Jake uncovering the crimes of the Duke of Flames – and during this time, all the preparations that could be made would be made.

As the meeting began to wind to a close, the Founder asked Jake to follow him to a private office. Jake could already feel another Special Courier Job coming as he closed the door behind him, and he saw the Founder activate some magic to seal off the room.

"Courier... things are even worse than I presented them out there," the Founder began as he sighed. "If things continue as they are, we don't stand a chance. While we may be able to defend for a while, we simply do not have the power to beat them in a straight-on fight... not unless we get more allies."

Oh... this trope, Jake thought as he already knew what was coming next.

"The Phoenix Queen and I are the only ones who can fight the S-grades among the ranks of the dragons, but there are also others from our world who can. Two old comrades from back during the war, known as the Blademaster and the Nine Seals Demon. The problem is, I am not entirely sure where they are; all I heard was that both went off to train many, many years ago."

"You need me to help find them?" Jake asked the obvious question.

"Yes," the Founder nodded. "While I do not know where either of them are, I do know someone who at least is aware of the location of one: the Blademaster. He sealed himself away for isolated training about ten thousand years ago, but his wife should still be living in the Elven Kingdom, and if anyone knows where my old friend went, it's her. Seek her out, and ask... and try to do this without raising any suspicions. I am certain that I am currently being tracked, the same as all the other A-grades, and I have to head to the frontlines soon to establish our defenses. As a C-grade courier, you should be mostly inconspicuous, but be warned there will likely be many pursuers anyway."

"Alright," Jake nodded as he got yet another Special Courier Job.

Special Courier Job 20: Locate and recruit the Blademaster.

Sweet, short, and simple. With a mission that just had to be the start of the final arc of this Challenge Dungeon, Jake headed off to find the wife and convince her to tell him where the Blademaster was. He expected a lot of difficulty during the journey, as he found out that the woman lived far away from any of the major cities on a small farmstead, meaning he had to travel a lot on foot without any teleportation circles available. At least he could get to the closest city pretty easily.

As Jake left the city, he saw that things were really busy. Everyone knew an attack was incoming, and while the normal citizens couldn't do much, they helped those with power as much as they could. Powerful defensive formations were set up, and people charged what looked like big mana batteries to send to the frontlines to power massive defensive barriers to assist the fighters up in space. No one even tried to flee, as they knew doing so wouldn't help with anything... if the dragons returned, their living in a city or hiding out would mean nothing.

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

Jake was certainly noticed as he left the city, but surprisingly, no one followed him. As he kept flying, Jake wondered when these people the Founder warned him about would show up, but he didn't see anyone. Well, not with his eyes, anyway. He did spot a group of people roaming around with a Pulse of Perception a few hours from the city and promptly made sure to be in stealth as he flew around them. He did the same with whatever else he got the feeling could be an enemy on the way. He honestly didn't want to meet or talk to anyone but this wife, so he stayed clear of everything possible. This was not a combat-focused Challenge Dungeon, so he had no reason to fight when unnecessary, right?

Now, if he could get experience, things may have been different... but alas.

Due to his careful and stealthy approach, Jake reached the farmstead about a week after leaving the elven city without meeting any trouble on the way. As he got closer, he saw many powerful formations already defending the place, so Jake stopped right outside and he yelled as loud as he could.

"Excuse me, but I'm looking for someone known as the Blademaster! Asking for a mutual ally! I was hoping you could give me a moment of your ti-"

Before Jake was even done yelling, he was rudely interrupted as his entire body turned into an ice statue, and even the air itself froze all around him. He physically became unable to let out any sound or even move a muscle as his insides were entirely frozen over. Yet he didn't feel any danger at all, despite the less-than-pleasant sensation of being a popsicle, showing the one who had frozen him wasn't aiming to kill but simply capture him.

An A-grade elven woman appeared in front of Jake a second later as she observed him closely. With a wave of her hand, she unfroze his head. "Speak. Who are you."

"Courier here on a job directly from the Guild Founder to ask you for the location or a method to find the Blademaster," Jake answered in his usual polite tone. Even if the woman was being a bit rude by freezing him, he wouldn't lose his professional attitude.

The woman looked surprised as she narrowed her eyes. A bit carefully, she melted all the ice on Jake's upper body, allowing him to move freely. Just as she did, Jake took out his Courier Medallion and showed her before she could demand for him to prove his identity.

She looked at the Medallion carefully for a second. "A legendary Courier... this must not be a small matter... why do you need the Blademaster?"

"I take it you are pretty isolated out here and don't get news that often?" Jake questioned.

"I enjoy the solitude when my husband is not here," the woman scoffed as if offended by the question.

"Well, to bring you up to speed. The dragon tribe is back, currently fighting the Guild Founder, Phoenix Queen, and many others in the neighboring solar system. Things are not looking good, and they need the help of the Blademaster," Jake quickly updated her, offering the news delivery service completely complimentary.

"This is..." she muttered. "Alright, I'll take you to him."

"Great," Jake smiled as the woman entirely unfroze and dragged him along as they flew to a nearby mountain range. Once they entered it, Jake felt that they entered a vast system of formations, likely set up by the S-grade to defend himself during his isolated training. Looking around, there were hundreds of caves spread around the mountains.

"He is here, with one of these caves leading to his location... however, I am unsure which one, and seeing as each has defensive formations, we will need to carefully search each of-

"That one," Jake pointed after he was done scanning the result of his Pulse of Perception.

The A-grade woman looked at him. "You speak with such certainty... how would you possibly know which one it is?"

Now, it was Jake's turn to scoff as he looked offended. "What do you mean how do I know? I'm a professional Courier."

Half an hour later, Jake and the wife stood in front of a huge gate leading into a sealed chamber as they knocked a few times. With the wife by Jake's side, the Blademaster soon opened when he noticed her, and after a brief talk where Jake flashed his token and said he was working for the Founder, they had a second S-grade in the back. Powerwise, he was somewhere between the Phoenix Queen and the Founder, so he was definitely a good addition.

Jake did ask if he knew where any of the other S-grades were, as the Blademaster frowned.

"The Phoenix Queen sure knows where the Nine Seals Demon is. Last time I checked, those two were an item."

For a moment, Jake considered if this was yet another plot twist... that the Phoenix Queen was actually with the dragons all along, and that was why she had kept hidden that she knew where this Nine Seals Demon was. That didn't feel quite right, though, so he would have to confirm.

With the Blademaster recruited, the S-grade quickly helped Jake get back to a major city, where he promptly went to the Guild and reported his success as the Blademaster and his wife headed toward the frontlines. In the Guild, the employee gave him a token from the Phoenix Queen."

Seeing no reason to delay, he headed to a nearby room and infused some energy into it.

The projection of the Phoenix Queen appeared in front of Jake a few seconds later as she spoke in a grave tone. "I heard you found the Blademaster... good. You have proven your skills are indeed worthy of respect, and if anyone can do this, you can. I did not hide the location of the Nine Seals Demon maliciously; I just had to make sure you may be skilled enough to find her. While I do not know where the Nine Seals Demon is, I know a way to get her to come to us. She left the planet a long time ago, but before she left, she set up a trial to find any prospective students worth teaching, meaning it can only be entered by C-grades. Inside this trial, I also know she placed a teleportation circle for her to return from borderline anywhere in the galaxy. Pass her trial and tell her we need help... and we need it fast. The location of the trial is already known by the Guild, so get it from them."

"I will head there straight away," Jake confirmed as he received yet another Special Courier Job.

"Good, but be warned. The Nine Seals Demon is a master of traps and formations, and her trial will be filled with them. I wish you luck for the sake of us all... this task will not be easy."

... to make a long story short, Jake would put this "trial" at the difficulty level of a moderately hard Minaga's Endless Labyrinth Section. Far below the best Jake could do for sure, which made for an easy Special Courier Job.

At the end of the trial, Jake indeed found a large chamber with a massive teleportation circle in the middle, as well as an orb that one could infuse power into. Jake didn't really think much as he went and did just that as a projection appeared soon after.

A woman with red skin, barely wearing any clothes and covered in tattoo-like markings, stood before him soon after. She looked down at Jake for a moment before she spoke.

"Ten thousand years and someone has finally passed my trial... and it turns out to be a mid-tier C-grade. A bit unexpected but not unwelcome. Now tell me, why did you pass my trial?" the Nine Seals Demon said.

Oh yeah, Jake had changed his level to show his actual one a while ago. He also didn't wear his mask anywhere, as he came to learn that it only had a detrimental effect when dealing with clients. Not that he could blame them.

"Greetings," Jake bowed. "I apologize, but I am not here for anything strictly to do with the trial. I am a Courier here to inform you that your homeworld is getting invaded, and I was tasked by the Phoenix Empress to contact you. She told me this place houses a teleportation circle to bring you back from wherever you are."

The Nine Seals Demon was quiet for a while before she sighed. **"Tell me... has the Phoenix Empress gone to the frontlines to fight?"** The source of this content is *novel•fire●net*

"Yes," Jake quickly answered, as he got an odd feeling from her question.

"I see," the Nine Seals Demon said, sounding a bit concerned. **"Very well. To activate the magic circle, take the crystals in the adjacent room and place them in the four focal points of the formation, and I shall return promptly to meet her."**

Jake looked at the projection for a moment as he nodded. "Alright, but one question first... since when did you side with the dragon tribe?"

The projection stopped as she stared down at him. **"What do you mean?"**

"Yeah, that being your response pretty much confirms it," Jake shook his head. "Seriously... you didn't ask any questions, didn't ask me to elaborate about anything, and instantly asked about the frontlines despite knowing nothing of what's going on. That's suspicious as hell. If you didn't already know what was happening, that is."

The projection kept looking down at him as she sighed. **"Too clever for your own good, huh? Tell me, if you are so clever, how much do you truly know about this entire conflict? Why there ever was a war, to begin with? You are on the wrong side of history. The planet you stand on was originally inhabited by the dragons and beasts. We who dare call ourselves enlightened arrived much later as nothing more than refugees, but the dragons took us in. Helped us rise to power... and once we did, we turned around and betrayed them. Killed their leader and forced them from their own home while rewriting history to make us look like the victims. All the dragon tribe is doing is setting things right, and-"**

"Ma'am, I don't care," Jake interrupted her, truly not giving a shit. "Just here on a job, and seeing as you aren't an ally, I'll be taking my leave."

"And here I thought you would see sense... very well, if that is your choice, so be it. But don't think for a second you are leaving here alive."

With those words, her projection exploded as magic formations on the walls activated, and everything around him rumbled as a collapse was imminent. Seeing as he was over a hundred kilometers below the ground in a heavily fortified trial, this could definitely be a problem. What's more, in the distance, he heard several explosions as all the traps he

had passed began going off, and from the sounds of it, these explosions were getting closer, making Jake swear internally.

Bloody hell, why can't this shit ever be easy... and I don't even get hazard pay.

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

Chapter 847: Nevermore: "What a twist."

Jake sighed as the entire trial was rapidly coming down on his head. Usually, a collapsing cave wouldn't really be a problem, and it would, at most, annoyingly trap him for a while, but this place was a bit different. It was clearly rigged to explode and kill whoever was inside, and releasing a Pulse, Jake saw that the pathways he had taken to enter the chamber were rapidly collapsing. If he really hurried, there was a chance he could still make it out the way he came, though it would be far more dangerous than the way down there. Even then, it was a risk, and he predicted he would get trapped at quite a few points and would have to do his fair share of digging.

He could do all that... or he could just go straight up and not waste any more time than he needed to. Summoning his wings, Jake began to rapidly infuse energy into them before he had an enchanted rock fall on his head. A green mist began to come out as he manipulated it to slowly surround him. Jake's body soon enough began to turn a dark green color as he took a deep breath before activating the emergency escape ability of Wings of the Malefic Viper.

Shooting upwards, Jake had little control of his movements, as he just focused on going up. He felt himself pass through solid matter as if nothing could stop him. Even the enchantments placed on the chamber didn't manage to impede his ascent, as they were ultimately made to strengthen the material, not stop someone using a skill like Jake's to travel straight through.

Everything was warped as Jake wasn't sure exactly where he would end up. After a few seconds more, Jake figured it was good enough as he deactivated the skill and appeared in the real world once more. Once his eyes and body refocused, he found himself standing in mid-air, above the clouds, with the ground far beneath him.

The wings on his back slowly withered away, and Jake felt the backlash as he could no longer activate the skill. He probably wouldn't be able to for a good while... at least a few days. Jake had purposefully not kept the skill going for longer than necessary to avoid the cooldown being too long, even if he could have continued for a good while.

"Well, the Nine Seals Demon was a dud," Jake sighed again. He had honestly been lucky he had discovered she was a secret ally of the dragon tribe because that had definitely been a risky gamble. Had Jake known for sure she was an ally of them? No, he just felt like things felt a bit off with her responses and lack of surprise when Jake mentioned the world getting invaded. Almost as if she had expected it to happen. Her concern also felt completely fake.

When he then accused her of being an ally, her response had also seemed off. She had frozen and just looked at him before asking what he meant. If she truly was an ally of the Founder who had fought the dragon tribe, wouldn't she be extremely offended that some C-grade accused her of working with her hated enemy?

Nothing was definitive proof, but Jake had risked big and won. The fact she had crumbled so quickly and confessed everything had been very lucky for sure. As for her explanation about how the dragon tribe was actually the wronged party and the entire "you're actually working with the baddies" spiel... yeah, Jake honestly didn't care. He was the Chosen of an evil snake cult. If he cared about being associated with the "bad guys," he would have had a faction change a long time ago.

The conversation did bring up one more annoying question he had to ask himself, though... was the Phoenix Queen an ally? The Founder had mentioned this Nine Seals Demon as an ally before, so there was a chance she had switched sides recently, and the Phoenix Queen had no idea. It could also be that the Phoenix Queen was also an enemy who would stab them in the back, which could be disastrous if the Founder trusted her. At this point, there was no way to determine her allegiances, and Jake had no idea how he would go about things.

Either way, shit was messy, and Jake was definitely not equipped to handle it. He considered what to do but ultimately decided to return to the Guild. Whenever in doubt, he returned to the core objective of this Challenge Dungeon: to complete Courier Jobs. So, if he could "trust" anyone, it had to be the Founder who made the Guild.

Luckily, the trial hadn't been that far from a major city, and a few hours of using One Step later, he arrived back in one. After a few more teleports, Jake was back in the capital city of the Human Kingdom, where he headed to the Guild to hopefully contact the Founder directly.

He ended up having to wait half an hour inside the Guild office before he could finally talk with the S-grade.

A projection appeared, and Jake saw the form of the Founder. He looked a bit worse to wear and was sitting with his legs crossed, likely also using this conversation to restore some energy. **"Courier, thank you for helping get the Blademaster here. I heard from the Phoenix Queen you went to recruit the Nine Seals Demon? Her abilities would be a great help in fortifying our defenses."**

"Yeah, about that... turns out the Nine Seals Demon is on the side of the dragon tribe," Jake said with an apologetic look. "I luckily discovered this before summoning her here, so a crisis was temporarily averted."

"What?" the Founder asked, confused. **"Impossible... she was... no, I believe you, you have yet to lie to me. What exactly happened when you contacted her?"**

Jake began to explain everything about their conversation and how he had to escape the collapsing cave, sprinkling that in to make it clear she had tried to kill him, likely to bury what he knew. The Founder frowned even more deeply than before when Jake told him she said that the dragon tribe were the planet's original inhabitants, and the enlightened races were nothing more than refugees who took over. His interpretation of history was a bit different, though.

"Refugees? While it is true some were, many were brought here by the dragons as slaves after their homeworlds were destroyed by the tribe. It was no rebellion toward a benevolent ruler but a revolution against a tyrannical one that took place over centuries. We did also get some help from other enlightened who arrived, but to paint us as the aggressors and not us simply defending ourselves... either the Nine Seals Demon has been utterly fooled, or she tried to fool you," the Founder said after Jake was done with his explanation.

Jake wanted to tell him that he still didn't give a shit about the history of the world, and he kind of assumed both of them to be full of crap when it came to telling him what actually went down, but he held his tongue. Instead, he waited for the Founder to give him some time to think. As this happened, Jake also saw he had completed the Special Courier Job to find the Nine Seals Demon, so that was nice.

"You have once more done us a huge service. If the Nine Seals Demon had been summoned to the planet and attacked from behind, dismantling our defenses, the consequences would have been disastrous. I also understand your concerns about the Phoenix Queen, and I will make sure to confirm if she is also a spy... but I doubt it. For now, do keep what happened with the Nine Seals Demon hidden, though. I will tell her if I believe that best while subtly investigating."

That was definitely a flag of some sort, and Jake quickly interjected.

"I believe it would be best to tell her now. There is a good chance the Nine Seals Demon joins the invasion force at some point, and if the Phoenix Queen is actually on our side right now, the shock of seeing someone she was once close with may turn her to the side of the dragons. If, on the other hand, you already discussed this with her first, she will not be shocked and be far more likely to refuse to listen to anything the Nine Seals Demon says."

Stolen novel; please report.

It was pretty common knowledge that people were incredibly biased toward the first side of any story they heard. If the Phoenix Queen already had the interpretation that the Nine Seals Demon had either gone insane or been tricked, she was far less likely to be convinced. This all assumed she wasn't a traitor right now, of course.

"Hm, perhaps you are right," the Founder agreed. **"Very well; I shall discuss it with her as soon as possible."**

One potential disaster avoided there... or I accelerated her betrayal, Jake told himself as he continued.

"How are things going at the frontlines? And is there anything more I can do to assist?"

"Our defenses are holding for now, but it is only a matter of time... the Blademaster has been a massive help and bought us a lot of extra leeway. However, nothing has truly changed. We need more allies... and..."

The Founder looked like he was hesitating a lot, unsure if he wanted to continue. Jake felt like he had to press him.

"Please, if there is any way, it is my responsibility to try and assist. So if there are any jobs, never hesitate to give them to me," Jake insisted.

Still clearly unsure, the Founder considered for a bit before finally sighing. **"Very well, you have yet to fail so far. There is one person you could approach, but it is not ally or an old friend. What I am about to tell you is not something many know, and not even the Phoenix Queen is aware. Around twenty thousand years ago, I discovered an unknown aura. I noticed as the sole S-grade and went to investigate. It was another S-grade, and I foolishly got in a fight. I barely held on for a few minutes and nearly lost my life, but I was spared in the end. That is when I came to learn who I had been fighting... the brother of the Dragon King, who had been thrown out as his mother was a human."**

Yep, Jake had definitely unlocked some more hidden lore and a very special job. More special than the regular Special Courier Jobs.

"Back in the big war, he was not involved, as while he despised his brother, he still didn't want to kill his own kin. The reason I am hesitant to try and make contact is that, truthfully, I do not know what his intentions are now. I do not know if he will even side with us or perhaps even choose his own kin and be our end. All I know is that without him, our chances are slim, while with him on our side, our victory is assured. Of course, our destruction is also unquestionable if he joins the enemy side, but at this point, it is simply a risk we have to take."

"I understand," Jake nodded. "A huge risk with a potential enormous reward. How am I to find this dragonkin?"

"Once more, I must be truthful... I am not entirely sure. All I know is that he is either on this planet or one of the inhabited moons. When it comes to his exact location, all I have is a runic horn he left me with when I encountered him back then. He claimed that the runes on it could be deciphered to find his exact location, but I never really even considered messing with it, as I feared he would know if I did, and admittedly, I fear this dragonkin. Now, my fear is no longer a consideration. Also, while I respect your skills, you won't be able to decipher it, as you are ultimately still only C-grade."

Jake felt a bit disrespected, but the Founder was probably right. Jake's chance of deciphering something made by an S-grade was borderline impossible, especially if he was on a bit of a timer.

"Instead, you must find experts capable of doing so. I have a few names in mind and shall include their locations when I transfer the Special Courier Job. Pick up the horn from my vault before you leave, and guard it with your life. Oh, and finally... due to the nature of the runes on the horn, it cannot be put in spatial storage, and with its draconic traits, I do not doubt for a second it will release an aura recognizable to dragons or their allies... so be careful as you travel, alright? There is a good chance the dragon tribe is also aware of their lost prince, so I doubt this will be a smooth journey. I would ask someone else to do it, but you are the only one I trust this task with. Now hurry, I must go; time is not on our side... may you succeed and win us this war."

The projection disappeared again as Jake had gotten yet another Special Courier Job. At least, he thought it was just another Special Courier Job, but he was proven wrong as he read it.

Final Special Courier Job: While carrying the Horn of the Forsaken Dragonkin, seek out different experts capable of deciphering the runes on it. Once the runes are fully deciphered, meet the Lost Dragonkin and convince him to join the war against the dragon tribe. While carrying the horn, you will be repeatedly pursued by allies of the dragon tribe. This Special Courier Job must be completed before the frontline falls.

That's right, the final Special Courier Job of them all. Just one more left and Jake would be done... though he got the feeling this one wouldn't be all that easy or fast. Without hesitation, he went by the Founder's Vault, and using his legendary Medallion with the Final Special Courier Job inside, he unlocked it, finding only the horn within.

The horn was about the size of a goat's horn and slightly curved. It had a brownish color but was covered in golden runes all over. Picking it up, Jake tried if he could analyze the runes at all, but after just a brief scan, he shook his head. *Fuck... no, I can't solve that... shit I doubt even Arnold could.*

Using Identify on the horn, he quickly confirmed it was at least also the real item.

[Horn of the Forsaken Dragonkin (Legendary)] – the horn of the ousted son of the deceased Dragon King. This horn is covered in runes that must be deciphered in order to unlock its true function. Cannot be put in any kind of spatial storage. Gives off powerful draconic Records, making it an item easily tracked by the dragon tribe. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY novel★fire★net

"Oh well," Jake muttered as he took the horn, and on the way out of the Guild, he took a small over-the-shoulder bag to carry it in. It was a bit too big to eat, so this would at least make it not too annoying to carry around.

Checking the location of the first expert, Jake frowned a bit. Of-fucking-course, it was placed in the middle of nowhere. With no reason to delay, Jake hurried out of the Guild and went on his way, not wasting any time to get this final job done. He just hoped that whatever the dragon tribe and their allies were cooking up wouldn't be too annoying.

Within a hidden mansion, ten figures sat. Nine of them were C-grade, all giving off auras of the late-tier, while the final one was a true A-grade powerhouse. They were positioned at a round table with a large crystal ball in the middle.

"The C-grade Courier is on the move," one of the C-grades, a human, said. "He has the horn."

These people were all of different races, each representing different countries on the planet, except for the A-grade, who showed strong draconic traits. Unsurprising, considering he was a dragon in human form.

With a large smile, the A-grade in the room spoke. "Good... the royal prince was right. In their desperation, they will lead us straight to him. Now, we just need to capture this Courier, and victory shall be ours. My movements are sealed, but you all should be able to act freely, so this task falls to you. Mobilize your forces and track him down."

Waving his hand, the crystal ball began to glow. Nine smaller crystal balls emerged from it as the A-grade did his magic. "The horn is linked to the Dragon Prince, and using it, we shall track this Courier easily. These artifacts will all show you the location of... wait a moment."

The A-grade frowned a bit as he cast his magic again. He tried two more times as he sneered and looked at the C-grade who had spoken earlier. "You said a C-grade had taken out the horn from the vault!"

"He... he did," the human confirmed. "I have an insider in the Guild who confirmed it..."

"Well, then tell me, you bloody moron, why the hell is the tracking spell not working on the horn! No... wait... ah, I see. Clever of them," the A-grade said after a while as he nodded confidently. "There is no way a mere C-grade could hide both himself and the horn from me... which can only mean one thing. He is a decoy meant to throw us off

while the real horn remains in the vault. That, or someone powerful enough to hide it from me, has taken it for transport.”

Everyone around the table nodded in recognition. “Truly a brilliant deduction,” a beastfolk chimed in, the dragon nodding, satisfied.

”Seeing as he is nothing more than a decoy, don’t bother with the Courier carrying the fake horn. If you have any agents that are in his path anyway, feel free to try and detain him and interrogate him for information, but there is a big chance that even he believes he is carrying the real horn, so I am not sure there is much to be gained.”

Once more, everyone nodded at the brilliant analysis from their leader. Truly, he had seen through the ploys of the Founder and Guild.

Minaga just grinned as he looked at the Wyrmgod.

The Primordial didn’t say anything but just looked at the livestream quietly as he held a stoic expression on his face.

Vilastromoz also smiled to himself as he watched Jake running around, wondering why the hell no one was bothering him.

Minaga leaned slightly forward as he looked at the Viper with the subtlety of a rampaging behemoth. ”Psst... did you know Jake actually does have the real horn, but due to his totally fair Divine skill, they falsely believe he doesn’t?”

”Wow,” the Viper responded with totally genuine shock. ”What a twist.”

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

Chapter 848: Nevermore: Forsaken Dragonkin

Maybe it was Jake’s fault for expecting too much, but he had very much assumed he would meet some kind of opposition during all his travels. He had set out to find people to decipher the runes, but on the way to the first one, he didn’t get intercepted by a single enemy. Were there times when something looking like an ambush was hidden in the most obvious flight path? Yes, but Jake had just easily avoided that or kept his stealth skill active to pass by unnoticed.

After his visit to the first rune-reading person, he was told that she alone couldn’t decipher everything, but she managed to make some progress before sending him off

to the next person with her notes. At this second person's place, a bit more deciphered, and at the third, a bit more than that.

Days turned to weeks, and soon Jake had spent over a month traveling between these rune decipherers. Each of them, for some fucking reason, liked to live in bum-fuck nowhere, meaning Jake had to travel a lot to get to them. With time, he did notice the search parties looking for him increasing, but with a mixture of Pulse of Perception, a legendary stealth skill, and probably also Shroud of the Primordial doing its stuff, Jake remained undisturbed for the most part.

It did annoy him that some of the rune decipherers were stereotypical shitty quest NPCs that would only help Jake if he helped them first by doing some dumb side job, but Jake didn't really have a choice. In total, Jake spent nearly three months before he finally met the final rune decryptor. The old man looked at the notes done by the others who had looked at the horn, and after about an hour, he succeeded in solving the final rune.

Right as he did so, all the golden runes covering the horn gave off strong light as they warped and changed. Jake quickly reached out and took hold of the horn, and the moment he did, two things happened. The first was that he suddenly knew exactly where he could find the Forsaken Dragonkin... and that a giant beam of light shot into the sky as the full aura of an S-grade dragonkin blasted out.

Jake was pushed back slightly as he saw the old decipherer fall to the ground, knocked out by the blast. This wave of aura spread further than Jake could see, and with how big it was, they could likely feel it all the way to the frontline far up in space. Quickly running outside, Jake stared up as the sky rumbled, and he didn't doubt for a second that many powerful beings were approaching. What's more, he got a feeling things had suddenly turned for the worse elsewhere, too, confirmed as he got a notification.

Final Special Courier Job Updated: While carrying the Horn of the Forsaken Dragonkin, meet the Forsaken Dragonkin and convince him to join the war against the dragon tribe. While carrying the horn, you will be repeatedly pursued by allies of the dragon tribe, who are now aware of your location. The frontline is rapidly falling, and time is not on your side.

Yep... things were definitely a lot worse now than before, and Jake didn't delay for a second as he headed straight to the teleporter in the city. He was lucky that the horn had only given off that one giant blast of aura and didn't continue to give it off, but it had still pinged every single person on the planet to this location.

However, Jake soon met another problem... the second he activated the teleporter to a new city and went through to the other side, a whole new blast of aura shot out of the horn. Due to how many people were near the teleportation gate, Jake knocked out over ten thousand people with his first teleport alone.

Fucking hell, Jake cursed, but he didn't stop as he teleported again three more times to get as close to his destination as possible. Tens of thousands, if not far more, were knocked out in Jake's wake as he sent off a sequence of pings to whoever was pursuing him, informing them of what direction he was heading.

When Jake had finally done his final teleport, he stormed off immediately. His wings were naturally available once more after he used the escape skill before, and he quickly summoned them and used One Step for maximum speed. He quickly got a bit away from the city, found a quiet place, and went down to activate his stealth skill. With it active, Jake continued his journey as he used Pulse of Perception every thirty seconds or so for the first period of travel despite the headache it induced as he was feeling pretty damn paranoid.

And for good reason. Powerful beings were coming his way, no longer limited to just C-grades either. With the fall of the frontlines rapidly approaching, those on the planet who had been lying in wait were now moving far more openly. Through Pulse, he did spot some people also fighting against them, as the war had pretty much broken out everywhere, and shockwaves of energy from B-grades fighting could be felt in the distance.

Jake had to fly more carefully than ever as he slowly approached a mountain range in the middle of nowhere. There were no towns anywhere close to it, and he had to cross a desert-like plain just to reach it, with nothing living there. Even the mountains were entirely bare rock, with not a single plant growing anywhere.

Yet the horn responded as he got closer and closer to his destination. When Jake entered the mountain range, yet another blast of aura was released, making Jake grit his teeth as he knew everyone was coming his way now. Things were really out of hand, and before anyone had a chance to catch up, Jake reached a small cave at the foot of one of the mountains.

Entering, Jake walked through it for a while until he reached its end. There, he found a heavily enchanted stone gate with a slot in it that looked very similar to the horn he had been carrying around all this time. Briefly inspecting the cave walls and the gate, Jake quickly recognized everything here had been fortified to a level where he doubted even the Founder could break through with force. Taking out the horn, Jake slotted it in as all the runes activated. Jake felt like he was on some treasure-hunting expedition as the golden runes spread to the rest of the door before it began to slowly sink into the ground, allowing him passage.

Walking through the open gate, Jake entered a long, bricked hallway as torches lit on both sides. He had already scouted ahead and knew he was in the right place and that there were no traps, so after walking calmly for a few minutes, he reached a large chamber unimpeded.

There, right in the middle of the large chamber, was a single figure. The floor was covered in a large magic circle that seemed to be feeding this person power, and he didn't even react when Jake made his entrance. Yet Jake felt the attention of this being upon him... and he knew it was the strongest creature he had met in this Challenge Dungeon so far, and not by a little. He didn't even dare use Identify as he was pretty damn confident the being would be aware if he tried to.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

Probably at the level of Viridia... and I heard she is close to the peak of S-grade...

"Greetings," Jake said with a polite bow as he stopped a good distance away, not entering the range of the magic circle.

The dragonkin slowly opened his eyes as two red irises looked Jake up and down. "That horn... I had nearly forgotten I even gave it out. Tell me, what is a mere C-grade doing here, interrupting me? It wouldn't have anything to do with the little scuffle outside, now would it?"

"You are correct," Jake nodded, seeing no need to hide anything. "The planet is facing a crisis, and I was tasked by the Guild Founder – the man whom you gave the horn - to seek you out and request your assistance."

Right as Jake said this, a notification appeared in front of him as the Final Special Courier Job had changed once more.

Final Special Courier Job Updated: Successfully convince the Lost Dragonkin to assist you.

As Jake read the objective, he cursed internally. He had a bad feeling about this one.

"You are asking me to help the man who killed my father? What's more, what he wants my help with is to kill my half-brother and other family members?" the Forsaken Dragonkin asked as he tilted his head and flashed a toothy grin. "Now, why would I ever want to do that?"

Alright, it was clear the dragonkin already had full knowledge of what was going on, which did make his opening line kind of weird. However, it meant that simply explaining the situation in detail wouldn't get him on Jake's side, so he had to actually do some convincing. The problem with that was Jake had no idea what to say. Doing all he could to not show his uncertainty, Jake simply nodded as he kept up his professional demeanor.

"Yes, that is exactly what I and the Founder are asking of you," Jake answered. He had to gamble on the Forsaken Dragonkin, having a somewhat positive view of the Founder.

If not, why had he left him alive back then and even given him a horn to find him with? It wouldn't make any sense if he actually gave a shit about his "family," so Jake would gamble on the Forsaken Dragonkin not liking them, considering them forsaking him and all. "As for why... I would ask why not. You are clearly no ally of the dragon tribe nor your so-called family."

The Forsaken Dragonkin looked at Jake with some amusement as he chuckled. "You're not wrong, but why would that make me want to help you? The dragon tribe doesn't matter to me much anymore. If I wish to see them wiped out, I may as well do so after they have exhausted some of their strength in this war. Wouldn't that be more efficient and just make more sense?"

As the dragonkin talked, Jake got more and more confused. *Why are we even having this conversation?*

It sounded like the dragonkin wanted Jake to convince him or something. Like he needed convincing. As an S-grade, why else would he bother talking to some random C-grade? If he had already made up his mind to not help, he could just be doing this for his own amusement, but Jake really hoped a high-tier S-grade wasn't that bored. Plus, the Courier Job had to mean convincing him was possible somehow.

"If that is what you want, then surely no one could stop you," Jake answered. "But I would still try and do my utmost to convince you to assist us, so please, is there anything I can do to sway your mind? I am most certain the Guild Founder and all those who oppose the dragon tribe would be more than willing to compensate you in any way they can if you save them."

Hey, if Jake had no idea how to convince the guy, why not ask him how to? Who knows, maybe it could even work.

The Forsaken Dragonkin smiled as he tilted his head before standing up. "Now that you mention it, there may just be one thing you could do to convince me."

Without any warning, the dragonkin appeared beside Jake as he spoke. "You know, I've been watching the happenings of this world for a while. Ever since my dear brother contacted me a few centuries ago and informed me of his return while asking for my help, I kept an eye on things. Considered if this world even stood a chance and if either side would rule, who I would be able to tolerate the most. I do not care about ruling anything... I am merely pursuing whatever lies beyond my current level of power. What comes after S-grade: the mythical realm of godhood."

"Understandable," Jake answered as the dragonkin stood beside him with an amused look.

"That is to say, I need whatever side wins to stay out of my way when I want them gone and support me when I want anything," the dragonkin continued.

“As aforementioned, I am sure that can be arranged and that the Guild Founder and all other factions would be more willing to do whatever they can for the one who saved them. Even if that includes doing your every bidding until the day you ascend,” Jake said. Hey, no one said he couldn’t make unrealistic promises as long as they beat the dragon tribe, right? Official source is **novel·fire·net**

“Ah, but wouldn’t the dragon tribe do the same? In fact, that is exactly what they offered already when I spoke to my dear brother. The thing is, my impression of them isn’t the best, so if both sides are equally subservient, I see no reason not to side with this Guild Founder of yours and choose the side you represent.”

Wait, things are actually going kind of well? Jake asked himself as he smiled and nodded.

“While I am unable to make any definitive promises on account of everyone, I can swear I will do my utmost to convince them to assist you in attempting to reach godhood, and with the authority and trust given to me by the Guild Founder, I am highly confident in my success,” Jake said as he felt like a deal was pretty much struck.

“Oh, I believe you,” the Forsaken Dragonkin said as he stood right in front of Jake. “You have made quite the impact ever since you appeared out of nowhere in this world. You weeded out corruption, became chummy with the most powerful people, and rose to a position second only to the Guild Founder within his little Guild as far as I can tell... impressive for a C-grade. Almost too impressive.”

“I am merely doing my best as a Courier and carrying out all jobs given as perfectly as I possibly can,” Jake answered, hoping that being professional would be enough. Still, his bad gut feeling only kept getting worse.

“Now, that... that is where I begin to question things,” the dragonkin smiled. “Why? Why are you carrying out these jobs as best as you can? Why are you seemingly so loyal to the Guild? Why do you risk your own life carrying out their bidding? To this point, I have yet to figure out what *you* get out of it. You are clearly competent, yet if I go purely by your actions, you seem like nothing but a thoughtless slave doing as his master wants.”

Jake narrowed his eyes as he looked directly at the S-grade. “I have my own reasons for doing what I’m doing.”

“I think this is the first time you’ve been wholly honest with me,” the dragonkin said. “You just keep making me more and more curious. You stand before me now, yet I sense no fear. No reverence. Nothing. Are you truly only a C-grade?”

“Does it matter?” Jake questioned. “What would anything regarding me as a person matter when it comes to your choice of who to support?”

“Oh, it matters a lot. You have influence. Your voice matters, and as I said, I can’t quite figure you out,” the Forsaken Dragonkin continued. “There are few things I actively dislike, but at the top of that list is doubt... uncertainty. Elements I cannot with confidence control. You are an uncertainty, and I am not sure if I can control you... so I have an offer. A task you can do for me, and if you accomplish it, I will help the Guild Founder and his allies wipe out the dragon tribe for good.”

Jake really didn’t like where this was going. “What do you want?”

“It’s simple... prove to me your professionalism and dedication to your job as a Courier. Prove to me you will truly do everything in your power to carry out your duties.”

The Forsaken Dragonkin looked entirely serious as his smile faded, and he pulled out a dagger, pointing the handle toward Jake.

“Kill yourself.”

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

Chapter 849: Nevermore: The Art of the Deal (Aka Lying)

Jake stared at the Forsaken Dragonkin as he, more than anything, just wanted to yell, “What the fuck did you just say to me?” but he managed to hold himself back. However, his face did reveal his distaste for the question, showing that he should have maybe worn his mask for this entire thing.

“Oh? Did the question offend you?” the dragonkin asked in an amused tone.

“I merely fail to see how my death would change anything,” Jake answered.

“It would convince me to help. You don’t need to know anything more than that. Now, why the hesitation? With every passing second, more people die, and the chance of the Guild Founder falling only increases. You can end it all by simply ending yourself... a small sacrifice if I say so myself.”

Jake’s eyes narrowed as he actually considered the proposition seriously for a moment. Not because he actually considered doing it, but more to try and understand why it was even offered within this Challenge Dungeon.

One had to remember that Jake had three lives, so that could make one think that killing himself would just be the smart thing to do. However, the rules of the Challenge Dungeon made things a bit more messy as he clearly remembered the text.

“Should you die, you will return back to wherefrom you originally accepted the most recent Courier Job. The Courier Job you died in the midst of will no longer be available. You have three total lives.”

There were a few things here. It only said Courier Job in the description, never specifying anything about Special Courier Jobs. Jake had just assumed that since Courier Job was in both names, both counted. There was also the part about returning back to where he accepted the Courier Job after failing it. Did this mean Jake was just teleported and revived there? Or did it turn back time to the moment he accepted the job? Jake once more assumed it meant turning back time, but he would fail no matter the case.

Unless... the Special Courier Job was completed *before* Jake was returned. In that case, what would happen? Would Jake just die and exit the Challenge Dungeon while also completing it at the same time? Would he see a nice epilogue slideshow as if he had just finished an RPG?

There were many interpretations, and there even was a chance that killing himself would actually lead to a “good” ending for the world. Of course, there was also the option that it just fucked Jake over completely and sent him back without having done the Special Courier Job at all.

Finally, this could also simply be a test. The kind of thing where Jake would take the dagger, but just before he actually killed himself, the S-grade would stop him and say he had proven his determination simply by showing he was willing to do it.

Now, no matter the case, Jake’s answer would still be a solid “fuck no.”

It wasn’t even a question of if this would work to complete the Challenge Dungeon. The dragonkin had simply asked Jake to do something he wouldn’t ever do. To kill himself would go as directly against his Path as anything could, and even if it probably wouldn’t really matter, Jake didn’t want Records of him choosing to kill himself like this associated with him.

Also, Jake didn’t even think he could try to genuinely do it. Chances are the S-grade could detect if Jake was faking it or not, so the “he will stop me at the very last moment” option wasn’t even valid. If it required Jake to truly be willing to kill himself, how was it different from actually killing himself? Truthfully, Jake simply valued his life too much to even fake it. He wouldn’t even willingly kill himself to save all of Earth, so why the hell would he ever do it for some random world in a Challenge Dungeon?

Last but not least, this simply couldn't be the solution. To even get to this point of the Challenge Dungeon, one had to be pretty damn good. One had to be a multiversally recognized talent, and someone often called a genius, and while Jake could see the logic in teaching these young geniuses how not to be assholes to others by using their status, he didn't see a world where the Wyrmgod thought teaching them to be doormats willing to kill themselves was a good idea.

"You are awfully quiet for someone on a timer," the dragonkin said, as Jake hadn't said anything for a while. "Are you truly in a position to be considering the offer that deeply? Why do you even need to consider it when I thought you were such a loyal and dedicated Courier, willing to do anything to get the job done?"

Jake clearly heard the mockery in the dragonkin's tone, making him lose his cool for a brief moment as he replied in a snarky tone. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking the joke had already run its course and was waiting for you to stop fucking around."

The Forsaken Dragonkin's smile only grew as Jake said this. "And there he is. The one hiding beneath the mask. Are you now going to tell me now what you really are and what you're doing here? Because I don't believe for a second you just appeared out of nowhere and suddenly found your passion by being a Courier."

"I think I already told you my matters are my own, but true, I'm not just doing this work out of the goodness of my heart," Jake said, having already decided.

Clearly, any usual strategies for convincing the dragonkin wouldn't work, so he tried to switch up the tactic a bit and act more like he usually did.

"But you do genuinely need my help," the Forsaken Dragonkin pointed out.

"Need your help? No, not really, it would just make things easier for me," Jake shrugged. "The people fighting up there do need you, though. If not, they're fucked for sure."

"And what would happen to you if they all die?"

"I would probably just leave," Jake said honestly. "No reason to stick around if everything is just a burning mess. But don't misunderstand, I do want to complete my current job, which is to have you help the Guild Founder and the others, so how to make you do that? And no, I'm not fucking killing myself."

"I see... so what if I just kill you instead?" the Forsaken Dragonkin asked as his aura was released. It pressed down on Jake with actual energy, making his knees slightly buckle, but Jake quickly responded by infusing stable arcane energy into them... meaning that rather than bend, they would get squashed like under a hydraulic press if the pressure got high enough.

"That would also be highly annoying," Jake said as his lips tore just from moving while under the pressure.

"Annoying? What an insignificant word to describe the end of your Path with," the Forsaken Dragonkin scoffed as he kept up the pressure. "You're telling me you won't kill yourself, but dying to me barely matters?"

"You can't kill me... at least not for good..." Jake said as he kept staring the dragonkin in the eyes despite his own body repeatedly taking damage.

The Forsaken Dragonkin tilted his head as the pressure severely lessened. "Now you got me curious. I don't need a lie-detector skill to know you truly believe that... what gives you such confidence?"

"Tell you what..." Jake said as he popped both his shoulders back in place after they had been dislocated from the aura. "I'll tell you after you've dealt with that dragon tribe."

Heh," the dragonkin shook his head. "I may be curious, but at this point, I am inclined to believe you are just insane rather than there being any actual reason."

"Fair, fair," Jake nodded as he took out and drank a health potion. "But isn't it worth the gamble? From how I see it, you have four choices. Either you wipe out the dragons and side with the Guild Founder, you help the dragon tribe and kill the Founder, or you wait for both to fight it out and swoop in to beat down the winner and have them serve you. That winning side very likely being the dragon tribe. Fourth, you just kill all of them and don't bother with any factions."

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The dragonkin kept looking at Jake as if he were some interesting specimen, and he seemed more and more amused. "And now you talk about wiping out everyone with such casualness..."

Jake shrugged, partly to roll his shoulders and make sure they were correctly popped into place, and partly to, well, shrug. "Not my first time seeing a world be destroyed. But I can't recommend it unless you really hate everyone here."

"If your goal is to intrigue me more, you are doing a good job," the Forsaken Dragonkin said with interest. "I already had the belief you didn't originally come from this planet or even any of the nearby solar systems, and seeing as I believe you have seen the fall of a world and that I am aware of any planets falling nearby, that only enforces it. So, where do you actually come from?"

"If I told you, it would stop being such an intriguing mystery, now wouldn't it?" Jake answered with a smile.

“Alright... then how about this. Have you ever met a god before?”

Raising an eyebrow, Jake was a bit surprised by that question. Partly because this felt like people with connections to gods would have an advantage with this one. Alas, Jake saw no reason not to tell the truth.

“Obviously.”

“So a god sent you here?”

“In a roundabout way, you can say that,” Jake nodded. “Now, not going to answer more, but I am kind of getting the feeling what you wanna ask about... you want to know how to achieve godhood, don’t you?”

“We all do, don’t we?” the Forsaken Dragonkin shrugged as he asked without an ounce of seriousness. “Why? Got any tips or tricks?”

“No, of course not,” Jake said with a deadpan expression. “But I may be able to help you... after you help me.”

“And how exactly will you help me?” the dragonkin said, looking even more amused than before, and from the look in his eyes, Jake knew the path he was going down was correct... because he saw a small smidgen of hope.

“I cannot tell you directly how... but I can show you instead,” Jake said as he took a deep breath. “Please, I would stand back a bit; this isn’t something I can easily do.”

The thing Jake was about to do had come to him as they spoke, and in all honesty, it was a huge gamble. Even if things seemed to be going well, Jake had the feeling the dragonkin still wasn’t going to actually help him. He was beginning to realize he truly didn’t care what happened, and Jake’s guess he was just fucking around by talking with Jake was actually mostly correct.

Would he have still helped if Jake had killed himself? Maybe, maybe not. Again, it didn’t matter, as Jake firmly believed it hadn’t been a real choice unless one was maybe on their last life or something. So Jake had cooked up this little ploy instead. He would, for a moment, convince the dragonkin in front of him he was actually the avatar of a god, just long enough to get him to help Jake. Genuinely help Jake.

The Courier Job was to convince the Forsaken Dragonkin. Jake believed there probably were things you could say to make him side with you, and maybe someone like Miranda could have done it by offering him things or making good arguments why assisting the Founder would be wisest... but Jake wasn’t able to do that. He had kind of tried but failed badly. So, he would just go with something only he was capable of by lying and deceiving using his special abilities.

“Alright, I’ll bite,” the dragonkin said as he raised both hands and backed away a bit. “But let’s make this your last chance. If you fail to be convincing I’ll kindly throw you out of here... because, honestly,... that fourth option of wiping out everyone does actually sound quite appealing.”

Jake didn’t say anything as the words of the dragonkin pretty much served as confirmation. That had probably been his plan all along. To have the two sides fight it out, and then rather than make the winner his servants, he would just kill them all. It made sense... he was Forsaken, after all. He hadn’t bothered making anyone his servants before now, despite being capable of all this, so why would he even bother now? Plus, the dragon tribe had clearly betrayed and thrown him out, while the human side, even if they served him for a while, would all despise him simply for his heritage. Simply put, he had no love for either side, but Jake still believed he could be convinced to at least tolerate the enlightened races.

Sitting down, Jake crossed his legs as he took a deep breath, and the S-grade observed him with interest. Entering Soul Meditation, Jake dove into his Soulspace. There, he saw the shadowy figure that looked a bit like himself representing Eternal Shadow, some other collections of energy here and there and a shitload of arcane energy covering the skies.

However, right in the middle of the world floated a small black object. A single droplet of dark blood. Jake approached this blood drop as the intense aura of the Malefic Viper could be felt from it. This was the blood Jake had absorbed all the way back in the Trial of Myriad Poisons just following the Tutorial. It wasn’t just regular blood either, but blood containing Records and energy from the Malefic Viper. A fragment of his power. Chapters first released on ***novel**fire**net***

Jake hadn’t really messed with it much, even if he did study it when using Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. It was still filled with knowledge for him to unlock, but doing anything forcibly with it simply wasn’t possible. The only reason it was even dormant and that having such a fragment inside of him didn’t kill Jake outright was because of his Bloodline being able to suppress it, and the Viper never actively trying to take it back.

Throughout time, Jake had many theories as to how he could maybe use this small droplet but never dared. Jake had no idea what messing with it could even help him with, so there had been little reason to even try before. He was already slowly absorbing it, and with time, he would make all the Records inside truly his, so trying to mess with it directly was high-risk, borderline zero reward.

Now, things were different as Jake was going to try one of the things he had theorized was maybe possible. Something that, even if he could do it, would be utterly useless outside of this particular Challenge Dungeon. Besides, with it being a Challenge Dungeon, even if Jake messed up, he wouldn’t actually die.

Approaching the drop of blood, Jake carefully reached out and stopped just before touching it. Controlling himself as best as he could, Jake lessened the suppression of the drop ever-so-slightly as it passively began to fight back, and its Records began to run rampant, not unlike the time he had absorbed all the cursed energy from the Root of Eternal Resentment.

A dark green aura spread from the drop of blood as it mixed with Jake's Bloodline, and with full focus, he projected it outwards. At the same time, he released his Bloodline aura fully as he opened his eyes out in the real world.

His aura exploded with the presence of his Bloodline as it blanketed the entire room. However, his presence was different from usual as it faintly mixed with that of the Malefic Viper's from the drop of blood, giving it a slight divine quality.

For the very first time, the Forsaken Dragonkin looked at Jake with genuine shock. Jake saw his legs slightly shake from the mixed presence, but before anything more happened, Jake had to pull it all back as he fully suppressed the drop of blood once more. As everything returned to normal, Jake coughed as blood filled his glove, and he made damn sure the dragonkin saw it.

"What was..." the dragonkin muttered.

"A preview," Jake said as he wiped the blood away and looked at the dragonkin.

"A preview of what exactly?" the Forsaken Dragonkin said with intense interest.

"Godhood," Jake just smiled. "And if you want to learn more... you know what to do. Help me to succeed in my task, and I'll be sure to help you afterward."

The Forsaken Dragonkin looked at Jake for a moment, and Jake knew he had deployed plenty of magic to see if Jake was telling the truth. Perhaps he detected some of Jake's words were half-truths, but he had never really outright lied, so in the end, the dragonkin simply nodded.

"Very well... you have a deal."

Final Special Courier Job Updated: Await the outcome of the war.

"Pleasure doing business," Jake smiled. "You can find me back here when you return."

"I'll make sure of it," the dragonkin said as he teleported to the entrance of the hall, and as he did, Jake felt the entire place seal off.

Jake just shook his head as he released a Pulse of Perception. He saw that outside of the mountain he was in, hordes of people had gathered, ready to strike at any moment.

With a second Pulse, he saw the Forsaken Dragonkin appear in the air outside. The third showed not one of his pursuers left alive, with only wayward ashes falling.

Pretty scary.

Leaning back, Jake lied down as he put his hands behind his head as he looked toward the ceiling of the cave. Now, all he had to do was wait for the outcome of the war just as the quest said. As he was lying there, Jake felt pretty satisfied if he had to say so himself. He had pulled off the damn bluff of a century.

Jake had initially considered trying to bluff using his Bloodline alone, but he knew that wouldn't have worked. The dragonkin knew about him, and nothing Jake did would make sense if he was actually some godlike being already. Sure, there was a minuscule chance Jake was just some immortal monster playing a delivery man with self-imposed rules for fun, but Jake wouldn't bet on the dragonkin reaching that conclusion.

However, by mixing in the aura from the drop of blood, Jake changed his presence slightly, and the divine quality it added was unquestionable. He knew any S-grade could sense it and know the sheer difference in grade between that energy and their own. Plus, the aura of the Viper's clearly wasn't the same as Jake's, communicating that there indeed was some god backing him.

Now, one may ask why Jake had never tried this kind of bluff before, and the reason was pretty obvious... this shit would only work on anyone who had never actually met a god before, much less the Malefic Viper. If Jake tried to blast the aura from the blood in the wider multiverse, it would easily be detected as "off," and Jake would get bitch-slapped for trying to fake it, while probably getting a heresy charge slapped on top.

Plus... why the hell would Jake need to do this kind of bluff when he had a True Blessing to blast people with if he wanted to intimidate them based on his connection to the Malefic Viper? It wasn't like blasting the aura from a fragment of Records from the Viper made Jake's connection to the Primordial any less recognizable.

No, the only reason it had worked here was because of the rules of the Challenge Dungeon. Jake had effectively found a way to still flaunt his Blessing despite being unable to, which felt pretty damn good. Now, he just had one minor problem.

I hope I don't actually have to give that dragonkin tips on how to become a god...

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Chapter 850: Nevermore: The True Path to Godhood

The gods watched the screen as Jake just relaxed on the floor while yawning lazily. In space, the Forsaken Dragonkin was rampaging, truly motivated by a promise of a potential Path to godhood. No one in the room really said anything as they simply observed events unfold until, finally, Minaga chimed up.

“So... another note in the development log?”

“Yes,” the Wyrmgod simply responded.

“Alrighty then,” Minaga smiled, clearly not upset with the situation. Looking at Vilastromoz, he couldn’t help but give a big thumbs up.

“I fail to understand... how did your Chosen even do that?” the Blightfather questioned the Viper after a bit. The Wyrmgod had shown the screen to everyone in the inner circle –the Primordials, Nature’s Attendant, and Artemis – so he was fully aware of the shenanigans Jake had been up to. This was naturally with the Viper’s permission, as he found their reactions very amusing, and what was better than bragging to old acquaintances?

“Do what?” the Viper asked, feigning confusion.

“Project your aura... or at least a cheap imitation of it.”

“Oh, that... yeah, Jake ate a drop of my blood infused with my Records and power a while back and has thus far not volunteered to give it back,” Vilastromoz answered nonchalantly.

There were a few raised eyebrows around the room as the Holy Mother also joined the conversation for once. “Impressive. To be able to handle such Records without seeing his own Path broken is not something you see often, and it truly shows his dedication. It isn’t something I would expect many mortals to be capable of, much less a C-grade.”

“C-grade? No, he ate it in E-grade, and my guy didn’t even ask,” the Viper sighed as he shook his head.

Eyebrows were raised even higher than before at the revelation. The only one that seemed entirely undisturbed was Valdemar. Unsurprising. He and Jake had many similarities in this regard, as Valdemar was also known for eating stuff he really shouldn’t be capable of while he was still a mortal. Even now, as a god, he would just gobble down natural treasures other Primordials were wary of nonchalantly.

“In any case, Jake did pretty damn well,” Minaga said, carrying along the conversation. “He even gave us so much good feedback on the Challenge Dungeon, outlining many things to address for the next era. Of course, most of the stuff he pulled off was things I wouldn’t really expect many others to be capable of, but there were some good data points anyway.”

Minaga was in a great mood, and the Viper couldn’t help but take a jab. “Feels good to see another Challenge Dungeon be utterly exploited after your labyrinth, eh?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, and such accusations are utterly unfounded and unwelcome,” Minaga tried to shut him down with a deadpan face. “Minaga’s Endless Labyrinth is a marvel of dungeon engineering that is perfectly balanced with no exploits.”

“Right, right,” the Viper nodded as he kept smiling.

“You speak as if the Endless Journey Challenge Dungeon was an utter mess, but I believe its self-correcting mechanisms did well. The Viper’s Chosen also adequately adapted to the situations he was in, and even if he had unique advantages, he also faced some extra challenges due to them. Ones he overcame, mostly due to these same unique advantages, true, but if one can say one thing, it is that he is good at exploiting said advantage,” the Wyrmgod finally said after a while.

“There were a lot of problems, though,” Minaga pointed out. “Admit it, this entire Challenge Dungeon was a bit of a mess and not the most successful launch.”

“While some would argue that nothing truly scenario-breaking happened, and the overall performance was fully acceptable. A few individuals being able to exploit a Challenge Dungeon does not make the entire project a failure. If it did, we would have had to decommission your entire labyrinth many eras ago,” the Wyrmgod said in his usual dry tone as he verbally murdered Minaga.

“No need to bully the poor Unique Lifeform,” the Viper shook his head. “But hearing you talk about how it isn’t a total failure... I wonder, how are Jake’s team members doing in this Challenge Dungeon? Or if they’ve already completed it, how did they do?” IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT *novel**fire**net*

The Wyrmgod briefly threw a glance at Nature’s Attendant, and after the god nodded, the Wyrmgod turned back to the Viper. “Three of them have already completed it, with only the Unique Lifeform yet to be done. As for how they all did or are doing... see for yourself.”

With a wave of his hand, the Primordial summoned four new screens. Each showed one of Jake’s party members inside the Endless Journey in a highly sped-up fashion, showing their entire runs in mere seconds in Realtime, which was more than slow enough for the gods there.

Now, let's see how they did, the Viper thought as he looked at the four screens one by one.

The first screen showed the Sword Saint standing on a podium in what looked like a conference hall, talking to the many figures present. Among them were dragons in human form, the Founder, and a few other S-grades, including beings Jake had never encountered or even knew existed. This was clearly the end of his run, and the mere fact he had gathered all these individuals was impressive in its own right.

After days of debate and division of land, an accord was struck, as peace – at least temporarily – was established. A clear political victory, achieved in an entirely intended way by a man who had been ruling a massive clan and navigated politics for close to a century before the system.

Even if the swordsman had repeatedly said he wanted to distance himself from politics and focus on his Path of swordsmanship, that didn't mean he had to throw away the political abilities he already had. Skills that were borderline second to none.

Needless to say, the Sword Saint's performance was considered exemplary, as he ended his Endless Journey run with a Legendary Medallion, still a good distance away from getting a mythical one. Perhaps he could have done slightly better if he had not lost two lives trying to set up this political meeting and if he hadn't had to make as many concessions in the final negotiations as he did.

On a second screen, Sylphie chased around an entitled customer while pecking him on the head until guards came to arrest her. She then proceeded to peck them, too, until more powerful people came, and she had to run away and flee from the very first starting city in the Phoenix Wing Empire.

Her first Endless Journey Challenge Dungeon life ended with her getting fired as a Courier on her second job with a lengthy criminal record, something she didn't like, which got her killed as she tried to fight an entire city's worth of guards.

With her second life, she managed to do a bit better but still got mad when a woman tried to scam her, making Sylphie retaliate by having a tornado rip a small village to pieces. In the Courier World, this was considered bad business and Sylphie failed her job. This she did not like and raised a ruckus in the Guild, and ended up getting chased away from the city again. Having decided to just explore a bit, Sylphie eventually ended up in a too-dangerous area while searching for something tasty to eat, which got her killed.

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After these two deaths, she got a bit more serious and even did a number of jobs, but she barely did one a week as she got bored and just flew around. That is until she got a

Special Courier Job that ended up getting her in contact with the son of the Infernal Baron. The difference here was that this man didn't want to recruit Sylphie but had detected her elemental heritage and now wanted to consume her. This was how Sylphie ended up joining what Jake had called PETE, and Sylphie ultimately ended her Endless Journey while taking down the Duke of Flames in a political act of mutual destruction that also got the hawk burned to a crisp.

Sylphie's overall performance in this entire Challenge Dungeon was what many would be considered pretty damn substandard for what one would expect of a "genius." Sylphie was happy enough, though, as she did manage to scam some natural treasures out of PETE before she left. She ended up with a Rare Medallion only, despite having spent quite a while in the dungeon, mainly just messing around.

A third screen showed Dina walking on a vast grassland as the plants swayed with her steps. The entire land was alive, pulsing with power, reaching the very peak of S-grade as the living planet allowed her presence. All across the massive planet, portals had opened as the enlightened races entered, the Guild Founder and many others among them as they prepared to establish themselves anew, knowing they could not face the dragon tribe in combat without facing total destruction.

Things had been especially bleak after the Nine Seals Demon returned and managed to get the Forsaken Dragonkin on their side with promises of telling him of a place in the universe that could give him the final push to godhood. Luckily for them all, Dina had managed to work with a seed sent out from this new planet that had landed on the main Courier World one and made a deal, relying on her Bloodline.

Her Endless Journey had been far from a conventional one, as she had relied on her Bloodline perhaps more than Jake and used plenty of summons to carry out tasks. Annoying customers and those trying to scam her were also easily dealt with, mainly through a few compliant-making spores in the air.

As for the larger political issues she faced... well, all the conversations she had with the Sword Saint about the art of Leadership had really come in handy there. This all led to an ultimately great performance, even if she did make a lot of mistakes, netting her an Ancient Medallion, just shy of a legendary one.

On the fourth and final of these new screens, the Fallen King was still doing the Challenge Dungeon, as he had done the same as Jake and saved this one for last. He had struggled a bit with being treated like a mere Courier in the early parts but had quickly suppressed his own pride to simply follow the objective and focus on getting a good reward.

Using his soul magic, he did better than most would expect from someone who rarely had to use words to get their way. Also, while it was a skill he rarely used, being able to detect lies of those a lot weaker than him was no difficult feat, and liars and scammers utterly failed to get one over him. When it came to the Special Courier Jobs, he also

performed great. In fact, he even had many advantages, as the Fallen King managed to leverage his identity as a system-recognized king to get his way in certain situations. One had to remember that while Jake was also a noble, he didn't really integrate this fact into his Path, nor did he openly project his nobility rank.

The Fallen King, on the other hand, did this openly, acting as if he were some high-level diplomat working for another massive faction far away. This did seem to get the job done for the most part, as he progressed steadily and kept everyone on their toes while making them hesitant to make aggressive moves toward him. This status as a king would also have its very own note in the Endless Journey Exploits Log, but ultimately deemed a non-issue as C-grades with the system-recognized title of king wasn't really a thing, and making changes just to address the uniqueness of a Unique Lifeform wasn't worth it in any way.

One big weakness the Fallen King did have in this Challenge Dungeon was his lack of speed when delivering goods during the regular Courier Jobs, and while he did alleviate this a bit through different means, this was ultimately still his big limiter as he continued his Endless Journey. However, even with this, his final result should be more than acceptable.

In the final Challenge Dungeon the gods observed, Jake soon enough had visitors. The Forsaken Dragonkin was returning, but he was not alone. With him were several others, including the Guild Founder, Phoenix Queen, and even the Nine Seals Demon, who looked a bit worse for wear while leaning on the Phoenix Queen.

Jake stood up as these figures approached the chamber. The barrier sealing him in naturally faded as Jake stepped forward and saw the S-grades approach. "I take it matters have been settled?"

"They have," the Guild Founder said with an exhausted but happy smile. "It will take a long time to rebuild... but with the dragon tribe no longer lurking as a threat, I have hope our future will be a bright one... now, let us return to the Human Capital. While there are many losses to mourn, there is also your unquestionable achievement to celebrate, and-

"Before any of that... you have a promise to keep," the Forsaken Dragonkin interrupted as he looked at Jake with narrowed eyes. "Or did things change?"

The Forsaken Dragonkin did not hold back as he used a skill to make completely sure Jake was telling the truth. It was certain that should he try and bullshit his way out or lie, the situation would not turn out well, especially considering Jake had yet to be told he could leave the Challenge Dungeon. So he did the only thing he could. Jake told the truth.

"I am still a bit spent from the preview I gave you earlier," Jake said completely honestly. "But I swear to you that I will share with you the true Path to godhood soon. The method every single one of the dozens of gods I am aware of have in common."

Jake had some time to think as he was waiting, and he had gone over what all the gods he had ever spoken of had in common. He had considered their Paths and what they had done to reach godhood and realized one universal truth about them all that he would share with the Forsaken Dragonkin was ready.

There were some amusing reactions from the Guild Founder and other S-grades when Jake mentioned gods, but none of them said anything. The Forsaken Dragonkin had looked skeptical, but at Jake's reassurance, he simply nodded. He did seem like he planned on staying close to Jake for the time being, though.

"In that case... let us return and celebrate as the Courier recovers," the Guild Founder said as the group of S-grades and Jake departed back toward the city.

Once back, they held a nice celebration and ceremony. The deaths of those who fought were honored; the Forsaken Dragonkin was called a hero that all of the nations would support, and the fighters who stood their ground were rewarded. However, despite all the S-grades, Jake was the main character as he was celebrated in a big ceremony put on by the Guild Founder.

Jake was praised, and in the end, the Guild Founder decided to do something unprecedented, as the first-ever Mythical Courier was crowned. Throughout this all, Jake just smiled and waved as he seriously hoped the system message would soon appear before he had to fulfill his promise to the Forsaken Dragonkin... luckily, it did right as Jake had his Medallion upgraded and officially got his final promotion.

Congratulations! You have completed the Endless Journey Challenge Dungeon!

You have risen to an otherwise unknown realm of Mythical Courier. A Courier rank that only you possess, granted to someone recognized by all in the land. As a Mythical Courier, you can choose to stay in the Endless Journey and continue completing regular Courier Jobs, or you can choose to retire and end your journey for good.

Exit the Endless Journey?

Seeing this message, Jake smiled... but he still had one more thing to do. After the ceremony was over, Jake and the Forsaken Dragonkin went to a chamber by themselves, as it was time for Jake to teach the S-grade how to become a god. He wouldn't be bullshitting either because Jake had truly figured it out.

"You should be fully aware of what will happen if you have attempted to fool me," the Forsaken Dragonkin said as Jake took a seat across from the dragonkin.

“I know, so I’m not going to bullshit you,” Jake said as he took a deep breath. “Do you know what godhood is?”

“Surprise me,” the dragonkin said with narrowed eyes.

“While you may see godhood as your ultimate goal, in reality, it is just another step on your Endless Path. It’s the hardest one by far, but far from the end. From what I’ve heard, some call it the moment you truly realize your Path and “prove” it, so to say, but in the end, it all boils down to simply staying true to yourself and dedicated to your Path.”

He spoke only truths, as the Forsaken Dragonkin seemed more receptive than before. “But the question is how...what tangible methods can one deploy to reach godhood?”

Jake took another deep breath as he looked upwards. “The how... is simpler than you think. From all the gods I have observed, and how they followed their Paths, I realized they all did one thing that those who failed to reach godhood didn’t.”

“What is it? What do I need to do?”

With a serious look on his face, Jake quickly prepared himself to leave the dungeon as he answered.

“Get good.”

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