

The Primal Hunter

- Chapter 651: Nature's Attendant

Chapter 651: Nature's Attendant

Jake felt how serious Viridia was, so he assumed this Nature's Attendant was someone important just from her reaction.

"How will we meet?" Jake asked.

"I believe a private meeting room has been prepared. A god of his level descending upon this hall filled with mortals wouldn't end well for anyone but you and a few others," Viridia said.

"That strong?" Jake asked, a bit surprised. *"I must admit I have never heard of this god before..."*

Viridia seemed taken aback for a moment but quickly gathered herself. *"Nature's Attendant is the right hand of Yggdrasil and her most trusted partner. Some compare him to what the Lord Protector is to the Order of the Malefic Viper, but that isn't entirely accurate. He is far more of an equal part of the Pantheon of Life, standing tall at Yggdrasil's side. As a god from the second era, he is incredibly strong and has one of the most powerful Bloodlines known to the multiverse,"* Viridia briefly explained.

"A Bloodline, huh?"

"His namesake. While I am uncertain as to its exact nature, it has to do with manipulation of nature affinity energy and communion with plants."

"Alright. Will you teleport me to the meeting room?" Jake asked.

"The Malefic One will welcome this guest personally, so no," Viridia answered. *"I just simply wished to inform you to avoid any issues and warn you to remain respectful. While he is not a Primordial, you may as well consider him at the level of one, and I also know that the Malefic One personally holds him in high esteem,"* Viridia said. *"Ah, I believe the Malefic One will fetch you now. Good luck."*

Jake didn't even have time to answer before he appeared in a separate room from the one he had been in with the three factions earlier. This wasn't even a meeting room but was instead a large living room he had been in before, and after orienting himself, he looked at the Viper, who was sitting on a couch.

"So, special guest?" Jake asked.

"The one I told you about before," the Viper smiled.

"Viridia seemed pretty freaked out about him."

"As she should. This isn't the kind of guest you can treat casually. And I will echo what she warned you about. However, rather than tell you to be respectful, I will warn you about trying to get into a dick-measuring contest using your Bloodline. That won't end in anything productive, alright?" Villy asked.

"Alright, alright," Jake said. "Why meet here, though? Isn't this your personal space?"

"And he is as much a personal guest as he is a guest to this ceremony," the Viper shook his head and got up. "Now, let's welcome him. Oh, also, he has brought someone along. A potential party member for your Nevermore party."

"Oh yeah," Jake said, his interest piqued. "Any idea who it is? Are they any good?"

"I do, and considering who is personally bringing her, I would have high expectations," Villy smiled.

Jake nodded and waited. Less than ten seconds later, he felt it. Outside of the living room, in a small entrance area, a presence descended. Jake felt like the entire living room was bathed in energy, and he imagined himself back in the Tutorial forest again. Instantly, he understood.

The mana... it's nature affinity.

The environmental mana itself had changed its affinity. Moreover, Jake felt something else resonate from deep within himself, and his heartbeat sped up slightly.

Then, just as he had properly registered this, two figures appeared in the room outside. One was a tall man wearing simple brown robes and carrying a staff with a flower at its tip, while the other was a young woman who looked to be in her late teens or early twenties. He could only see her face, and she looked mostly human, except for two small bumps on her forehead, and her hair looked very much not like hair but more like vines with flowers sprouting from them. After he saw them in his sphere, he understood why he got this odd feeling.

Bloodlines.

Both of them had one. Both were incredibly powerful, too, though Jake felt a slight difference between them.

As the two of them appeared, Villy went over to greet them with an oddly serious look on his face.

The old man – Nature’s Attendant – walked into the room with the girl following close behind, and Jake finally laid his eyes on them.

The woman surprised Jake a bit due to her light green skin and her entire form looking semi-plant-like. She also wore a large baggy robe and cloak and didn’t visibly wear any weapons, though she could have something hidden under her large cloak, which he couldn’t look beneath even with his sphere due to how Soulshapes and all that worked. Only her face was visible, and there he saw her small horns, which he recognized were actually antlers and her long green hair of thin vines with flowers blooming from them.

As for Nature’s Attendant, he indeed did look like an older man, but one in peak physical condition with dense muscles displayed where visible. He reminded Jake a bit of an old farmer, and he had a soft smile on his lips as he opened his arms wide, allowing the staff to just float beside him.

“Vilas, it has been too long,” he said in a soft tone.

“It has indeed,” Villy answered, returning the smile as he walked over and went for a hug, which surprised Jake.

But not as much as the words he said next.

“I am glad you could come, father-in-law.”

Wait, what? Jake asked, and he also saw the woman he had brought with him look surprised. The two exchanged a quick glance before both looked back at the two gods.

“Well, you could have invited me earlier, but I guess you had your own stuff to deal with,” the old-looking man smiled, patting Villy on the back.

The two pulled away from each other as Nature’s Attendant looked a bit more serious. “I take it you have this entire Yip of Yore situation handled? He isn’t an ordinary opponent.”

“Of course I do,” the Viper shook his head. “No need to worry, okay?”

“Alright, alright,” the other god nodded before he finally turned and looked at Jake. “So, is this the young man who was the impetus to finally make you leave your divine realm?”

Jake perked up as the Viper answered. “Yep, he was the guy who one day popped into my realm, and we had a good talk. My first one in far too many eras. After that... well, I

decided to take that step and come back. I couldn't have stayed in here forever, now could I?"

Nature's Attendant nodded as he still looked at Jake. "Thank you for getting Vilas to see some sense."

The god slightly bowed, making Jake feel a bit uncomfortable.

"I didn't do much," Jake scratched the back of his head.

"Perhaps it doesn't seem like so, but you still managed to give him that final push. Now, let's have a proper look at you," the older-looking god said as he walked over and studied Jake a bit more closely.

Jake felt a bit awkward as the old man scrutinized him in both body and soul. Nevertheless, he stood still and just threw Villy a glance as the god put up his hands in defense, not saying anything.

"Pretty good, solidly built, good stats for your level," Nature's Attendant nodded. "Though your Bloodline is not quite as simple as resisting auras, now is it? Ah, don't worry, not gonna meddle in your secrets, just a small observation."

Jake's eyes opened wide, and before he could ask, the god answered.

"I feel your constant observance of the mana all around us, and you are using your Bloodline to do that. My own Bloodline allows me to feel the mana and has linked me to it, which is why I know," Nature's Attendant explained. "So don't worry too much."

"Father-in-law is known as one of the most powerful Bloodline Patriarchs in the multiverse for a reason; I should have guessed he would figure it out," Villy also said in a nonchalant tone. "I will echo what he said, don't worry too much."

Jake was just slightly relieved he hadn't figured more out than knowing he had some kind of Perception-related skill.

"Either way, it's nice to finally meet you," the god finally stopped his inspection. Then, with a big smile, he went to the one he had brought to this meeting.

"This is my granddaughter, Dinaldria," Nature's Attendant introduced the girl as he practically dragged her over to stand in front of him. He proudly had both his hands on her shoulders, and she looked embarrassed and like she wanted to run away. Jake hadn't done it before, but he took this chance to use Identify on her and finally saw her race and even her level of Blessing.

[Dryad – lvl 205 – Divine Blessing of Nature's Attendant]

With a big proud smile, the Nature's Attendant glanced between Villy and Jake.

"When I heard you were looking for another party member for your Chosen to enter Nevermore with, I couldn't help but think of her. Do you know how difficult it is to find a proper party for a young druid like her? Ah, I am sure you do, but it has only gotten worse through the eras, I tell you. With Dina here, it is even worse, as she can't just go with an ordinary top-tier party but needs one that is truly top-tier, you know? Anything else would waste her talents. And if Vilas here thinks you are talented enough to be his Chosen, then I can only trust his judgment."

"Oh, he won't disappoint, and neither will his party members," Villy said with a grin. This text is hosted at **novel~**

"Aye, I saw that old swordsman teach those young ones a lesson. An odd one for sure, but definitely powerful," the god nodded. "The Unique Lifeform is also quite something, and the hawk is interesting. I am sure you will like them too, Dina."

The dryad just nodded as she still looked at the floor. The old man finally let go of her shoulders, and she looked at him with a meek expression as he nodded and smiled.

Jake felt a bit awkward just standing there and was surprised when he saw the staff Nature's Attendant had brought float over to the girl. He saw the lotus flower at the head of the staff wave its leaves back and forth, and he got the feeling the staff was somehow talking.

Dina looked at the staff and nodded a few times as Jake tried to understand what the staff was up to.

"Is she talking to the staff?" Jake asked Villy.

"The staff in question is one of the most powerful weapons in the multiverse, infused with true life and a soul, practically making it a living being capable of slaying most gods by itself," Villy answered. "But yes, she is talking to it. The Bloodline of Nature's Attendant allows my father-in-law to communicate with plants in a way unlike any other, and his granddaughter has inherited this aspect."

"I see. Her Bloodline is strong, too, isn't it? It feels strong," Jake commented.

"Nature's Attendant's is often mentioned when people talk about the most powerful Bloodlines in the multiverse, and this girl has part of that. Oh, just to note down, his granddaughter is the child of one of his daughters and is a quarter human," Villy answered.

"Who is the grandmother?" Jake wondered.

"Yggdrasil."

Jake held himself back from visibly reacting as he asked further. *"I thought it was incredibly hard for gods to have children? And isn't Yggdrasil a tree? How does it all... you know, work?"*

"Alright, it is not their kid in the way you expect. Their daughter was born from a seed they made together. Mind you, Dina here is a biological child, with her mother being a dryad god and her father an S-tier half-dryad. Both of which had Bloodlines," Villy explained. *"I won't reveal much more of her personal history, but you need a fifth party member, right? It is difficult to do any better. She is enlightened with only a class, which is a druid. Coupled with her Bloodline, natural talents, and having been taught by Nature's Attendant from childhood, she is also considered an absolute monster by multiversal standards. There is just one tiny little issue."*

"And what is that?" Jake asked, even if he already had a good feeling what it was.

"Well, she hasn't really ever been outside? As in, she has no real-life experience. Every interaction she has had with others has been curated, and she has never been in a fight where there wasn't a god waiting in the shadows to make sure she didn't get hurt. That is one of the reasons she is here. She needs experience. She is also on the younger side, not even forty years old yet, and considering her lack of exposure to, well, anything, she is sheltered and not that mature despite her appearance," Villy said.

"Got it; I guess that explains why she doesn't exactly give me the vibes of a genius," Jake said. *"Now, are you going to tell me more about him being your father-in-law?"*

"He was the father of my wife, with the mother being an S-grade who never made it to godhood," Villy answered. *"I guess you could say he is my only family. And that is where I will leave it for today."*

Jake knew to not push and just nodded.

Back in the real world, it seemed like the staff had managed to convince Dina to finally come a bit out of her shell as she looked up at Jake.

"Hello..." she said in a meek tone.

"Hi there," Jake said and extended a hand. *"I am Jake Thayne, a pleasure to meet you."*

She looked at his hand for a moment until the staff bumped into her, making her raise hers from beneath the robe. She shook his hand very lightly before quickly retracting into the robe. *"I am Dina..."*

This is going to be an uphill battle, Jake said to himself. However, the brief moment of physical contact did allow him to properly confirm the powerful Bloodline dwelling within her. His instincts also told him that she wasn't simple but hid quite the power.

Nature's Attendant stood to the side and had a radiant smile as the two of them greeted each other. "See, already getting along so well! I take it there will be no discussion about whether Dina here will join you for Nevermore, right?"

Jake considered for a moment before answering. "It isn't solely my decision, but a collective one made with my party members."

"Alright, so it is a done deal then because none of those other kids can even begin to compare," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Dina looked back at the god, but he just grinned. "Now, now, don't be like that. This is for your own good, and I am sure you will have a great time! Also, you still got Bobo with you, right?"

"Yeah..." she said, clearly a bit embarrassed at the name.

"All good then," he waved her off before looking at Jake. "Now, why don't you take Dina and go talk to the other party members so you can all get to know one another?"

"Sounds like a fine plan," Villy agreed.

Jake also just nodded as he thought that was fine. Dina didn't look too enthusiastic but more like she had just resigned herself to her fate.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Jake," the nature god smiled at Jake.

"The pleasure is all mine," Jake nodded.

"Ah, and Jake?" the Nature's Attendant reached out telepathically.

"Yes, *Nature's Attendant*?" Jake asked, remembering to be respectful, though wondering why he didn't just talk. Though the reason became obvious in the next sentence.

"Please, just call me Tonken. I just wanted to tell you to be nice to little Dina, okay? And if anything happens between you two, then while I am not against it, just be aware that should you break her heart, I will break you, alright?" the old man said in what sounded like an amicable tone, but Jake felt a shiver run down his spine nevertheless

"Yes, sir," Jake simply agreed. If he had learned one thing from Caleb, it was that one should never make the grandfather of a girl angry. Jake still remembered that time Maja and Caleb had a misunderstanding, and her grandfather came and paid Caleb a visit... yeah, let's just say it was lucky they got over their high school spat.

"Good. I hope you two have a good time. Try to get to know each other, alright? When you return, I will be sure to give you proper compensation, but till then, I will leave her in

your care," Nature's Attendant said. "She may seem fragile and meek, but don't be afraid of pushing her."

Jake sent a mental confirmation, and the older-looking god smiled even brighter. "Now, you two go have fun!"

With that, Jake and Dina disappeared from the living room and were unceremoniously teleported back to the large hall.

Back in the living room, with Jake and Dina gone, Vilastromoz looked at Nature's Attendant.

"You want to go see them, right?"

The other god put on a sad smile. "Of course I do."

Vilastromoz nodded and sighed. "I am glad you came."

Nature's Attendant walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't your fault, and you know that."

"No," the Viper shook his head and stared at the ground. "No, I don't. Let's just go, alright?"

His father-in-law nodded and squeezed his shoulder. "Let us."

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Chapter 652: Onwards, To Nevermore

Back in the main hall, the festivities that were actually just a glorified political event continued. A number of people still held hope that they could join the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and his party for Nevermore, as they all knew what that would mean.

It wasn't out of the question for weaker individuals to effectively get carried through the mega-dungeon, thus earning a better title, more levels, and more items than if they had gone with equally skilled people. That was why those with supportive roles hoped they would get selected simply because there weren't any better options. The scope of potential party members that met the stringent requirements was limited, as finding good support between level 200 and 210 who weren't already with powerful groups wasn't easy.

However, that hope was shattered when the Chosen returned. He did not come alone but was accompanied by a dryad who met the requirements, and what was more, she carried the Blessing of Nature's Attendant. If there were anyone with Bloodlines, they too would have realized how screwed they were as this dryad surpassed any and all of them.

As the Chosen went over to greet his party members, it was quickly realized that the choice had been made, and all the young talents could do was be happy they had at least been able to attend, and some even had the chance to spar a swordsman who few would be able to forget.

Contrary to popular belief, the Fallen King was not actually related to plants or trees in any way. This was despite him looking like a tree guy and being named King of the Forest when Jake first met him. The bark-like skin also wasn't even bark, or even wood for that matter, and while the mask did look and feel like wood, even being described as wood-like by the system, it wasn't actually wood either.

All of this is to say that the Fallen King and the meek Dina didn't immediately make friends due to her Bloodline, and Jake honestly felt a bit bad for the girl after being grilled with questions from the Unique Lifeform. Questions she mostly didn't answer or just gave one-word responses.

In some ways, Jake found it liberating. This was the first time he had met someone who was worse at being social than himself. What they did get out of her was that her horrible ability to communicate wasn't because she never talked to others. She just wasn't used to talking to people. More accurately, she was the trope of a flower growing up in a greenhouse. In that, she had literally grown up in a large greenhouse with the plants there being all her best friends. Even the ones who couldn't talk could still express emotions, which Dina could understand.

However, despite Dina's issues with talking to them, there was one member of their group she looked capable of talking to. No, not Sylphie, as Dina didn't quite understand what "ree!" meant, but the Sword Saint and his overpowered old-man aura.

"So you did explore this forest with your friends?" he asked with a grandfatherly smile.

"Yeah... it was a bit weird there, and the beasts didn't like us, but Bobo was with me," she answered, seemingly only focused on the old man.

"You mentioned him before, but who is this Bobo?" the Sword Saint asked.

Jake was curious, too, remembering Nature's Attendant mentioning this Bobo being with her.

"Bobo is my Guardian," she answered before quickly looking like she had said too much. "I... I mean..."

"We are meant to explore the depths of Nevermore together; secrets like that are counterproductive," the Sword Saint smiled and shook his head. "While we all respect each other and the respective secrets we all hold, please do not withhold information if it hurts others or hampers us in any way, alright?"

Dina looked in thought before she nodded. "Alright."

Old-man energy was truly too strong; even Jake got the compulsion to overshare. He had a strong feeling Dina was just more used to being around old geezers, which was why she could handle the Sword Saint so easily, but he did severely hope she would open up more with time or spending years with her in Nevermore would be hell. Luckily, the old man, using his old-man insight, already knew this.

"We need to trust each other and build rapport. As we learn from and about you, so will you learn about us, and I sincerely hope we can all get along well," the old swordsman said with a comforting smile.

Dina nodded once more and looked at Jake and the others. "Sorry..."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, scaring Dina a bit, but she quickly realized the hawk wasn't mad. The King stayed silent while Jake smiled.

"Either way, it is good to have you on board, and I look forward to seeing what you can do. Your grandfather hyped you up quite a bit," Jake said, trying to be nice.

It didn't work that well, as Dina looked embarrassed and stared at the ground again, but luckily she quickly recovered. "... I'll do my best."

Jake felt a bit lost and reached out to the Sword Saint telepathically.

"*Will this really work out? She seems a bit... you know?*" Jake asked the old man.

"While I don't truly know her history, it is clear she has lived a sheltered life. She reminds me of my cousin from when I was a child. My uncle feared his daughter would be corrupted by the world outside, and as she was born a genius, he hired private teachers and people to teach her everything there was to learn. Yet even as she reached adulthood, her father kept her inside their compound. My uncle was narrow-minded and wanted to find her a husband he thought was worthy of her. When he finally did, she was already in her early twenties and had never interacted with anyone under the age of forty, and the only men she had ever spoken to was her father and her grandfather," the Sword Saint answered.

"*That must have fucked her up,*" Jake responded.

"It did... for a while. Humans have an incredible ability to adapt, and while she may be a dryad, this is a trait I believe is shared by all with true sapience. For now, she will be

*awkward, but once she opens up, learns our social cues, and begins to feel comfortable, all will be well,"*he explained further. *"But what my true point is, is that even if my cousin could not speak a full sentence in front of a man her own age, she could still write a thesis or give an ethereal performance on the violin – for that is what she had learned. This girl has learned how to be a dryad and a druid. I see no reason to doubt her abilities within Nevermore."*

"Aight, you convinced me, but are you sure the others are-"

*"I just gave the exact same speech to the Fallen King,"*the old man sent in a slightly cheeky tone.

Jake nearly choked but held himself together, no doubt helped by his mask.

"Also, I don't think your attempt to make friends is made easier by you wearing a mask and only showing her your eyes," the Sword Saint added mercilessly.

"Okay, good point," Jake answered, seeing a problem there.

Their conversation had been performed rather swiftly due to the power of telepathy, so only a few seconds had passed where the King had asked Dina some basic questions about her skills, and she – to the surprise of no one – revealed that she did nature affinity magic exclusively. Luckily, nature affinity was a composite affinity that included the life affinity, giving her plenty of healing magic at her disposal. The more Jake heard, the more he looked forward to seeing what she could truly do.

Jake wanted to stay and talk more, but soon he was dragged away by Viridia as some people wanted to meet him. The Sword Saint also informed him that with the final member of the party recruited, he wanted to take the time before Nevermore to check in on the members from the Noboru Clan that resided in the Order, Reika included.

This left Dina alone with the Fallen King and Sylphia as Jake walked off to help Viridia with something he had truly dreaded: acting nice in front of a bunch of S-grades as they praised him and wanted to discuss the ceremony.

A shrunk-down Sandy also made their way into the hall not long after, having delayed their arrival to a time when Jake didn't take up all the attention. That worked out pretty well, as for a good hour, Sandy was the center of attention and got a bunch of gifts – every single one of them edible.

While Jake had been a struggle to find gifts for, he learned that the Lord Protector had sent out some basic information about Sandy, and once they learned these basic traits, gifting became easy. Because how hard could it be to find gifts for someone focused on the concept of consumption and capable of absorbing nearly any kind of natural treasure or form of energy?

Yeah, Sandy was truly the exact opposite of Jake when it came to gifting. Was it energy dense and considered a high-Records item? Good enough! The fact that they didn't need to give gifts to the same level as what they gave Jake made it even simpler.

Sandy was a happy worm and sent several messages to Jake throughout this entire gifting session. The one thing he had feared was a lot of people judging Sandy for being, well, Sandy, but all he heard were positive comments about how dedicated they were to their Path and how rare it was to see such a powerful and committed creature. Some even described the damn glutton as humble.

With all the gifts, he imagined Sandy would spend the majority of the time he was in Nevermore digesting and sleeping.

After the entire ordeal with Sandy was over, things finally seemed to die down, and Jake had no more obligations. The after-after party was also clearly canceled, though none present there were supposed to attend, to begin with, so it wasn't like anyone noticed. Villy had likely just had private meetings with all the gods he wanted to discuss with, and he also guessed a few had gone to visit Nature's Attendant.

Jake regrouped with the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Dina, who had each gone to a corner of the room, where Jake also saw Caleb had managed to sneak in. Jake hadn't seen him around before now, wondering where he had been all this time.

"Hey, when did you get here?" Jake said as he went as his brother talked to Dina, who already seemed more comfortable around the shadow assassin than Jake himself.

"I was here from the beginning, but I hogged one of the side rooms with a few other members from the Court and had a few meetings here and there," Caleb said with a smile as he turned to greet Jake. "Also, I guess congratulations are in order, oh Chosen of the Malefic One."

"Thank you, thank you," Jake said, hearing the false sincerity in his little bothers voice.

The two of them smiled at each other as Caleb spoke privately to him. *"So, Dina is directly related to Nature's Attendant, isn't she?"*

"Oh? I thought the public information only said she was a student of his?" Jake asked.

"Yeah, it does, but she isn't the best at keeping secrets, and there is intel on him having a granddaughter who was soon to reach C-grade and was considered extremely talented, in part due to her Bloodline. I can put two and two together and guess this is her," Caleb explained. *"Quite the find, all through the power of nepotism. Having a Primordial as a friend sure makes life easy; you know how hard it is for a group of assassins to get a good healer?"*

"Pretty hard, I assume," Jake teased him.

"Damn right it is, but hey, we managed to snatch up one of the people you discarded, so better than expected."

"How benevolent of me, allowing you my leftovers," Jake relentlessly continued.

"Do you want me to start talking about you being thrown into a dungeon with a Unique Lifeform, a hawk, an old man, and a young, slightly naive dryad, and what kind of hijinks might develop? Just don't let poor Sylphie be corrupted. She is still so precious, and-"

"I am a single word away from punching you in front of everyone," Jake sent as he smiled at his little brother.

Caleb didn't say anything else but just threw him a cheeky smile. Only when the King asked him did he respond, and he stayed a bit longer before he looked at Dina and the others. "It was nice to chat with you all, but sadly I have business to attend to. I wish you all luck during your trip to Nevermore. I would say for us to have a good competition, but I would prefer not to lie to myself and think there will even be one."

The Judge of the Court left after that, leaving just Jake, the King, Sylphie, and Dina. With people already leaving the hall all around them, Jake also thought it pertinent for them to soon take their leave. Follow current novels on *novel•fire•net*

"Do you all have anything you need to do before we head off to Nevermore? Any last-minute preparations or shopping you need to get done?" Jake asked.

"Not here at the Order, and if there is any required shopping before we head off, we can simply do that at Nevermore City before we enter the dungeon," the King answered.

"Alright," Jake nodded. "I still have to meet up with Miranda for a talk and to get all the useful stuff I wasn't directly gifted that may come in handy during the dungeon. How about you guys just relax back at my residence before then?"

"Acceptable," the King agreed, with Dina tentatively nodding and Sylphie yawning.

"Great."

Shortly after, he had Viridia come and help with teleportation as the three of them were teleported to his mansion, and Jake went to check in with Miranda and see how everything was going on her end. He found her looking pretty damn stressed out within a room set up by the Verdant Witches, which was also where Jake learned he had gotten over a hundred million slaves that would soon be transferred to his home planet.

Being the kind World Leader he was, Jake wished Miranda luck dealing with all that and also made sure she would have all the authority she needed to handle the situation by practically giving her control over all the slave contracts. He also collected all the natural treasures and alchemical ingredients he had been given before sitting down and having

a short chat with Miranda about her plans upon returning to Earth. During this, he also reluctantly got one of the drops of venom from that accursed statue, and while he knew it would be useful, he didn't like it.

Jake wasn't sure how long he would be at Nevermore, but chances are it would be at least a few years in Realtime. You could be there for five years at D-grade, and that only increased in C-grade to a total of fifty whole years within the dungeon. A tenfold increase. With how the time dilation worked, Jake wasn't sure exactly how long it would be, and no one else could be either, as the dilation increased the more floors you managed to clear.

He also decided to give her the spaceship the Automata Legion had gifted him and informed her of the plans of the United Tribes and their desire to send people, something she was in huge support of. The spaceship would go to Arnold to study, and the United Tribes members were more a gift to Miranda and the beast factions on Earth, so he was happy that this gifting session could benefit more than just him.

After talking with Miranda, Jake did his rounds and spoke to a few others to say goodbye before he headed off. Fifty years seemed like a long time, but when one could live thousands of years, it truly wasn't, so those who were used to operating on the timescale of the multiverse didn't even see this trip as a big deal. Irin and Draskil both at least didn't seem to care much, and Draskil was also busy planning his own trip to Nevermore anyway. Scarlett seemed sad he would be gone for a while but didn't say much as she had already prepared herself and was busy integrating with the Order.

Finally, Jake found his way back to the mansion, where he finally dispelled his mask and sat down to have a proper talk with Dina, Meira, the King, and Sylphie. Well, Sylphie didn't talk much, and Dina was even shyder than Meira, so not much productive talking was done as they waited for the Sword Saint to return.

When he did, there truly was no more reason to delay as they headed off toward the most well-known World Wonder of the multiverse:

Nevermore.

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

Chapter 653: Nevermore City

Every single universe in existence was filled with life, planets, stars, and incredible opportunities. Yet the thing it had more of than anything else was nothingness. Empty

spaces that seemed infinitely large, so big that some S-grades would struggle to pass through it in their entire lifetimes.

One of the largest empty spaces of all could be found within the second universe.

And at its center, one could find it: Nevermore.

A floating flat landmass that looked like a continent just sitting there in space at first look, but once one came closer, it became obvious it wasn't one. Instead, it was a ring. This donut-shaped object truly didn't look like much to an onlooker, but once one got near, things changed. Beneath the hole, darkness stretched, coated in nothingness surpassing even the blackness of space all around it. Stretching down what felt like infinitely.

Not even the most powerful of gods could pierce this dark pillar. This dark space. An indestructible concept blocked their path, with the only way in through the large pit on the floating ring. When looking down this endless pit of darkness, it looked like certain death, but in reality, it was an entrance to the single-largest dungeon in the entire multiverse. Floor after floor extended downwards, and entire cities on "safe" floors were interspaced throughout.

Despite the floors making it sound like it was a linear path, this wasn't even true. The pit allowed you to fall to where you belonged, and when the system decided where to send you, you simply appeared there. Nobody could even know one truly appeared in a space inside this pillar.

Nevertheless, this place was a place no faction in the multiverse could neglect.

Even the ring itself had become home to a massive city, barely any space unoccupied as every single faction had made their own compounds, and merchants had taken what was left. All this was under the purview of the Wyrmgod of Nevermore – the dungeon master of this World Wonder.

And on that day, a party of five appeared in the ringed city that had aptly been dubbed Nevermore City.

Nevermore.

Jake had heard so much about it for years. William had used it at D-grade to get a huge level advantage, and many D-grades who weren't considered top-tier talents went there to get an edge and often to try and overcome their current limitations. Nevermore was a well-spring of Records, surpassing other dungeons by quite a margin as the mega-dungeon had something none others did:

Unique titles.

The deeper you went, the better the title, so if you had little confidence to reach far into D-grade, going to Nevermore after evolving was a great way to ensure you would at least have some progress. For these people, C-grade was still a long shot, but Nevermore would at least give them a chance.

To people like Jake and his party members, they went there only at C-grade to compete on the Nevermore Leaderboards. These Leaderboards mattered not only for reputation and to show off to others but would give tangible titles based on how well you did. How the Leaderboards worked was also simple as could be.

Rack up points based on how you did in Nevermore. All scores were individual, and points could be gained both during solo portions of Nevermore and group portions, with the final score being cumulative, meaning to be the best, you had to be good at both. With a time limit of fifty years, it was a marathon to get as many points as you could.

The easiest way to gain points was to clear floors, do quests, complete challenges, get achievements, and participate in events. Simply killing a lot didn't necessarily give any rewards, though level-gain during this period did also reward points. The fact levels gave points was also one of the reasons it was generally considered best to be at close to 200 as possible, though being at a higher level could help allow you to dive further down.

Getting to Nevermore was also far easier than one would expect. The Wyrmgod himself had set up teleportation beacons that were incredibly easy to hone into even for forces that didn't have any gods, and through direct aid by the system, even the cost of teleportation was significantly reduced. During one of their long conversations, Jake had briefly talked to Villy about the Wyrmgod, and the Viper had revealed that out of every single Primordial, if not all gods, period, the Wyrmgod was the top expert when it came to space magic.

This is to say that Jake and his party of five arrived at Nevermore City without any issues. More accurately, they appeared within the compound controlled by the Order of the Malefic Viper. Even if the Order had become derelict throughout the ages, they had still maintained this compound, and it still remained one of the largest in Nevermore City since the day it was established in the second era.

"Welcome to Nevermore City, Chosen of the Malefic One and his comrades in arms," an attendant spoke as soon as they stepped off the teleportation circle.

Jake allowed his sphere to spread out and even released a pulse immediately to scan the area. He saw a massive compound that looked like it could house millions, if not billions, without issue, though it appeared mostly empty. Besides that, he felt quite a few presences lock in on him after he appeared, most of which were of a divine nature.

There are at least a dozen gods here, Jake quickly realized. All of them were within the Order compound, too, indicating they were members. A few seconds after he detected these auras, they all pulled back, leaving Jake to wonder.

Ultimately, it didn't matter as Jake greeted the attendant. "Thank you, is everything prepared?"

"Yes, please follow me," the attendant quickly nodded and motioned for them to follow. Their odd party moved through the halls of the large building they had appeared in as Jake took the chance to ask the Sword Saint something that was on his mind. New NOVEL chapters are published on [novel×fire×net](http://novel.fire.net)

"Do you need to go shopping for equipment?"

He noticed that the guy hadn't changed that much stuff, at least not outwardly, since their duel in the Treasure Hunt. His robe was new, and the bracers he wore also looked newish, but the sandals looked the same, and his sword was his old ancestral weapon. Jake naturally couldn't see the old man's jewelry, but he knew that if he had to rely only on stuff from Earth, he would have been struggling. Considering how recently the Sword Saint hit C-grade, it only made sense he would need some upgrades.

"No, that won't be necessary," the Sword Saint smiled.

"Oh, really? Damn, for me, it was quite a challenge to hit the stat cap," Jake commented. "Did you have Reika get you some stuff, maybe?"

"No, it is that I don't need equipment to hit any stat cap," the Sword Saint explained. "Or, more accurately, I cannot get stats from equipment. I instead simply get stats when I am wielding my sword, roughly equivalent to the stat cap. A limitation of my class, if you may, that without my sword, I am far, far weaker."

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Didn't even know that was a thing, but I guess it makes sense."

"That does not mean I shun away from upgrading what I wear. The robe still offers good protection and even increases my resource regeneration, my bracers are defensively focused, my sandals increase the effectiveness of my movement-related skills, and I naturally wear a necklace with spatial storage," the Sword Saint further clarified. "It is just that I don't get stats, and I can only wear a total of five different pieces of equipment."

"Five? So, what is the last one?"

"The item you chose to give me after our last duel," the old man smiled.

"Wait... will that work inside the dungeon?" Jake asked skeptically.

The Sword Saint smiled even more as he turned to Dina. "Your friend Bobo can be summoned inside the dungeon, can't he?"

She seemed surprised at suddenly being asked but still nodded. "Yeah, Bobo is a Guardian."

"So is the Monarch classified as," the Sword Saint said. "Though there will likely be some restrictions considering it is an item I cannot fully control, so I cannot promise we will have another combatant, just that he should at least be able to give out some advice. Not that he could fight for prolonged periods even without these restrictions."

"Hm, alright," Jake nodded. If they could summon the Monarch of Blood at all times... yeah, that would be overpowered.

Jake knew that the rules about Guardians and tamed beasts and whatnot were quite complicated when it came to dungeons. Sylphie and Jake had their Union Oath that technically made them Companions – hence why he could take her along to the Treasure Hunt – but that did not mean they could do the same for Nevermore. They each took up a slot, as while they were linked, they were still entirely separate entities. One thing Jake had learned was that those you could bring along without any restrictions were classified solely as Guardians and always had one core aspect:

If their "owner" died, they would die, and their strength would always be directly tied to the "owner" in question. This made them closer to permanent summons, at least in the eyes of the system, than true separate lifeforms.

Of course, the entire thing was more complicated than could be easily summed up. The Monarch was in a gray zone, Casper and Lyra were in a gray zone, and there were so many damn gray zones one single rule simply could not exist. This ultimately resulted in every situation being judged on a case-by-case basis, where the system decided if it was okay or not. Luckily, there were several ways to test it before already being at the dungeon. This was mainly an issue for tamers who, more often than not, had to limit the number of beasts they would bring.

Bringing a horde of ten thousand beasts into a sewer dungeon also probably wouldn't be very comfortable...

Anyway, their party of five went towards a prepared meeting room in the Order compound where their final preparation would be done, and a basic strategy would be formed. In reality, they had not discussed much internally about how they planned on approaching the dungeon and tackling the challenges, as they all knew one thing: they were overqualified.

More accurately, they were overqualified for the early parts of Nevermore.

The dungeon was split into a huge number of floors that got progressively more difficult, so it only made sense for the first ones to be far too easy for a party like theirs. It was possible to skip floors altogether, but Jake and the others had no desire to do this even if they could as these early floors were a good way to rack up some easy points.

Considering they would likely spend at least a few months going through floors that weren't overly challenging, they would have that time to also form some synergy and truly learn how the others fought. Jake knew the most in their party about how the others approached combat, and even his knowledge was limited.

So, with this in mind, their preparations mainly consisted of some basic briefings. Oh, and of course, it was a chance to give Sylphie the gift from the United Tribes.

"Alright," Jake said when they were all in a meeting room, and he had sent the attendant away. "First of all, Sylphie, come here for a good thing."

The hawk flew over, and Jake quickly took out the box. "I got this gift from the United Tribes for you. It is the feather of a super strong bird, and if you eat it, you can absorb its energy and stuff."

"Ree?"

"No, I don't know what it will taste like, but probably not too bad. Also, you will have to eat it rather quickly based on what the phoenix goddess who gifted it said," Jake explained.

"Ree," Sylphie acknowledged.

Jake nodded as he slowly infused his energy into the box to unlock it. The moment he did, the lid slowly opened, and powerful energy radiated into the room as it was bathed in orange. Jake saw the feather in the box, its almost crystal-like appearance and radiant red-

Gulp

He barely had time to study it before the small hawk had pecked forward and gulped it down like a hungry chick. Jake was momentarily scared something bad would happen and quickly looked at Sylphie. "Are you okay?"

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, confused.

"No, I mean, how do you feel?"

"Ree, ree," Sylphie said unbothered.

"Oh..." Jake muttered. Yeah, Sylphie claimed she felt full but otherwise didn't comment much. He was a bit annoyed at failing to identify the feather fast enough, but based on Sylphie's response and the phoenix goddess' description, it was likely that the feather had been prepared specifically to be so easily consumable.

"Well, that was fast and easy," Jake muttered. He threw a glance at everyone before asking: "Do you all have any comments? Any personal plans for exploring the city?"

"No," the Fallen King said dismissively.

"No more preparations can be made that will truly assist us within the dungeon," the Sword Saint shook his head. "Though I would like to take a look at Nevermore City. Not doing so would be a waste."

"Ree!" Sylphie said, agreeing they should just get going.

"Grandpa gave me everything I need, so..." Dina said, making fast progress at becoming able to talk like a normal person.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment. They truly didn't have any more preparations to do. It wasn't even possible to gather information on the floors they would explore as that was censored to foster competition. It was censored in such a way that even if Villy tried to tell Jake, he just wouldn't hear or see anything, and even if Villy wrote something down, the words wouldn't appear. Perhaps there were some ways to get around this with Bloodline bullshit or some Transcendents, but Jake saw no reason to try and cheat.

"Then we should get a move on," Jake smiled. He was naturally also ready and had a stock of more ingredients than ever stored away in his spatial necklace. High-level stuff too. Most of the gifts he had left over were given to Haven or stored back at his mansion for use upon getting back, as a lot wasn't something he could use quite yet. Oh, and if Jake did need to get more stuff, it wasn't like one was stuck in there. As long as one had reached one of the city layers, one could always teleport away and back there again. This would still waste time for the leaderboards, so it wasn't advised, but it was a possibility.

Their group of five thus left the Order of the Malefic Viper compound shortly after they had arrived and left towards Nevermore. However, even if they did not need to do any preparations in the city, there were still a few places they wanted to stop by.

The first of which was the place dubbed the Leaderboard Square. This was where one could see all the Leaderboards of Nevermore, though not all of them were displayed at all times. The Leaderboards also only displayed the top ten, though one could pay Credits to search up specific individuals, and as long as they hadn't made their entries anonymous, one could still see it. A lot of factions also had special tokens to see individuals from their own force or even their enemy forces. Oh, and one could naturally always see their own ranks.

It was also announced to the entire square whenever someone got a good score, though this usually didn't happen more than a few times a year.

On the way there, Jake and his party gathered quite the attention. They stood out even among geniuses, but Jake still had to admit he felt slightly humbled by the number of powerful people he saw while walking toward the square. He did not encounter any he would consider truly top-tier, but he did see some parties that he believed could give him quite the challenge if they all came at him together. All these parties were below level 210, of course. The square they were going to was the one with the C-grade Leaderboards, after all.

Luckily, no one bothered them. Even without Jake there, the Fallen King alone would scare anyone off. Those able to Identify Blessings especially stayed out of their way, as Jake didn't hide his identity as a Chosen, and Sylphie and the Sword Saint naturally didn't hide their Blessings either.

This is to say they made it to the massive square quite easily. It still required them to teleport once and walk quite a distance, as flying was not allowed in Nevermore City. Neither was fighting of any kind – outside of the arenas, of course.

Walking into the square, Jake's eyes instantly landed on the four massive monuments on display. Each of them were over a hundred meters tall, and each had only ten golden names written. Jake quickly scanned them all as he marveled at the craftsmanship, the old swordsman at his side also nodding and complimenting them.

Two of the leaderboard monuments were related to the ninety-second era that had just ended with the integration of the ninety-third universe, while the two final ones were related to his own universe. He had not expected anything to be on the last two, but when he got closer, his eyes opened in surprise.

People have already reached C-grade and done Nevermore to get on the Leaderboards? How in the actual fuck!?

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

Chapter 654: Nevermore Leaderboards

Jake instantly understood how the list was full when he laid his eyes on the first wall, which displayed the top ten individuals of the ninety-third universe.

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

1. Holy Templar – Low Tier
2. Holy Knight – Low Tier
3. Holy Priestess – Low Tier
4. Holy Ranger – Low Tier
5. Holy Knight – Low Tier
6. Holy Mage – Low Tier
7. Holy Duelist – Low Tier
8. Holy Mage – Low Tier
9. Holy Knight – Low Tier
10. Holy Templar – Low Tier

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They were all shit scores. For reference, there was no actual display of points; people were just placed into a “tier” based on their performance, with the lowest being the Low Tier. After that was Middle-Low Tier, High-Low Tier, and then Peak-Low Tier. Then from there, one moved into the Low-Mid Tier, Mid Tier, High-Mid Tier, and so on and so forth.

All of this is to say that Low Tier was the bottom rung. Jake was still a bit surprised, especially when he saw the list dominated by people who chose to remain anonymous and only post the archetype of their classes. Moreover, they were all from the Holy Church based on their names.

The reason he found it weird was that having “completed” Nevermore already shouldn’t really be a thing, right? To complete it would require one to spend the full fifty years inside, which would be at least a year or two, even with great time dilation by getting to the lower floors, something these people clearly hadn’t. Jake had only managed to reach C-grade recently, same with the others, and this list was only for people from the ninety-third universe.

Perhaps there were some beasts and whatnot already inside, but the final score would only appear on the Leaderboard after one was done in there... so how had the Holy Church managed to speedrun the place? Jake wasn’t the only confused one.

“Have I misinterpreted how Nevermore functions? I believed one would have to spend their full term inside before the score displays?” the old man asked.

Jake was about to comment as Dina spoke. "It's normal."

"Could you elaborate?" the Sword Saint looked at her while smiling.

She nodded enthusiastically as she explained.

"The Holy Church always does this. Every new era, the Wyrmgod changes up the dungeons, and the Church sends in C-grades from the new universe to effectively scout it out for their later, more talented parties. While those who get through it can't relay any direct information, through different methods, the kind of environments, mana types, and of course, the general sizes of the floors can be determined. They even often wear equipment capable of tracking distances traveled through subtle means," Dina explained quite articulately. "To see the new version within the first decade, one must bring along at least one person from the new universe too, so that is why they are on the list."

"Huh," Jake said. "But how did they complete the dungeon that fast already? They can't have reached C-grade that long ago..."

Dina looked at Jake before she gazed back at the old man, and it was only after he nodded she answered.

"They don't try to complete it... they just get helped by four far more powerful individuals to the first city layer. There, they then enter a time dilation chamber just to wait out the time and get their names on the Leaderboards. They do this to communicate they have knowledge of the floors and try to recruit people and sell intelligence," Dina explained.

"That... sounds like such a waste?" Jake said, confused.

"The Church often does things that seem like a waste... and I am sure they also got other parties going to the floors after the first city layer. They usually only bring one member who is getting helped by the four others, and then that person is abandoned for someone they deem actually talented for the floors that provide actual challenges."

Jake nodded as he kept staring at the Leaderboard. "So they are pretty much sacrificial pawns?"

"Sounds like it," the Sword Saint said with a frown.

Dina didn't deny it as she subtly nodded.

"Is this knowledge they gain even worth that much?" Jake asked. "Or the advertisement by having a bunch of low-tier scores on the Leaderboards?"

"No, not really," Dina admitted. "But a bunch of C-grades aren't worth much either."

Jake wanted to protest... but after just thinking for a moment, there was some truth to it. If the Church just had some people who weren't judged to very talented level to C-grade quickly, ignored trying to get Perfect Evolutions or even good classes or professions, it shouldn't have been that hard. Especially if the Church invested extra resources in them to help raise them. Maybe these people wouldn't even have been able to reach the grade naturally.

Or maybe the Church had just thrown away talents because they viewed them as a dime a dozen. Either way, it left a bad taste in Jake's mouth, and he looked at one of the other Leaderboards that showed the scores from those of the 92nd universe to try and better his mood by seeing the performances of some actual geniuses.

That didn't make him feel better.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 92nd Universe.

1. Yip of Yore – Pinnacle Tier
2. Altius of the Blade – Pinnacle Tier
3. Holy Templar – Pinnacle Tier
4. Hand of Umbra – Pinnacle Tier
5. Chosen of the Blightfather – Pinnacle Tier
6. Warrior of Valhal – Pinnacle Tier
7. Monk – Pinnacle Tier
8. Anonymous – Pinnacle Tier
9. Scion of Life – Pinnacle Tier
10. Altmar Prince – Pinnacle Tier

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Jake read over all the names, and his eyes naturally settled on number one. Yip of Yore. It seemed that even in C-grade, he had been at the top of his game. As for the others, Jake didn't care much. Most chose to just name themselves something representing their factions and not themselves as people. The one exception was the top two, which did make Jake wonder who this Altius of the Blade was. Not that it truly mattered.

Instead, he inspected the Leaderboard showing the scores from the ninety-third era. While the Leaderboard before only displayed individuals native to the ninety-second universe, this one displayed every single C-grade who had completed Nevermore during this entire Era. In other words, the top geniuses of nearly fourteen billion years.

Jake opened it... and while it shouldn't have been unexpected, he saw a familiar name at the top once more.

Nevermore Leaderboards (C-grade): 92nd Era.

1. Yip of Yore – Era's Pinnacle.
2. Monk – Pinnacle Tier
3. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier
4. Altius of the Blade – Pinnacle Tier
5. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier
6. Champion of Valhal
7. The Eldritch Dancer
8. Anonymous - Pinnacle Tier
9. Estrastromoz Regalflight – Pinnacle Tier
10. Chosen Son of Gwyndyr – Pinnacle Tier

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This list was of the entire era. The top ten C-grade geniuses for billions of years. Yet Yip of Yore still found himself at the top, recognized as the Era's Pinnacle. Jake was also surprised to see that the guy called Altius of the Blade managed to come in fourth overall, making it seem like there were two supreme geniuses in that era. Jake wondered what happened to that guy... though the most likely explanation was that he failed to ever become a god. In fact, Jake got the feeling that one of the reasons few names were used was because most were dead. At least it would help someone like Gwyndyr to have his name referenced on the Leaderboards even if this Chosen Son died.

Jake shook his head as he looked at the final Leaderboard – the one for the ninety-third era.

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

Leaderboard Opens in 615 Days

He wasn't sure if he should be surprised to find it empty. No one had gotten on it yet, as it wasn't even open yet, but even if it had been open, Jake didn't imagine many top geniuses would have had time to get Pinnacle scores, which seemed to be the norm for the top geniuses. Jake felt determined to, at the very least, put his name towards the top of that list – if not at the very top.

The 615 days till it opened also seemed rather arbitrary, though perhaps it did have a deeper meaning Jake wasn't aware of. Or it was literally just a random number chosen by the Wyrmgod based on how fast the Primordial estimated people will take to clear it.

Wait, maybe it has something to do with titles?

Yeah, that made sense. If claiming the top spot, even for a moment, rewarded a special title or something, then it made sense to not allow people like those chumps from the Holy Church to just claim it. Jake also reckoned that even if you completed your Nevermore run before the Leaderboard opened, you would still be rewarded whenever it did, just on a delay.

However, as he stared at the four Leaderboards, one thing did strike him as odd.

"Is there no all-star Leaderboard? One for the best of the best?" Jake asked.

"No," the Sword Saint asked. "I had asked my Patron about this once before, and he explained to me that while there was one in the past, it was eventually done away with. The issue is that each era tends to be too different to directly compare their scores, so the Wyrmgod believes a composite list of comparisons to be faulty. In most cases, the top spot would be claimed by the most powerful of the current era, making it shift all the time and ultimately be useless. At least that is the official story."

"Official story?" Jake asked. "So, what is the unofficial one?"

"That it still exists, but if you aren't worthy of placing yourself on it, then you aren't worthy of knowing about it either," the Sword Saint said with an amused smile. "I do still think there is some truth to the official story, but I believe the framework is still in place if the Leaderboard did exist once upon a time."

"Hm," Jake mused to himself. No matter what the truth was, it didn't change their goal in Nevermore in the slightest. They just had to do as well as possible in both the group portion and the individual challenges.

"We have delayed enough, have we not? Let us continue towards the entrance to Nevermore proper. We shall claim the top places of this Leaderboard and stand here next in admiration of our own glory," the King said with confidence in his voice.

None of the others seemed to disagree with heading off. However, just as Jake was about to agree, he heard voices behind him from two C-grades speaking loudly.

"The Chosen of Yip of Yore will claim first place, won't he? You saw in him the northern arenas?" one of them said with reverence in his voice.

"Yeah, did you see when he took on an entire party from the Altmar Empire? It wasn't even a fight..." the other guy answered with an equal level of reverence. "He is probably the top genius from the new universe, right?" Original content can be found at [www.firenet](http://www.firenet.net)

"Definitely," the first one agreed.

Jake stopped listening in as they just kept sucking the orange fucker off. Jake couldn't even say he was surprised anymore at hearing about the guy. Jake also wasn't dumb enough to think this was a coincidence, and clearly, the Sword Saint agreed.

"This was planned," the Sword Saint said as they still stood in front of the leaderboards. "That he is at an arena just when we happen to arrive at Nevermore also isn't coincidental. He has been waiting for you."

Nodding, Jake agreed. "Let's go check it out either way."

"Chances are he wants you to come. It is even likely he wants you to challenge him there," the old man continued.

"I know," Jake said.

"I do wonder who this Ell'Hakan truly is. Perhaps I should enter the arena for a bout with him," the Fallen King voiced his interest.

"No," Jake shook his head. "Can you take Sylphie and Dina elsewhere? The Sword Saint and I will go check out the arena and then regroup with you three afterward."

"Why?" the Unique Lifeform questioned.

"Because he is dangerous in a way that pure power doesn't work against. I know the Sword Saint faced him before and walked away fine, but I barely trust myself, which is why I won't go alone," Jake explained.

Jake knew the smartest move would probably be to just not go to this arena, but his curiosity ultimately won out over his logic. He wanted some clue about the party members Ell'Hakan had gathered, and he wanted to feel how strong the other Chosen had grown since their last encounter. After his recent talks with Villy, it became clear Jake couldn't half-arse dealing with Ell'Hakan. This is why he didn't want to risk exposing the others to the nahoom, or more specifically, expose them to his Bloodline.

His Bloodline was, in all honesty, scary as hell, and while Jake trusted the Sword Saint to handle his emotions, he wasn't so sure about the three others. Dina, he barely knew, but she had grown up isolated and only around trusted friends, so she had little experience with the world. He could easily see just a single encounter fuck her up and potentially even poison the well entirely, making them lose her as a party member.

Sylphie was too free-spirited and probably wouldn't be that affected, at least not when it came to turning her against Jake. However, if he instead tried to inspire doubt or even have her attack Ell'Hakan to break the rules of Nevermore and have her be punished or something like that, Jake could totally see Sylphie fall for it.

Finally, there was the Fallen King. Jake had defeated the King once, and he knew how prideful the Unique Lifeform was. At times, Jake felt like they were talking a tight line of mutual respect and viewed the existence of the other as mutually beneficial, and Jake couldn't write off Ell'Hakan ruining that balance. Perhaps even go as far as make the King feel that death would be better than being bound to Jake.

Ultimately, it came down to Jake not truly comprehending what the other Chosen was capable of, and he knew it would be foolish to take too big of a risk by exposing them all. Hence why he would go with the Sword Saint only.

One other reason he wanted to go was for the sheer exposure. Chances are their final showdown would be in C-grade, and Jake wanted a better feel for what he would be dealing with Bloodline-wise. A part of him feared that perhaps Ell'Hakan's Bloodline had also evolved and grown stronger like his own, which would add a whole other layer to the challenge.

Jake explained this logic to the others, and while the Fallen King wasn't happy about it, he still complied.

"Very well, I shall respect your assessment. I have previously chosen to not respect the power of a Bloodline once, and I find it pertinent to not do so once more lest I wish to see myself twice-fallen," the Fallen King said as he turned to the girls. *"Follow me, hawk of the wind, dryad of nature."*

"Ree!?" Sylphie screeched at Jake in an offended tone for not wanting to take her along.

"He is dangerous, okay? He makes people think things that aren't true. Like, what if he made you think that I was actually a bad person?" Jake asked.

"Ree!" Sylphie retorted.

"No, I am not saying you would for sure fall for something like that, but... what if he made you feel something really bad that made you do something you didn't want to? Something really bad?" Jake tried again, pretty much saying the first thing. He wasn't really sure how to phrase it...

“Consider this, hawk of wind. What if this enemy Chosen made you believe the rumored Smelly Pot, as you have aptly named it, is, in fact, the perfect nest?” the King said.

What the fuck kind of argument is tha-

“Ree, ree!” Sylphie’s eyes glowed with realization as she flew over and landed on the King’s head before promptly telling Jake to never allow the monster known as Ell’Hakan anywhere near her.

Jake stared a bit before just giving up. If it worked, it worked.

“I shall take these two somewhere else, perhaps another arena to observe some battles or have some entertainment for ourselves,” the Fallen King said. *“I wish you luck facing your rival Chosen.”*

“Thanks, I guess,” Jake smiled. Even if the entire plan was to not truly face him in the first place. Killing in the arenas wasn’t allowed, after all.

With that, the group prepared to split up as Jake and the Sword Saint headed to this Northern arena while the others headed toward the southern ones.

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

Chapter 655: Last Say

The Nevermore Arenas. To Jake and the others in his party, these did not have much pull, but to others, they were a cornerstone of Nevermore City. They pulled in huge audiences and were somewhere geniuses from all over the multiverse gathered from C-grade to S-grade. It was a chance to show off their skills to others for a myriad of reasons, most of which revolved around recruitment.

Faction-less Individuals could show off their power and potentially find party members to join them in their pursuit to rank high in Nevermore. Others hoped to be recruited into powerful parties that needed someone with their skills. Some of these even hoped to join a faction.

This was especially prevalent due to the new universe recently getting integrated, and it would only increase as the Wyrmgod sent out these tokens for C-grades all over the new universe to teleport to Nevermore directly. All who had arrived now had to have some backing to even be able to make the trip.

Needless to say, many of these factions did not need to be in the arenas to recruit members but already had full parties, which led to another reason why some went to the arenas: to show off. Jake was pretty damn fucking sure Ell'Hakan was in the camp of people wanting to show off, and if he could also attract Jake, that was probably just a win-win for the guy.

Jake did find it regrettable that killing was not allowed in Nevermore City, not even in the arenas. Accidental deaths weren't a thing either, as referees always watched the fight, and some odd formation had been placed that made it so not even instantly fatal attacks would kill someone. Instead, it just threw them out of the arena. Jake suspected system-fuckery was behind this.

Either way, if this anti-killing rule was not in place, Jake would have gladly faced Ell'Hakan within an arena.

However, with the rule in place... Jake just wouldn't face him at all if he could avoid it. Yet he still wanted to at least lay an eye on the guy and get a feel for how much stronger he had gotten and if his Bloodline had grown more potent. Ell'Hakan had proven himself very good at suddenly popping up and attacking, and Jake wanted to avoid being taken by surprise if the fucker ambushed Jake with a Bloodline that was more powerful than Jake expected.

He also knew that curiosity would gnaw at him if he didn't at least see a few of the asshole's party members. Villy said they were powerful, and Jake knew that wanting to see them personally wasn't logical and potentially even Jake walking into a trap, but the alternative was him wondering for decades to come. Besides, If Ell'Hakan was fighting in one of the arenas, Jake should be able to scout out his party mates without even being noticed, but even if Ell'Hakan had set a trap... well, he did kind of have a plan for that.

"Would you happen to have an extra robe and a sword?" Jake asked the Sword Saint.

"Oh?" he asked with interest. "I do, but what for?"

"Something that will hopefully work," Jake answered. "Follow me."

He led the Sword Saint into a small alley and after he was sure no one was looking, he had the old man give him a robe and a sword and put them on.

Then, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he entered meditation. He focused on his heartbeat and soon heard it thumping strongly within his mind. Focusing even more on it, he made it slow down significantly as he felt slightly strained. His Sphere of Perception momentarily seemed to flicker before it stabilized, yet the sound of his own heartbeat had ceased to be within his mind. It was as if he had grasped it with a hand and squeezed tightly to keep it under control

"Your aura... I felt a slight shift," the Sword Saint frowned as Jake opened his eyes. "You feel, hm, weaker, perhaps?"

"I made it a bit easier for me to hide from his detection," Jake said. "To allow me to not attract attention but just be a follower of yours."

"Oh?" the Sword Saint exclaimed skeptically. "I have done some research into Bloodlines, and from my comprehension, he will be able to feel yours if he gets close. Even if you change your looks and aura, suspicion would still arise if I am seen walking with an individual with a Bloodline."

"Unless he is touching me, not even Ell'Hakan should be able to feel it."

The Sword Saint frowned before simply nodding. "Do as you may."

Jake nodded in return and made sure the robe was properly put on and the sword attached to his waist. He then lifted his hand and conjured a stable arcane barrier over his mask before infusing it with a bit of dark mana, hiding his face. He finished the look by putting on his old cloak and changing its colors to dark blue, like the Sword Saint's robe.

Finally, he used Shroud of the Primordial to display himself as only level 200 while also entirely removing any trace of him having a Blessing.

"How do I look?" Jake asked.

"Different," the Sword Saint answered. "Enough so that I would not recognize you."

"Good enough," Jake nodded. "Let's go."

What Jake had done was something he had theorized for a long time should be possible. During his childhood, Jake had managed to completely suppress his Bloodline to the level of effectively deactivating it. This was not a usual function of Bloodlines or something anyone could just do, yet Jake had done it, which begged the question... why couldn't he do something similar again?

Which was what he had just done. However, it was flawed, and Jake had to actively focus on keeping it suppressed to the level of being undetectable lest he wanted to somehow try and suppress it entirely. Something he had no desire to do. For now, his Bloodline remained fully active while also being suppressed enough so that no one around him could feel it. It had been effectively pressed into his body and could only be discovered through touch.

Had Jake known he could do this before coming to Nevermore?

No, no, he hadn't.

So there was no fucking way Ell'Hakan could either.

In fact, the lack of a Bloodline would more likely than not make him entirely disregard Jake and instead focus solely on the Sword Saint. At least, that was the plan.

"Let's pick up the pace, can't keep this up forever," Jake said, as he did know he was on borrowed time. It wasn't effortless to contain the aura.

"Very well," the Sword Saint said.

The two of them hurried, and soon enough, they made it to the northern arenas. It was a huge complex of different arenas, and even for C-grade, there were dozens, making Jake fear finding Ell'Hakan would be difficult.

That proved to be a non-issue as one arena had far more fanfare than any other. More than that, Jake felt something. A familiar Bloodline lurked just through the entrance to the large double doors leading into the colosseum-like structure. Hidden, just out of sight.

"He is just past here," Jake warned the Sword Saint.

"Very well," the old man answered. *"I shall naturally take the lead, my fellow member of the Noboru Clan."*

Jake didn't comment as they walked forward, and as they entered the arena, Jake heard the grating voice.

"What a wonderful surprise to see you here, Sword Saint," Ell'Hakan spoke as he spotted the Sword Saint and the disguised Jake. He had been hidden by a large group of people, and they made way for him as he walked straight toward them.

"I do not believe I can say the same," the Sword Saint said, turning to look at Ell'Hakan.

Instantly, eyes gathered on them as the crowd paid attention. It was clear Ell'Hakan had gathered all of them to witness this encounter.

Jake felt Ell'Hakan's gaze briefly land on him, but it was only for a mere moment as he turned his attention back towards the old swordsman.

"Our last encounter was unfortunate; I will take that upon myself," Ell'Hakan said with a smile as he turned to the crowd of onlookers. "Everyone, allow me to introduce the man known as the Sword Saint. A man I have faced once, and from that alone can firmly say I cannot assure victory. Also, a party member of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper."

A few frowns came from all around at the mention of the Malefic Viper. *Really not a popular guy.*

“Ah, do not misunderstand; the Sword Saint is not a member of the Order of the Malefic Viper, but a man who stands on his own, correct?” the Chosen said.

“It is so,” the Sword Saint didn’t deny. “I choose my own Path because do we not all seek to walk one that is only ours? Or perhaps that is just the ramblings of an old man. At least, his willingness to pave his own way is something I find admirable when we discuss Lord Thayne. His willingness to walk his own Path, even if it does not align with that of the Malefic One.”

“I have heard he recently did some quite impressive things indeed,” Ell’Hakan nodded in recognition. “Speaking of the Chosen, I had hoped to meet him here and perhaps have a fruitful discussion. While it is pleasant to meet you once more, it does make me wonder... who is this man you brought along? I do not believe him to be one of your party members.”

Jake really tried to keep it together, but he felt oddly nervous that he would be discovered. Too nervous. He still managed to remain stable, as the Sword Saint answered.

“This is my great grandson-in-law. Or, well, at least I wouldn’t complain if that is what he became,” the Sword Saint said as he let out a grandfatherly laugh.

Jake stared at the Sword Saint with wide eyes at that sudden declaration. What the hell was the guy saying?

“Amusing,” Ell’Hakan smiled and shook his head as he redirected his attention to the Sword Saint. “Say, would it be possible to have you arrange a chat with the Chosen of the Malefic One?”

With the attention off him, Jake could finally focus more on scanning the Chosen in front of him as the Sword Saint kept him distracted.

“Sadly, I do not think he wants to discuss very much with you. You have not exactly been a good conversation partner to Lord Thayne thus far, now have you?” the old man shot back.

“Alas, I cannot deny that. However, it does make me wonder... why would he not dare say this to my face? Is it perhaps accurate for me to assume that he sent you here because he does not wish to face me directly?” Ell’Hakan asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I would deem that assessment highly inaccurate. In fact, I believe he would gladly stand in front of you at this very moment if he wanted to,” the swordsman countered.

Ell’Hakan raised his eyebrow again before sighing. “Very well. I merely wanted to have a frank talk with him under the gaze of the Wyrmgod, with our safety ensured by the

rules of Nevermore. Seeing as he is not interested, would you so kindly deliver a message for me?"

"That could be arranged," the Sword Saint agreed.

"Thank you," Ell'Hakan bowed. "Tell Lord Thayne that I truly do want a discussion. No deceit. A genuine olive branch, where an alternative can be found to the demise of either of us. I know he has... doubts about his Patron, so let him know he can find a home in so many other places than that forsaken Order with his unique talents. While we may have had a bad first impression of one another, I genuinely believe that a friendship or at least mutual tolerance can be formed as long as he desires it to be so."

The Sword Saint looked at the nahoom for a few seconds before nodding.

"That is truly all," Ell'Hakan said as he bowed yet another time. "Thank you, Sword Saint. I would invite you to a duel in the arena to have a proper rematch, but sadly I will have to take my leave now as my comrades are done enjoying themselves in the arena. Nevermore awaits. Oh, and do know that even if I desire friendlier terms between us, I shall hold nothing back during the descent. Let us have a healthy competition."

With those words, four people walked out of the arena. Jake turned his gaze to them, and instantly he felt relief. He didn't recognize a single one of the four figures that walked out of the arena. Jake instantly scanned them all, and together with his assessment of Ell'Hakan... he had a decent idea of what he would be dealing with.

The four were all peak-level geniuses. They gave him the same vibes as Dina but without the air of naivety. Among them was a beastfolk warrior that looked to be descended from a wolf. Another was a mage of an unknown race Jake didn't recognize, and he didn't dare use Identify. Second-to-last was an elemental in humanoid form. A metal elemental of some kind, it seemed. Lastly was a woman covered in all white and a veil hiding her face, giving off a familiar aura that did give Jake some pause. The most
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It appeared the Holy Church had sent a healer Ell'Hakan's way. If this was some official policy, he couldn't be sure.

Ell'Hakan turned to meet his party members and was about to walk toward them, but he didn't get far.

Scanning them all gave Jake enough information, and he looked at the Sword Saint for a moment as the old man gave a light smile and nodded.

"Are these your party members?" Jake opened his mouth for the first time, purposefully masking his voice with mana.

Ell'Hakan turned and looked at Jake as all eyes from the onlookers gathered on him. A lot of eyes at this point, with many also observing from far away. Jake felt the annoyance of the enemy Chosen at Jake speaking despite just being a follower of the Sword Saint, but Ell'Hakan didn't show it. Who did show it was all the supporters around him who sneered at Jake daring to ask.

"They are indeed. Why do you ask?" Ell'Hakan asked, his tone neutral despite how annoyed he felt.

"Curiosity that has now been sated," Jake said in a curt tone.

Ell'Hakan frowned deeply now. Jake didn't need his intuition to tell him the Chosen was thoroughly using his Bloodline to try and understand why Jake suddenly had a change in demeanor. Sadly for him... it was too late.

"I am starting to believe there is more to you than meets the eye, masked friend of the Sword Saint," Ell'Hakan said, clearly trying to claim back control of the conversation and have the last word. "However, as I said, I cannot delay here much longer, and I will-"

"The answer is no."

Jake released the grip upon his heart as he allowed it to thump to life once more. Jake's aura flared out as he let it all go, including his presence. The robe covering his body was shredded, revealing his true form as his yellow eyes drilled into the genuinely surprised Ell'Hakan, who stared at Jake with wide-open eyes.

"How dare you stand there and talk about unfortunate situations and bad first impressions. You came to *my* planet. Killed *my* friends. Proclaimed you would kill me and wreak havoc across my world. I didn't even know you. And for what? To spin some grand tale of pure fantasy? To claim you tried to save my world? Guess what, the ones you manipulated to help you and then betrayed are rebuilding after the destruction *you* caused. They grieve the deaths *you* instigated. So no, I will not take your poisoned olive branch or listen to the words of someone who has only ever sought to deceive. I decide if I want to listen, not you. Remember, *you* came after me first. *You* started this. Never forget that," Jake said, his voice echoing out so everyone around them could hear.

Shocked eyes were all around him as he heard faint whispers, making it clear they all knew who he was. More attention was ever focused on the square as Jake's loud voice had attracted an even bigger crowd than before. Jake took the chance when they were still shocked and turned to the four party members of Ell'Hakan, who all stood there, looking perplexed.

"I do wish you four luck. You will need it, seeing as you chose to follow the vision of a coward who can't even see the one he proclaims his fated enemy when he stands right in front of his eyes."

With those words, Jake turned to leave as the Sword Saint looked at Ell'Hakan one more time before bowing. "A pleasure."

The old man followed after Jake as they heard a yell from behind.

"Wait--" Ell'Hakan tried as Jake retorted before he had a chance to say anything.

"Just stop," Jake's voice, infused with his Willpower, bellowed out. **"I don't care about your words. Speak with your action."**

With those words, Jake walked off with the Sword Saint walking tall beside him, not looking back. A sliver of doubt, if he had done the right thing, crept up in his mind, but Jake squashed it the instant it appeared as he knew it was a feeble attempt by the other Chosen.

Ell'Hakan's Bloodline hadn't evolved, and Jake had also confirmed one more crucial thing.

He was legitimately afraid of fighting Jake. Afraid of killing him. He was looking for a way to spin the story and to turn Jake to his side and against the Viper. Without realizing it, his recent stunt, which gave him the support of several major factions rivaling for surpassing the Order, had given Ell'Hakan and Yip pause when it came to acting against Jake. Moreover, they seemed to genuinely think they could turn Jake into a heretic... not knowing he already was one.

Jake wasn't a schemer... but even he knew how to take advantage of someone acting on faulty information.

Meeting Ell'Hakan had been a risk. No doubt about it. But for the first time, he walked away with the last say, and his doubts and curiosity were laid to rest, allowing him to focus on what truly mattered:

Actually doing the damn Nevermore dungeon.

He just hoped his party members hadn't gotten up to any trouble while he and the Sword Saint faced off against another Chosen.

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Chapter 656: Into the Abyss

“That must have been cathartic,” the Sword Saint said after they had made some good distance between themselves and the northern arenas. “I take it no one is following us?”

“Nobody, as far as I can tell. And yes, it felt damn good to finally tell that fucker off,” Jake wholeheartedly agreed, though he scratched his chin a bit embarrassed as he asked: “But... eh... was that entire speech a bit overboard?”

“Hm, it was adequate and communicated what had to be said,” the old man shook his head.

“Good, good,” Jake nodded. He had pretty much made up the speech on the spot and let out a few pent-up feelings, so he wasn’t sure how it came off.

“It was an interesting encounter, I must say,” the Sword Saint commented. “More so than your speech, I believe your recent actions in relation to Vesperia are the real issue for this Yip and his Chosen. His attempt to try and find a solution that does not include killing you seemed genuine. I believe they fear the potential backlash of other factions if they kill you outright, and chances are they will attempt to discredit or spin that ability of yours, such as claiming that it cannot truly benefit others. Or perhaps say you refuse to help anyone.”

“I had considered that and also planned a counter-strategy of sorts to that bullshit story, but all of that is for after Nevermore. I truly couldn’t go and affect another evolution here and now even if I wanted to,” Jake sighed. He was still annoyed at having to deal with Ell’Hakan, but he had also decided to take it seriously.

“In either case, today was a win. You turned the narrative from you pursuing him to him being the one chasing you. You threw the ball in his court to prove himself worthy of even competing with you. I do not doubt he can spin it to still be a position he can work from, but one thing I do believe is that you managed to change part of the discourse. You swept him up in your own tale, and forcing any storyteller to adapt and change his story to fit a new reality leaves it open for plot holes and mistakes,” the Sword Saint said.

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. “Thanks, by the way. You handled things pretty damn perfectly. I did not expect that line about great-grandson-in-law. Sure threw me for a loop, and I guess my confusion and embarrassment was a great veil to block Ell’Hakan from gleaming anything.”

“Ah, yes,” the Sword Saint nodded. “But it was genuine. I had hoped something would develop there, especially after the two of you got along during the Treasure Hunt. Sadly, it seems you and little Reika aren’t meant to be.”

Jake nearly tripped at the old man talking so frankly. “Well... sorry to disappoint. I only ever viewed her as a colleague and a friend.”

“Perhaps for the best,” the Sword Saint nodded. “ I reckon she would not be accepting of any extramarital affairs with succubi or elves.”

Glancing at the old man, Jake saw the cheeky smile, making him know the bastard was joking around. “You make it sound like I plan on building a harem.”

The Sword Saint glanced back at Jake. “If you planned on having one, I would advise against it. It is exhausting and leads to needless drama if you want to keep everyone happy, and once children become involved, it is a nightmare. Better to settle for either one life partner or not truly commit to anyone.”

“Wow, you almost make it sound like you’re talking from personal experience,” Jake teased the Sword Saint back.

The old man just smiled.

“Wait, seriously? You had a fucking harem?”

“Life is a journey. Looking back and focusing too much on the past will never lead to happiness. Instead, we should focus on present issues and the recent past. Such as you owing me a new robe,” the old man said in a fake sage tone.

“Hold up, let’s get back to the fact you apparently had a damn-“

“Ah, would you look at that? The southern arenas are on the horizon,” he cut Jake off.

“You aren’t getting that robe,” Jake muttered.

“A sacrifice I will have to make.”

Jake shook his head and walked silently, and decided to do something he probably should have handled earlier. At the very least, it should help take his mind off the exploits and the mental images of the Sword Saint in the past.

Walking, Jake finally got around to fixing the stats on his newly gained ring from the Altmar Empire. He had 5000 stats to distribute but only around 2500 stats till the cap, so he chose to only place 2500 of them for now. Considering Strength and Agility were already close to their caps, and Jake not feeling like he needed the other stats that badly, he made an executive decision.

+2500 Perception.

After that, he still had 59 stats to the cap and decided to put 100 into Strength just for good measure to not have any waste. Due to the awesome design of the ring, he could always fix it later. Opening his status, he did a quick check-over.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 204]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 203]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 206]

Health Points (HP): 88340/88340

Mana Points (MP): 174703/174703

Stamina: 89012/89110

Stats

Strength: 8536

Agility: 12496

Endurance: 8911

Vitality: 8834

Toughness: 7389

Wisdom: 11181

Intelligence: 9276

Perception: 23246

Willpower: 9385

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World], [Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer IX], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Marquess], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter], [Myth Originator], [Progenitor of Myriad Paths], [Mythical Prodigy], [Perfect Evolution (C-grade)]

Class Skills: [Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Arcane Stealth (Rare)], [Superior Stealth Attack (Rare)], [Splitting Arrow Rain (Rare)], [Arrow of the Ambitious

Hunter (Rare)], [Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Rare)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Avaricious Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Ancient)], [Arcane Awakening (Ancient)], [One Step, Thousand Miles (Ancient)], [Fangs of Man (Ancient)], [Horizon-Chasing Big Game Arcane Hunter (Ancient)], [Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon (Ancient)], [Moment of (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Relentless Hunt of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)], [Eternal Shadow of (Mythical)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Grimoire of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Alchemist's Purification (Inferior)], [Alchemical Flame (Common)], [Cultivate Toxin (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Rare)], [Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Epic)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Ancient)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Anomalous Soul of the Heretic-Chosen (Legendary)], [Core Manipulation of (Legendary)] Read full story at *novel★fire★net*

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Wisdom of the Hunter (Unique)], [Identify (Rare)], [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

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Everything looked as expected, and his stats had all grown nicely, especially after he finally got fully capped out on equipment. Strength had significantly increased, with Perception naturally being the biggest winner. All in all, good stuff.

He closed his status as they had made it to the arenas. As with the northern ones where they had met Ell'Hakan, this was an entire complex, but also, as with Ell'Hakan, it wasn't hard to find the one they were looking for. Because in this place, there was also one arena with far more attention than any of the others, and as Jake heard someone mention a Unique Lifeform, it wasn't hard to figure out what their three other party members were up to.

Jake and the Sword Saint quickly confirmed their suspicions after entering the stands of the large colosseum and seeing the creature that was down below with an entire party of challengers standing before him. Or, well, three people were standing. Another was

embedded head-first into a wall, and the fifth one was just two legs sticking out of a large mound.

All of the challengers were humans, and the last three still standing were a man with a large sword, a woman with a spear, and a mage of some kind.

“I had expected more of the archer, though perhaps my view is skewed,” the Fallen King said as he floated slightly off the ground, opposite of these humans. *“Nevertheless. Continue.”*

Raising a hand, he released a blast of force toward the mage. Jake was surprised to see the guy capable of teleporting away in time as he reappeared nearly a hundred meters away and slammed his palms together as a massive pillar-like spear of earth formed above him.

The King ignored him and pointed at the sword-wielding warrior running straight at him. The warrior braced himself as a blast of force knocked him backward, but he managed to cover for the woman with her spear. Ice condensed all around her as she stabbed forward, only to hit a transparent barrier. The entire spear bent from the impact, and the King swiped his hand as the woman was hit by an invisible blast, sending her flying. Just then, the pillar of earth from the mage also struck, but it simply exploded into shards of rock, not leaving a single knick on the barrier.

Despite being knocked away, the warrior with the sword had rapidly recovered, and pure energy exploded from his body as he jumped and cleaved the sword downwards onto the barrier of the King. Once more, the Unique Lifeform didn't even budge. The warrior's eyes opened wide as the Fallen King spread out his arms, and two golden hammers formed.

“A melee battle it shall be.”

It wasn't a battle. Jake and the Sword Saint proceeded to watch the Fallen King manhandle the three of the remaining members, and less than a minute later, they all teleported out as Jake heard the chatter from all around.

“Truly a Unique Lifeform... is that barrier even breakable by a C-grade around his own level?” someone questioned out loud.

“Those five were all considered pretty damn good; they won four party battles just yesterday,” another chimed in.

“We are looking at the pinnacle. Comparing that monster to a bunch of humans just isn't fair,” a dragonkin shook his head.

The Sword Saint raised an eyebrow before throwing Jake a glance. “Would you mind if I go retrieve the King as you find Sylphie and Dina?”

“Sure thing,” Jake said. He felt Sylphie through their Union Oath and knew she was halfway across the filled stands. He began to make his way over, trying to not bump into anyone, as he watched the arena below.

“Another glorious victory by the Fallen King!” an announcer of sorts spoke. **“Are there any more challengers, or will the Unique Lifeform remain undefeated? Unchallenged? Remember, full parties are allowed!”**

Jake heard a bunch of comments from people about how no one wanted to go embarrass themselves before the announcer spoke again.

“Ah, we have a challenger! An individual, no less!”

“Arrogant idiot,” someone muttered as Jake walked by, making Jake shake his head.

On the platform below, the Sword Saint appeared, standing opposite the Fallen King.

“Let the battle begin!”

As everyone seemed to expect the King to blast the weak-looking old man away the moment the announcer declared the match had begun, the Unique Lifeform instead spoke. *“Ah, you are done dealing with the invader?”*

“Yes, I came to fetch you,” the old man smiled.

“Very well,” the Fallen King nodded. *“However, it would be a waste to give up a chance like this. I know of the power wielded by the others, but please, humor me. Let me feel the blade of the human who dares call himself the Sword Saint.”*

The Sword Saint smiled as he drew his sword. Instantly the atmosphere in the arena below changed, and Jake felt a collective gasp from the many D and even C-grade onlookers from all around him. Even a few above C-grade suddenly showed quite an interest.

Jake heard comments about how not a single person had managed to pierce the barrier of the Fallen King yet... how not a single person had managed to make him even move. Which was why what came next was surprising to everyone.

Below, the swordsman disappeared. He next appeared right in front of the Fallen King, as the Unique Lifeform once more allowed his opponent to strike. Jake saw the Sword Saint faintly smile as he grabbed the sword with both hands and stabbed forward. As his blade moved, Jake saw countless droplets form in a line in front of it, and everything seemed to shift.

Time magic? With droplets?

The Sword Saint's thrust made the entire arena shake, and the barrier reacted like it had been hit by thousands of small attacks every millisecond. It vibrated before hairline cracks formed, and it finally shattered into a million wisps of golden energy. The King responded as he moved his ivory claw, and as it was clad in gold, he blocked the sword.

Despite his efforts, the strike sent the Fallen King sliding back for a dozen meters before he stabilized himself. The Unique Lifeform looked at the palm of his hand and saw the faint nick in the otherwise pristine ivory claw.

"Indeed, another monster along with the hunter," the Fallen King said in a satisfied tone. He then spoke loudly. *"The battle ends here; I see no value in wasting resources and risking injury on either myself or my party member."*

"The Sword Saint nodded, and a moment later, both were teleported out of the arena to quite the fanfare as numerous people discussed the bizarre situation. Jake just smirked and shook his head as he finally found Dina and Sylphie, who seemed to get along quite well. Dina had even made a branch grow out of one of the benches on the stands for Sylphie to perch on.

Jake greeted them and promptly had a bird on his shoulder a second later. Dina also stood up and nodded at him. After that, it didn't take long to group up with the Fallen King and the Sword Saint, even if it was a bit annoying that they were surrounded by what Jake could only categorize as fans. A lot of them questioned who else was in their party, and one guy even offered to pay if they would assist him.

However, when they saw Jake and the others walk over, they all backed off. Jake released his aura and flared his Blessing, and quickly, everyone knew the two were with Jake and his party. The Sword Saint thanked the people around him, as the King disregarded them all as both followed him out of the arena.

Their group of five quickly made their way through Nevermore City, not getting caught up in anything more that was happening. There were markets, factions trying to recruit with stalls, and of course, the many arenas. Not to mention other things regularly found in cities, like gambling houses, hotels, brothels, and a slew of entertainment options. Recruitment agencies were also a big thing, but luckily they left Jake and the others alone. In fact, no one bothered them as they did a few teleports to get closer to the entrance of Nevermore.

The last teleport took them about ten kilometers from the edge. For ten kilometers or so, all around the pit, not a single building existed. Only black obsidian stone marred the ground, and without further ado, their party of five made the trip.

In the speed department, it wasn't that surprising to see Dina be the slowest, but she was still plenty fast. The King was second-slowest, with the Sword Saint third, putting Jake and Sylphie at the front. Considering the ten-kilometer distance, it didn't take them long, but Sylphie still bragged at being first.

As one, they all stopped a few meters from the large pit.

They found themselves standing at the edge of an endless cliff that seemed to stretch infinitely out to both sides. Considering the sheer size of Nevermore and the ring around the pit, it didn't look circular at all, not even with Jake's high Perception. The curvature was simply not significant enough for a C-grade to even notice.

As they stood before the pit, the voice of Villy descended.

"Good luck in there, mate. Nevermore will be the first true challenge where you compete with not only your own universe but the multiverse as a whole. Every faction, every individual talent. Prove to them that you are worthy of sitting atop the food chain and exist firmly at the peak of your weight class. Prove to them you are the monster I believe you to be. Ah, but more than anything... have fun and enjoy yourself!"

Jake smiled to himself and sent a mental affirmation to Villy. *"Thanks, mate. Just focus on your own matters, alright? I got the mortal stuff handled."*

Villy seemed amused at his concern but still acknowledged Jake's words.

After they had all been standing there for a few seconds, someone finally spoke.

"I take it we are meant to jump in together?" the Sword Saint asked, also staring down.

"Seems to work that way," Jake shrugged.

"I do wonder who the first was to discover this. A brave soul indeed, choosing to leap into an endless abyss," the old man nodded as he spoke in a respectful tone.

"Or a complete moron," Jake grinned.

"Entirely possible," the Sword Saint chuckled as he shook his head.

Jake just smiled and looked at the others behind him. "You all ready?"

He got confirmations all around as Jake turned to look down the pit.

"Then let's fucking go."

Jake stepped over the edge without hesitation, and within a second, four more figures followed him as they fell into nothingness. The last thing he heard before he subtly felt the world fade away was a final whisper from the Viper.

"Happy hunting."

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

Chapter 657: Nevermore: First Floor

Jake didn't know how long they were falling. It felt like minutes, yet also hours. No notification ever popped up, and no prompt asked them to enter. They did not have to register or do anything to confirm they were a party, as the system handled all that. All they had to do was enter together and fall together.

Then, suddenly, Jake felt solid ground beneath his feet, and his sphere spread out to reveal the world around him. He also opened his eyes and was nearly blinded by the bright sunlight beaming down on him from above.

He and the others found themselves standing on a large rock in the middle of a giant desert-like landscape. Sand stretched infinitely no matter where one looked, and the wind was utterly still. Jake did not see a single living being anywhere either.

"So, this is Nevermore," the Sword Saint spoke.

"It's-"

Jake was about to say something when he was cut off by a notification.

You have entered Nevermore.

Welcome to the first floor of the C-grade portion of Nevermore: the Sunlight Dunes. In order to progress to the next floor, the main objective of this floor must be completed, and the entrance to the next floor must be entered together with all surviving party members.

Completing events, achievements, and objectives rewards points that count towards the leaderboards and final rewards.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of the Dunes.

Bonus objectives: Gather at least 1000 Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes to open the Lord's Treasury.

Current progress: Lord of the Dunes (0/1), Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (0/1000)

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

Godspeed, Chosen of Vilastromoz; I look forward to your performance. Do not expect any assistance.

Current Nevermore Points: 0

Jake read the notification and smirked a bit at it getting personal towards the end. While this was indeed a mega-dungeon and a World Wonder, it was also the domain of the Wyrmgod. Even now, Jake felt an odd presence observing him. It felt different than when Villy looked and more like it was passive in nature. Rather than an individual looking, it was more like a trained AI kept an eye on things.

“Lord of the Dunes, huh? And a thousand of these Sunlight Fragments?” the Sword Saint once more commented.

“Ree,” Sylphie complained loudly.

“The wind is oddly silent, huh?” Jake commented. The lack of wind affinity energy in the air was an issue for Sylphie for sure, and when he looked at the Sword Saint, the old man simply nodded.

“I do feel this environment is less than beneficial than it could be,” he said. “However, it is not truly an obstacle. Besides, this is not one of the difficult floors, now is it?”

He then turned to Dina, who looked to be in thought. “How about you, Dina?”

“There aren’t that many here,” she said in a sad tone. “This land is... dead.”

Not good for her either, huh? Jake thought. He suspected she was talking about plants, so the environment was also bad for her.

“I am unbothered,” the Fallen King said. *“How about you, hunter?”*

“All good here,” Jake smiled. “Now, let’s not delay and get going right away.”

The environment was maybe shit, but they still had one thing going for them. Jake smiled as he closed his eyes and released a Pulse of Perception. *Seven.*

Instantly, he spotted seven identical shard-like items hidden in the sand, all about ten to a hundred meters down in the sand.

“Two sec,” Jake said as he quickly teleported over to the closest one and, with a blast of mana, blew up the sand and sent the shard flying into the air. With a string, he quickly caught the orange crystal, and the moment he did, it disappeared.

Current progress: Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (1/1000)

Jake grinned even more as he quickly made his way back to the others. "Aight, the shards appear hidden beneath the sand and are pretty much indestructible. Should be easy enough."

Once more, his Perception build proved supreme.

"Was the shard that orange thing?" Dina asked curiously.

"Yep," Jake smiled, happy she was even talking to him. Progress!

Dina nodded. "Okay."

She then took out a small pouch that she could somehow put her entire hand into. Then, she pulled out a handful of seeds and threw them onto the sand below. The moment they landed, she sent out a green blast of energy that soaked the hundreds of seeds she had just thrown out.

Within seconds, each seed grew as a stalk first appeared, then a flower at the head, and a wellspring of vines popped out everywhere. This happened to every single one, as soon there were several hundred. Jake curiously used Identify on one of them, not expecting it to work, and was surprised when it did.

[Vine Seed Soldier – lvl 194]

He saw it had a level, but he also felt like it was summoned and not a "true" creature. Closer to an ectognamorph drone than a truly living being.

"Go find the Sunlight Fragments," Dina talked to the many Vine Seed Soldiers. Without any indication they even understood her, the many plants began wandering off into the large dune.

"Sure that will work?" Jake asked.

"They know what to do," Dina said with confidence.

"Alright then," Jake nodded, seeing no reason to question her. He did wonder how they would bring the shards, but he had no idea how long they would spend there, so it wasn't a problem.

"Stop dallying, and let's get this area cleared out already and move on to the next floor rather quickly," the Fallen King said.

"I would lean towards agreeing. Attempting to fully complete this floor would be a waste when all subsequent floors give more points," the Sword Saint also voiced his thoughts.

“Fair enough. Let’s get this show on the road, then. First, we need to find the end boss, and I do still think we need to collect these thousand fragments, so finding this Lord’s Treasury is also a priority. That sounds good?” Jake asked the group.

He got three nods and a ree in confirmation. “Great. Aight, Fallen King, do your thing.”

The Fallen King nodded as he held out his ivory claw. Four golden orbs condensed and took on a solid, physical form before flying out to each of them. Once they touched the orb, they simply allowed it to be absorbed into their bodies as small golden tattoo-like drawings appeared for a moment before quickly fading.

“Testing, testing. We good?” Jake reached out.

“Loud and clear,” the Sword Saint said in a rather joking tone.

A major issue many parties faced on Nevermore was communication over vast distances. Jake had initially just wanted to bring in some walkie-talkies made by Arnold but came to learn that items like that were either not allowed or significantly weakened within the mega-dungeon. The same was true for many other supporting items, formation discs, and pretty much anything that one didn’t create themselves. Well, themselves, or someone in the party.

Luckily for them, the King was capable of condensing these golden orbs people could infuse into themselves and then communicate over pretty much unlimited distances due to soul magic stuff. This was one of the kingly abilities the King had, and as the Unique Lifeform explained, the skill was originally made to keep in contact with his servants, and each orb could also be used to track through. The entire thing functioned by using the King as the focal point of their telepathy which did have the slight drawback of everyone hearing everything anyone said through the orb unless the King purposefully blocked it. A small drawback, all things considered, as many other groups simply relied on something akin to signal flares by shooting magic into the air.

Oh, and on the topic of them being lucky... one thing many groups needed more than a proper method of communication in dungeons was consumables. More specifically, they needed that good shit Jake chugged down with reckless abandon without a care in the world: potions.

That’s right, even potions were restricted within Nevermore if they weren’t created by one of the individuals in the party. Their effect would be “capped” to be far worse and below that of what an average alchemist could make at their levels. All this was naturally an attempt by the system and the Wyrmgod to introduce some level of fairness for those who weren’t swimming in wealth or had huge backings. It was naturally impossible to truly curb all advantages people with deep pockets and solid backings would have, but at least it was an attempt.

With communication established, Jake did one of the jobs he had been assigned: scouting. Jumping, Jake took to the air as Sylphie threw a gust of green wind his way, propelling him up faster than he could possibly fly on his own. The others spread out in the immediate area where Jake had pointed out seeing Sunflight Fragmented with his sphere. As he took off, he also saw Dina take out more seeds to bolster her army of vine soldiers.

Jake kept flying upwards and felt the oppressive sun bear down on him more and more strongly the further up he went. As far as Jake could tell, it wasn't even a false sun either, like what he had encountered in so many other dungeons sub-dimensions. No, this was a true star.

A true star that served as a limiter on how far people were allowed to fly up. Jake felt his skin begin to hurt a bit from the sheer heat, and he identified some other concept mixed into the rays. Scoffing, he covered his body in scales as the pressure instantly disappeared.

He kept going for several more minutes, but soon he had to stop. Using his stable arcane mana, he condensed a parasol to cover himself as he turned to look down at the desert below.

"We're on a small planet," Jake told the others through the soul walkie-talkie. *"Got a diameter of around nine to ten thousand kilometers based on my estimates. Can't spot any boss quite yet, but there are quite a few elementals spread throughout."*

"Go look for the Lord and this hidden treasury?" the Sword Saint sent.

"That's the plan," Jake smirked. He scanned the planet beneath him one more time before he began flying. Down below, the others got to work collecting fragments, with Dina covering a huge area with summoned vine soldiers while Sylphie kicked up tornadoes to send anything and everything hiding under the sand flying up into the air. The King and Sword Saint were not particularly helpful in this part but instead made sure no elementals or other creatures bothered anymore.

Not like that job was hard... Jake had not seen a single creature above level 205.

After flying for an hour while scouting the ground below, he finally noticed the environment truly begin to change in the distance. It wasn't that it was no longer a desert but because a huge shadow stretched across the horizon.

Jake had moved to the other side of the planet. Seeing as the shadow seemed to get closer faster than he flew, he had also correctly flown counter to the planet's rotation. The sunlight energy had slowly been weakening for a while now, and looking ahead, he felt a different kind of energy. Squinting his eyes, he spotted something interesting. THIS

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Ice elementals.

The energy he felt was dense ice affinity mana that dominated the other side of the planet. Jake informed his party as he kept flying into the darkness, and soon after, it was as if he had passed some threshold. The warmth of the sun was gone, and rime began to form on his body and even his parasol. Seeing no need for it anymore, Jake dispelled the magical construct and picked up his pace even more.

Cold energy began to condense in the air in front of him, and finally, Jake faced his first enemy. A floating ghost-like creature slithered towards him in the sky, and Jake quickly Identified it.

[Ice Wraith – lvl 202]

He didn't even bother stopping as he simply summoned two spears of destructive arcane mana and blew it up. The creature's form was dispersed, but it managed to reform itself behind him. Luckily for it, Jake was long gone, and he had no interest in finishing it off.

The cold intensified, but Jake easily handled it. He did begin flying a bit closer to the ground as the constant drain on his resources to fight off the unfriendly environment was an annoyance, but he still had an easy time spotting anything of note on the planet below.

Jake noticed that more creatures gathered towards the north pole, and Sylphie also confirmed this was the case as she was scouting south. This made him question if this was also where this Lord of the Dunes was. However, not long after, this theory was dispelled as he saw something on the horizon. A large mountain of some kind of limestone-looking rock appeared, the entire thing covered in dense ice. At the peak of this mountain, on its spire-like tip, was a large six-legged chameleon-looking creature. Its entire body had a blueish hue, and Jake quickly Identified it.

[Lord of the Dunes – lvl 205]

"Boss spotted on the dark side of the planet. How about you guys?" Jake quickly reached out to the others.

What he got in return was a mix of images from Sylphie. It seemed that while he had flown around the planet, she had reached the southern pole and found a huge mountain, far larger than the one Jake was at. Inside the mountain, she had then found a ritual circle requiring a thousand fragments. Likely the treasury.

As for fragments...

Current progress: Sunlight Fragments of the Dunes (654/1000)

It turned out that having an army of vine soldiers scouting was pretty damn overpowered.

“Can you slay the Lord of the Dunes on your lonesome?” the Fallen King asked Jake. *“Travelling to you would be a wasted effort.”*

Jake just grinned. *“I’ll be done in a jiffy.”*

Still flying far up in the air, Jake pulled out his bow and took out a well-poisoned arrow from his quiver. He nocked it and activated Arcane Awakening at the stable 30% as he began charging his Arcane Powershot. Below, the creature seemed to be in some kind of hibernation with its eyes closed, and it didn’t react before it was too late.

An arrow tore through the sky as it descended upon the unsuspecting dungeon boss. The chameleon was slammed right in the head, its eyes opening in a panic as it was blasted off the mountain. While still in mid-air, it was struck by a barrage of arrows, sending it tumbling toward the ground.

It hit the frozen sand and sent it flying everywhere, but it didn’t even have time to stabilize as even more arrows stuck it, slamming it deeper into the sand. The boss let out a loud screech as ice magic condensed around it, and hundreds of ice elementals rose from the sand all around it, but its opponent was simply too far away. The chameleon struggled and tried to defend itself, but every barrier was broken, and every attempt to dodge stopped.

Jake had to admit it took longer than expected, but the takedown never even turned into a fight.

****You have slain [Lord of the Dunes – lvl 205] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Dunes before it ever sees the sunlight. 3 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Dunes within 24 hours of entering the first floor. 1 Nevermore Point gained.

Jake saw the notifications come in, and he also quickly got a ping from the others.

“I see you are done on your end,” the Fallen King sent him.

“I take it you all got the achievements too?”

“Yes,” the Sword Saint came in and confirmed. *“We are all moving towards the south pole as we gather the rest of the fragments. Can you check out the northern one?”*

“Sure thing,” Jake answered.

It seemed like everything was going smoothly. Jake flew down and quickly stored the corpse of the large boss monster while also checking if it dropped anything. The answer to that was a big no, so he took to the air once more and flew towards the northern pole. On the way, he also checked a new part of his interface.

Nevermore Points: 4

Four points. Yay. Jake did find the name of Nevermore Points a bit lame, but hey, it was descriptive and easy to remember, so who really cares?

His flight towards the north was uneventful, but once he got closer, he did spot something interesting. Not unlike what Sylphie had shown him and the Lord of the Dunes had been sitting on, a large mountain appeared, and Jake flew closer to investigate. On this one, he also found a large cave to enter. Just as he walked into the cave, he got another round of notifications.

Bonus Objective Completed: Unlock the Lord’s Treasury. 5 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Unlock the Lord’s Treasury within 12 hours of entering the first floor. 2 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake saw the notification appear as he netted himself another seven points, bringing him to 11 total.

“Anything good in there,” Jake sent to the others.

“I do not find myself impressed,” the Fallen King answered. *“Nevertheless, we shall bring what is here. Now, all we need is to find our way to the next floor.”*

“See, funny you should mention that,” Jake grinned, having made his way into the mountain’s depths.

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

Chapter 658: Nevermore: The Dina Show

Just after Jake was contacted and told his teammates were done, he just happened to find himself standing in front of a large gateway that he didn’t doubt led to the next floor.

One thing did confuse him a bit, though. There was also another smaller teleportation circle of some kind near the wall of the cavern, but it was slightly damaged.

"Pretty sure I found it, but there is also this other teleportation circle. It looks like a short-range one, though," Jake sent through the link to the others and even included a mental image.

"Peculiar," the Sword Saint answered and sent the mental image of an identical magic circle down at the south pole. This one wasn't broken, though. *"Is yours operational?"*

"Nope, is yours?"

"Appears to be, but with yours broken... we shall begin making our way north now," the Sword Saint sent.

"Eh, gimme a minute," Jake said as he looked at the magic circle a bit. He tilted his head and went closer. Touching the circle, he closed his eyes and studied it for a minute or so while comparing it to the one at the southern pole.

"Pretty low-level one, huh," Jake muttered as he infused his energy. Analyzing it and finding the flaws had been easy enough, and soon enough, the broken lines were restored as the entire magic circle hummed to life.

"Ours just seemed to activate. Did you do something?" the Sword Saint asked, surprised.

"What can I say? I know a bit about formations," Jake grinned.

A minute later, the party of five all appeared in the cave on the north pole. The second the last person was there, the large archway that served as a gate activated as a portal appeared.

First floor completed. 10 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the first floor before the light of the sun could have ever reached the Lord of the Dunes. 5 Nevermore Points earned.

Nevermore Points: 26

"That's one floor down," Jake smiled as he turned to the others. "Anyway, what did you get from that treasury?"

The Sword Saint proceeded to take out two rare items, and a bunch of stuff clearly meant to help battle the Floor Boss and the environment, such as crystals that gave resistance to the sunlight and what looked like a grenade. These items would disappear upon entering the next floor, so, honestly, the only reason to even do the bonus objective was for the points.

Without further ado, the five of them entered the portal to the next floor. Upon entering it, the party found themselves in a large square room about fifteen meters on each side with a gateway in front of them, one behind them, and one off to the side. The walls were of dark gray stone, and Jake's sphere informed him that there was nothing outside of them but the empty void of nothingness.

Jake instantly understood what this room was. The gate in front of them had a sign saying "second floor," while the gateway off to the side was an exit. Mind you, if one exited Nevermore before one reached a city, then they would have to go through the first floor once more to progress. And not "go through" as in do the boss again and whatnot, but literally travel through the already completed dungeon, making it just a waste of time.

Anyway, In the middle of this new gray in-between-floors room was a small platform with a lockbox on it. The loot from the first floor.

"I must say, it is a bit underwhelming," the Sword Saint said as he looked at the lockbox. "Though we must consider this is simply the first floor, and it only took us a few hours to clear it all."

"True, true," Jake said as he walked over and unceremoniously opened the lockbox. Within was a rare rarity sword, and Jake could only look teasingly as he went over and handed it to the Sword Saint in an overly formal way, even going down on one knee as he held it up. "For you, our resident swordsman. It is only proper you receive this bounty. I hope there are no complaints?"

"Will... will he use it?" Dina questioned, looking confused.

"No, no, he won't," Jake grinned as he stood up.

"Then... why?"

"Exactly," Jake nodded. "Let's move on to the next floor?"

Dina was still confused as they all moved through the gateway leading onwards.

Walking through the gate was like stepping into an entirely new world. Probably because they did step into an entirely new world. Jake's sphere spread out, and he saw a familiar-looking environment filled with greenery and trees as far as the eye could see. At least in front of them. Behind was an endless wasteland of nothingness.

They had appeared on top of a large cliff overlooking a valley filled with trees, the entire place utterly massive, stretching thousands of kilometers. When the others came through the gateway, they also just appeared standing beside him with no actual gate to come out of, making it clear there was no way back. The only way to proceed was to clear the floor... or wait for the full fifty years and get thrown out.

Welcome to the second floor of Nevermore: The Evergreen Valley.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of the Valley

Bonus objectives: Find 10 Illusory Lotuses hidden throughout the forest.

Current progress: Lord of the Valley (0/1), Illusory Lotuses (0/10)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 26

Jake read the message and nodded. Only ten lotuses this time, but going by their description, these lotuses would be a bit harder to find than the Sunlight Fragments, as their name indicated an ability to create illusions to hide. The Lord of the Valley was pretty straightforward, though he was a bit disappointed at the name of the boss.

Maybe these first few floors are just low-effort by the Wyrmgod as most good parties just rush through, Jake considered.

"This seems nicer than the desert," the Sword Saint smiled, looking down at the valley.

"Definitely," Jake nodded as he looked at the King. "Sad this floor isn't called the Evergreen Forest. Then we could have had a Floor Boss called the Lord of the Forest."

"Your humor is far from as funny as you believe it to be," the Fallen King answered.

"Now that is just mean," Jake commented.

"The joke is only made worse by requiring inside knowledge only you and I are aware of, as no one else here has known me as anything other than the Fallen King," the Unique Lifeform didn't let up.

"I get it, I get it," Jake said defensively. "Geez. Anyway, let's just use the same tactic as last time. Find the ten lotuses, find and kill the end boss, and move on to the next floor. I can handle finding the lotuses while you all search for the boss. Sounds like a plan?"

"The boss is over there," Dina pointed northeast into the nearly endless forest spanning before them. Jake was about to question as she looked down at all the trees and spoke again. "And... oh, okay. Okay. That would be nice, thank you."

Dina looked like she was talking to herself as suddenly, the forest before them rumbled. Large vines extended upwards all throughout the valley, creating lines of giant pillars spanning into the horizon. Then, Jake saw the vines begin moving, and a few kilometers away, he saw an entire patch of land around five meters across being carried by vines

by handing the patch off to one another. Within a few minutes, the patch was dumped on the ground just beneath them in the valley, and looking down, Jake saw the small landmass had an odd rock on it. After squinting his eyes, the illusion fell away, revealing a lotus.

“Did... did you just?” Jake asked Dina.

The dryad seemed confused and tilted her head. “I just asked if the trees wanted to help, and they agreed. They were very nice and even offered to bring the lotuses to us, so we didn’t have to go through the forest and potentially ruin anything. Oh, and they asked if we could kill the Lord of the Valley as it isn’t very nice to the trees and is hurting the natural balance.”

Jake slowly nodded as he stared at tens of thousands of vines extending endlessly into the valley to slowly carry lotuses toward them. This was... kind of overpowered, wasn’t it? Like, pure cheese of an entire floor. Would the Wyrmgod penalize them for shit like this?

“Good job, Dina,” the Sword Saint smiled and gave the dryad a proud nod.

“Quite a display of power indeed. Is it your Bloodline that allows this?” the Fallen King questioned.

“Ye... yeah, I just asked... so...” Dina said, looking shy. Her green skin turned a slightly darker shade of green – the dryad way of blushing – which did make Jake wonder what color the blood of dryads was. It wasn’t important, but he was a bit curious. Anyway.

“Definitely does make life easier,” Jake smiled and gave her a thumbs up. Even Sylphie gave a happy screech.

“Did the forest also tell you where the exit is?” the Sword Saint asked.

Dina nodded and pointed in the same direction as the Floor Boss.

“So we will pass the boss if we go for the exit?” Jake asked.

“It moves around... but if we hurry, yeah,” Dina explained.

“Then let’s get a move on,” Jake said. “Can you handle collecting the lotuses on the way somehow?”

While they had been brought one lotus, then it wasn’t like the many vines were fast. They were pretty damn slow, actually, so it would likely take them a few hours at least to bring all the lotuses to their group, and while waiting for them at the entrance to the floor would be faster than searching themselves, it would be faster to just get them along the way.

“Oh, okay,” Dina nodded as she looked out at the forest. Jake didn’t feel the movements of any energy or any indication whatsoever she was doing anything, yet a few seconds later, she nodded.

“Okay, they will help.”

Jake smiled. “Then let’s go.”

What followed was something Jake could only call cheating. Along their way to the boss monster, they encountered upheld patches of land with lotuses on them, and by the time they reached the boss, they had six of the ten. Killing the boss took them less than thirty seconds as the five of them descended on the poor level 208 beaver-like monster that was just trying to enjoy a good meal by eating one of the trees.

The fight started with roots shooting up from the ground and entrapping the beast. Then, pure pressure from the King kept it utterly unmoving as Jake released a barrage of Powershots, with Sylphie and the Sword Saint cutting it apart with wind and water blades, respectively. It never even had a chance to fight, and the only reason it stayed alive as long as it did was due to its high health pool. On that note, after encountering it for the second time, Jake was pretty sure these Floor Bosses had artificially inflated health pools. Not that it mattered in a case like this.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Valley before it manages to return to its lair. 5 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Slay the Lord of the Valley within 12 hours of entering the second floor. 2 Nevermore Points gained.

After the boss was dead, it was just a relaxed flight to the end of the second floor while collecting “hidden” lotuses on a silver platter along the way. As mentioned... it was pretty much cheating.

The second floor exit had also been meant to be a challenge to find as it was a hidden pit in the ground covered by vines when they first got there, but a slight nudge from Dina made them move out of the way. Right in front of this pit, they also found the final lotus.

Bonus Objective Completed: Collect 10 Illusory Lotuses. 10 Nevermore Points earned. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT *novel•fire•net*

Achievement earned: Collect 10 illusionary Lotuses without using any of the provided tools to assist in their discovery. 4 Nevermore Points gained.

Seeing that there were tools to help find the lotuses nearly made Jake choke at how unfair Dina’s ability was. He did have to admit that their illusion was quite good, forcing him to squint a bit to see through it. While that didn’t seem like a lot, one had to

remember that Jake had more Perception than pretty much any other C-grade at his level in existence. Because he was smart and knew what the best stat was, of course.

“Dina,” Jake said as they had just jumped into the pit and walked through the small tunnel leading to another gateway. “You are awesome, you know that, right?”

The dryad blushed again. “I... I just did what I should...”

“If that is only what you feel like you should do, then you should definitely keep being awesome,” Jake grinned, happy with Nature’s Attendant for introducing her to the group. Just that brief interaction with the boss monster also made Jake aware she was no slouch when it came to combat. Her support capabilities were still unknown, but if anything she had shown so far was an indication of her skills in that department, they were indeed in for a fantastic time.

The Sword Saint also praised Dina, making her even shyer than before. No one really had a chance to show off any of their skills on this floor, and in the end, the entire thing ended up only taking them a bit over an hour and a half. Most of their time was spent flying at a semi-leisurely pace as they still had to wait for a few places for the vines to bring a lotus. The floor was quite a bit smaller than the first one but was far more densely packed. Even then, they only explored a few percentages of the forest as the trees did all the work.

When it came to the setting of the floor, Jake learned that a war of sorts had been going on between the forest and invading beaver-like monsters that were pretty much just all smaller variants of the Lord of the Valley. Their group of five had not gotten involved in any of this fighting but had just beelined for the boss and gotten their lotuses. It wasn’t like the wanton slaughter of the beavers would help any of them, and the trees were nice and helpful, so there was no way they would fight them either. The trees even told Dina to avoid killing anything besides the boss, so they saw no reason not to follow that advice.

Anyway, after only a bit of walking, they reached the exit of the floor.

“Ree,” Sylphie said as they reached the gateway properly.

“Yep, a lot easier and faster than the first floor,” Jake smiled. In the room with the gateway, they also found a small pond with a sealed treasure chest in the middle and ten small rock formations with holes in the middle, each perfect to fit a lotus into. After placing all the lotuses, they opened the lockbox and got an epic rarity lotus crown that they decided to just give Dina. No one else needed it, and she had done everything on this floor, so it was only fair.

Without any reason to stay longer, their overpowered party moved through the gateway and completed their second floor within the day.

Second floor completed. 20 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the second floor within 12 hours while collecting all ten lotuses. 8 Nevermore Points gained.

Achievement earned: Traverse the Evergreen Valley and complete the second floor while collecting all ten lotuses without killing any other living creatures than the Lord of the Valley. 15 Nevermore Points gained.

Nevermore Points: 90

The points just kept rolling in. Jake wondered if the points would keep doubling, considering they got 20 for just doing the floor, but he had a feeling they wouldn't. Exponential growth like that tended not to end super well. Oh well, he would find out once they did the third floor.

Leaving the local wildlife and ecosystem alone also proved to be a good idea, as it netted them an extra 15 Nevermore Points. Taking the advice of trees was definitely a lesson to remember.

As for loot... well, it was shit again. Two pieces of rare equipment they once more just gave to Dina.

Let's hope the third floor is fun, Jake thought to himself as their party continued.

Spoiler alert: it wouldn't be fun.

It was the exact opposite.

A fucking water level.

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Chapter 659: Nevermore: The Worst Floor

The Wyrmgod of Nevermore. One of twelve Primordials, and a being often viewed as the greatest of all the dragons. The Draconian Accords had been overseen by the Wyrmgod, and all dragons in existence viewed him as the most powerful. While the Malefic Viper was also a dragon before godhood, simply by his chosen name, it was clear he identified as a snake more than a dragon. Hence why the Wyrmgod got the title.

When the Wyrmgod managed to directly work with the system and create the World Wonder known as Nevermore – the most famous in all of the multiverse – the skill of this Primordial only became more widespread. Not only was he the most powerful dragon, but also the apex of all dungeon masters.

No one could discount the achievements of the Wyrmgod. However, on this fateful day, Jake did feel like he could question the title of apex dungeon master. Or, perhaps, even the greatest of dungeon masters fell victim to the folly of trying to do the impossible:

Make a fun water level.

And a folly it was. Because the third floor was complete shit compared to the two before it. Their group of five found themselves appearing on the dry ground within a cave, but soon it became clear it was but a temporary refuge.

The only way out of this cavern was diving into a large pool of water extending into a vast ocean. As they all appeared in the cavern, the system also popped up with the message for this floor.

Welcome to the third floor of Nevermore: Deep Coral Ocean

Main objective: Defeat Coral Ocean Lord

Bonus objectives: Collect at least 500 Deepsea Pearls to open the Ancient Clam.

Current progress: Coral Ocean Lord (0/1), Deepsea Pearls (0/500)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 90

Jake hated the place from the very moment they appeared there, and the description of the place sure didn't help. Defeat a boss? Sure, but collect five hundred fucking pearls? That sounded like suffering. To make matters worse, his one hope was dispelled when he looked at the Sword Saint shortly after they all realized what they were dealing with.

"I delve into the concept of rain, not water as a whole. While my understanding does assist me, I too find myself heavily impeded while underwater," the old man shook his head. Jake then looked to the King with hope.

"Water is an obstacle, but it is manageable. It weakens all but my soul magic, and while my force magic still has significant potency, I have to fight the environment itself," the Fallen King also said.

Dina?

“Water plants... are rare,” Dina said, sounding a bit sad. “I don’t hear anyone nearby here either. I can do okay in water, though. Grandpa made sure I was prepared.”

So, at least they had one combatant. Their support. Jake looked at Sylphie, who he estimated to be the weakest of their group. As a bird using the wind affinity primarily, she would naturally be unable to fly while in water and would have to solely rely on her magic. Her speed would also be reduced, her maneuverability nil... Jake honestly considered if it was best for her to just take up the role of ranged fighter for this floor.

“Sylphie, want me to help carry you?” Jake asked.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked as she tilted her small head in confusion.

“The water,” Jake pointed as he had a realization. Actually... had Sylphie ever really encountered deep water? The thought struck Jake, and he was about to explain what Sylphie would face and even mention she would probably need to acclimate herself to the pressure as she screeched again.

“Ree, ree.”

“No, you can’t fly in the water,” Jake shook his head. “There is no wind there. The pressure and density of the water will also make it so every action is harder. You can’t even properly flap your wings.”

“Ree.”

“I said you can’t.”

“Ree.”

“It doesn’t work like that!”

“Ree.”

“Yes, we can bet on it!”

“Ree.”

Jake had mixed feelings about what happened next. They had all rushed into the water at Jake’s ushering, with Sylphie being the last one to enter. He goaded the bird to please go ahead and show him how she could “totally just fly in water like normal,” and he already had his “I told you so” ready on his lips when the bird dove into the water.

And... yeah.

“I have difficulty comprehending how that works,” the Fallen King asked.

"She is indeed a peculiar creature," the Sword Saint echoed through telepathy.

"Yeah..." Dina even agreed.

Jake was floating there, surrounded by water and passively fighting off the pressure with the four others, while the hawk was just zooming around them, flying as if she was in the air like normal. She wasn't even slower than before. Straining himself, Jake tried to see what Sylphie was doing, but no matter what he did, it just looked like Sylphie was flying like normal. As if the pressure just didn't really matter.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, not even using telepathy.

"That makes even less sense!" Jake complained. You couldn't fucking talk underwater.

"Ree."

"I... I give up. You win," Jake surrendered, and Sylphie happily flew over to him and perched on his shoulder as he was swimming just outside the small alcove leading into the vast ocean.

Perhaps he had been foolish to believe Sylphie cared about things such as logic, and he was now paying for his mistake by owing Sylphie "all the scratchies," with the hawk cashing in right away by forcing Jake to rub her stomach.

Either way... Sylphie's unexpected prowess proved to be incredibly valuable. They all agreed on not wasting more time than necessary in the damn water level and to just find the boss and the exit as fast as possible. Because of Sylphie, they could explore things a lot easier, and Dina could also summon some aquatic plants to help scout, but she could make far fewer plant summons than above ground. Even if she could have made more, they encountered one more issue.

While the prior floors had been relatively absent of enemies, this one was filled to the brim. Sharks, squids, fish, coral monsters, elementals, giant floating crabs, and even a few undead creatures met them. While none were a challenge to Jake and the others, as they were all weak variants that didn't even reach level 210, they were more than strong enough to kill Dina's summons, making their ability to gather information limited. This meant they had to explore the ocean as a group, with Sylphie being the best scout by far, as she was several times faster than anyone else.

Besides water, there were also giant rock formations floating in the water in different areas, their buoyancy somehow allowing them to just float there without being attached to anything. Some of these were utterly huge and allowed their party to enter and even find dry land within, and it had even been within one of these giant floating rocks they had appeared on the floor. These became needed because compared to all prior floors... this one was not a speedrun.

Instead, it became a long and arduous journey of trying to explore an ocean that even Jake didn't have good visibility in. Finding their target was a huge challenge, and Jake sent out Pulses of Perception so often that he got a headache just in an attempt to find something – anything – of note. Sylphie also took the initiative to try and fly upwards to find the surface while the others tried traveling downwards to the sea floor, but after quite a while, they reached another slightly horrifying conclusion.

The “ocean” had no bottom and no surface but was just a huge bubble of water floating within a massive goddamn fishbowl. They did eventually find some kind of barrier that sealed in all the water, but their hope of discovering some clue as to the location of the final boss was shattered.

Their entire first day was spent just trying to figure out the environment and find clues to locate the final boss. They did find a few pearls, all of which were carried by flying clam monsters, but they had no expectations of collecting all five hundred.

Combat was still piss-easy even when they got ganged up on, meaning the only real challenge was figuring out where the hell to go. Ultimately, they decided to split up and explore different areas of the huge fish bowl while using the King's markers to stay in communication, with the King also keeping track of their locations and making sure they didn't have any overlap in the areas they covered.

This was how the first week of the dungeon passed by.

For some reason, the Wyrmgod decided that making the water floor larger than the two before was a great idea. Based on what the King said, the spherical ocean they were in had to be at least twenty thousand kilometers across, making it far larger than the entire planet on the first floor. Considering everyone besides Sylphie was far slower in this environment too... it was hell.

Two weeks into the water level, the Sword Saint had found the giant clam they were supposed to give the pearls for the bonus objective, not that it was any help. Meanwhile, Sylphie had located the gateway leading to the next floor, but before it would unlock, they had to find the final boss and kill it. Something none of them had managed to do yet.

Now, Jake liked to find positives wherever he could. While it was undeniable this floor was complete shit, and everyone hated it, it did force them all to take the time to properly adapt to an underwater environment. If one compared their speeds from the day they entered the ocean to now, they had all gotten significantly faster. Well, besides Sylphie, who was never bothered to begin with. Especially the Sword Saint had managed to leverage the concept of rain to propel himself forward and nearly merge with the water. The Fallen King used his force magic to far more aggressively move around while even shaping a barrier around him to make his entire form have better fluid dynamics.

Dina slightly morphed her own body to almost resemble some ocean plant and swam far faster than before while also simply adapting better to the pressure. Finally, we had Jake.

Jake had spent nearly all of this time not trying to learn how to swim faster but to adapt one skill: One Step, Thousand Miles. Space magic shouldn't care that much about being underwater or above ground, and the environment should at most lead to increased energy consumption. His primary issue with the skill wasn't actually the space magic part either, but the activation of the skill – the act of taking a step.

Without any solid ground in the water, taking a step seemed impossible. Even if Jake condensed stable arcane platforms to step on, it was still damn slow. It was unnatural. While the entire concept of One Step was rooted in the natural movement of taking a step, one simply couldn't walk underwater naturally. However, with so much time just having to explore a damn ocean without much else to do, Jake had time to properly explore the skill.

He considered dozens of ways to improve his useability of the skill. Condensing the water itself to harden it, trying to step on the water itself but just with a hard stomping motion to force himself forward, having constant platforms beneath his feet. He even had one crazy idea of making some spring-like system so whenever he forced his foot downwards, the springs would collapse and make a stable arcane platform hit the sole of his boots. All of these ideas ended up being shit, but the experience alone did allow him to realize some things.

It was all about making it natural. To not make it into some kind of forced movement that Jake would never make if it wasn't for the skill. That is how he had his breakthrough on the sixteenth day. He slowly moved away from the concept of stepping down normally but turned towards what he considered a "step" while in the water. If he didn't have a seafloor to walk on, how would he normally move around?

Well... Jake would swim. So, rather than try and force his movements to fit with the skill, Jake changed his perspective to make the skill fit his movements. He also began to break away from some other usual assumptions. Normally, a step would be taken from a horizontal position, but Jake had walked on several vertical surfaces and used the skill like that before, so why would that be an issue while in the water?

This was a true three-dimensional space, and while some odd kind of gravity allowed them to know what was up and down, it wasn't that impactful. With all his insights and realizations coming together, he finally managed to form a far more effective way of getting through the water.

Swimming forward, Jake naturally moved his legs up and down to propel himself, but rather than simply push against the water to get himself forward, he "stepped" on it as every stroke teleported him several hundred meters in the direction he was facing. Coupled with Unblemished Arrows, using his Wings of the Malefic Viper to swim even

faster, and his increased adaptation over time, Jake became far more potent in the water. He estimated he could still fight with nearly seventy-five percent effectiveness while in the water. He could also still do a normal “step” while in combat, but his new swimming-stepping was far faster moving around the vast ocean.

Sadly – or perhaps luckily – he didn’t need these new capabilities much as Jake did not do anything of note on this floor. New novel chapters are published on

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On the twenty-second day, Sylphie finally encountered the Floor Boss. Their group had been under the assumption that something called the Coral Ocean Lord was stationary as it was a coral, but they found that to be an entirely wrong assumption. The boss was instead a huge floating rock filled with corals that traveled around the ocean at an impressive speed. This was how they had somehow kept missing it despite feeling like they had explored everywhere.

The only way Sylphie found it was due to the whispers of the wind. While the wind was far more silent under the water, Sylphie eventually did manage to hear them. They began to tell her of the environment, and when the Fallen King found a rock formation filled with seaweed and had Dina come over to talk to them, they managed to narrow down the area the boss was in.

While everyone would have loved to let out some pent-up frustration by teaming up and tearing up the Floor Boss together, Sylphie did it alone as that was just faster. Meanwhile, the rest of the group made it toward the exit.

On the dawn of the twenty-third day, they finally all managed to get there as they promptly entered the gate and finished the god-awful water level.

Third floor completed. 30 Nevermore Points earned.

Nevermore Points: 120

Jake noted that the floor gave 30 Nevermore Points upon completion, which made him believe that each floor gave points based on what numbered floor they were, times ten. They also didn’t get a single achievement, yet no one cared. They were just happy to be done with the third floor.

Sitting in the small in-between room before the fourth floor, they were all regrouped for the first time in weeks and all relaxed as they reflected a bit on the third floor.

“Even if this particular experience was less than pleasant, I do believe it was a valuable one. If we find ourselves in a similar environment on a later floor, we are not entirely powerless, and I almost have a feeling the Wyrmgod placed a level such as this early on to prepare us,” the Sword Saint spoke words of wisdom.

“Doesn’t make water levels like this less shit,” Jake spoke even wiser words.

“While I do agree with that assessment, the Sword Saint is also correct. It is a potentially lethal weakness for our group that only the Sylphian can act unimpeded in the water. Improvements are needed,” the Fallen King also chimed in.

“Yeah, we did all get better at dealing with water, and this will definitely prove beneficial if we encounter a water floor later on. Also, if some monster is capable of summoning a water domain or something, we won’t find ourselves as limited,” Jake nodded.

Dina also seemed in agreement as she looked deep in thought after the water level, having also not enjoyed it much either.

“Ree,” Sylphie shrugged, not understanding why they all cared so much. Jake seriously wanted to figure out how the hell Sylphie did it, but alas.

He sighed and looked towards the next gate as the others went through the lockbox with loot. Once more, the reward was useless, and Jake was more determined than ever to get a move on. They had just wasted over three weeks, so now it was time to pick up the pace and rapidly clear their way to the first city layer.

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Chapter 660: Nevermore: Monarch of the Skies

The fourth floor. Jake and his party entered and were all met by a very different environment than the one they had just been in. Pure darkness roamed, and the air smelled of soil and death. The environmental mana affinity matched this as it was an odd mix of earth, death, and dark. Shortly after they were all there, the dungeon informed them of their objectives for this floor.

Welcome to the fourth floor of Nevermore: Darkrock Caverns.

Main objective: Defeat the Darkrock Revenant Lord.

Bonus objectives: Smelt and create at least 200 Darkrock Ingots using Darkrock Ore.

Current progress: Darkrock Revenant Lord (0/1), Darkrock Ingots (0/200).

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

Current Nevermore Points: 120

Instantly, they encountered one pretty major issue:

Jake was the only one who could see properly.

The dark mana was intense, and it appeared that Jake was the only one who possessed a natural affinity to it. Even the Fallen King was significantly affected by the dark mana, which reminded Jake of how well his dark mana had also worked on the King back when he was known as the King of the Forest. He had managed to blind the Unique Lifeform back then with his weak dark affinity mana, so for it to be a weakness of his made sense.

Sylphie still managed to adapt by using a domain of wind that was barely detectable. It was only as if a slight breeze appeared all around them, but it allowed the bird to know everything going on in the area. Dina adapted by quickly growing some odd flower on top of her head that could apparently see for her without any problems and warn her of dangers.

This still left the Sword Saint and the Fallen King as the most affected individuals. The Sword Saint truly had no good tools to see in the darkness but did have skills that allowed him to fight quite effectively nonetheless. The same was true for the King, who did have a skill to sense souls in his vicinity even through the darkness, but this wasn't very useful when it came to the primary challenge of this floor:

Navigating the caverns. Oh, and avoiding the traps that were placed bloody everywhere. It really took Jake back to his Forgotten Sewers days in the Tutorial, except the enemies here were not rats but a mix of earth affinity creatures and – as indicated by the death mana in the air – a whole lot of undead.

If the second floor had been Dina's time to shine and the third Sylphie's, then this floor was Jake's. Collect ores to form ingots for the bonus objective? Sphere of Perception. Avoid traps and find their way through the labyrinthian cavern network? Sphere of Perception. Locate hidden "vaults" of sorts hidden deep beneath the earth? Well, okay, the sphere wasn't quite big enough to reach these in its passive state, but the occasional Pulse of Perception had that covered.

The Darkrock Ore was quite easy to discern from the other rock around it due to its highly-increased mana density, so Jake spent quite a lot of time directing the others where to blast cavern walls apart or where to dig. His party members did slowly adapt to the environment more as time went by, but it honestly wasn't even needed.

There was only one problem Jake had seen, and that was how to change the ore into ingots. He considered if he could melt it himself using Alchemical Flame or maybe even

try to summon an actual fire affinity flame, but that turned out to be a non-issue. In one of the secret vaults, they found an entire damn forge that one just had to pour the ore into, and ingots would be spat out shortly after. By the time they found this vault, they had more than enough ore and quickly made the 200 ingots and moved on.

Less than half an hour later, Jake spotted a large being that seemed to be made of pure energy through his sphere. It was also in a large cavern surrounded by other smaller variants of itself, and it didn't take much brainpower to know this was the boss. After getting there, Jake finally saw this Darkrock Revenant Lord. It looked like hundreds of corpses fused into stone, mixed with a shitload of dark affinity mana. It was a mix of an elemental and a ghost, making it quite an interesting opponent. Not that any of them cared, as this abomination was rapidly ripped apart. After that, they found a large smelter pot to throw all the ingots they had formed into, with the result being an epic rarity breastplate and a pair of legguards that none of them needed.

From there, they moved on and quickly located the exit and moved on to the next floor, having finished this one in less than a day.

Current Nevermore Points: 234

114 Nevermore Points earned on the fourth floor. 40 from just completing the floor, 74 from the bonus objective, and then a bunch of achievements. These achievements included one for finding more than half of the hidden vaults, killing the boss fast, no one taking any damage from any traps, and of course, one for swiftly completing the dungeon.

The loot from the in-between room was once more useless, so they moved on to the fifth floor. Follow current novels on [*novel*■*fire*■*net*](#)

Upon entering the fifth floor, a theory they had discussed was pretty much confirmed. The moment they stepped out of the gateway, they were met with vast open skies and found themselves standing on a floating island, surrounded by other floating islands of sizes varying from a few meters across to several kilometers.

The environmental mana was dense with wind, water, and lightning affinity energy, and Jake even saw a few cloud islands in the distance, reminiscent of those he had seen on Earth. The theory they had confirmed was that the first five floors of Nevermore all served a quite simple function: make sure the challengers could at least handle different environments.

They had gone from a desert of extreme heat and cold to a nature-filled forest of life. From there they entered an ocean of pure water, followed by a dark cavern with death, with the final floor in the sky surrounded by wind mana. Each floor had a theme. Perhaps this was why the design at times felt so lazy... they were meant to be relatively simple and to test the basics of those who dared attempt to explore Nevermore.

Though Jake called the design lazy... upon reading the description of the fifth floor, it did appear there was more to this one.

Welcome to the fifth floor of Nevermore: Cloudspring Archipelagos.

Main objective: Defeat the Lord of Winds, Lord of Clouds, and the Lord of Lightning.

Bonus objectives: Catch at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits before they escape the archipelagos.

Current progress: Lord of Wind, Lord of Clouds, Lord of Lightning (0/3). Caught Cloudspring Spirits (0/24).

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

Current Nevermore Points: 234

Rather than only a single boss to kill, this one had three. Perhaps it was because this was the final floor before they would enter the first city floor. After every fifth floor, there would be an intermitting floor that didn't actually count as a true floor and wasn't even a dungeon. Either way, even if Jake admittedly didn't know much about these city floors, he planned on getting there fast.

This floor was also different in one other way. All of the prior floors had either been an unfavorable environment to at least a few people in their group or, at the very least, not a beneficial one. Dina had been advantaged in the second floor, and Jake in the fourth, sure, but this floor... this one was different.

Wind. Clouds. Open area. Sylphie, the Sword Saint, and Jake all felt in their element. Due to their advantage, they all knew that this level was theirs to utterly dominate. It wasn't like the King and Dina were disadvantaged either. They set out with great gusto, and quickly it became clear just how ridiculous their advantage was.

The wind whispered far louder than on any other floor, allowing Sylphie to know where everything was, meaning that within a minute, she already had a rough idea of where the three Lords were. The bonus objective of wanting them to capture at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits was also one they wanted to tackle, and it didn't take them long to find their first spirit. These spirits were small fairy-like creatures that all moved incredibly fast and were quite elusive. Their group discussed how to capture them and even laid out plans that included the King creating small cages and Jake weaving stable arcane mana nets, which made their first encounter with one incredibly anti-climactic.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched loudly the second they saw this first spirit.

The spirit stopped dozens of kilometers away and turned around. Then, like an arrow, it flew straight towards them before circling around Sylphie and eventually settling on her back as the small fairy rubbed its head against the hawk's feathers.

Current progress: Capture Cloudspring Spirits (1/24)

It turned out that these Cloudspring Spirits *really* liked Sylphie. As in, after the first one was "captured," they kind of all just came flying as they traveled through the floor toward the three bosses. They weren't even a quarter of the way when they passively completed the bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Capture at least 24 Cloudspring Spirits. 20 Nevermore Points earned.

After completing the bonus objective, they learned that the three bosses were all in roughly the same area on three massive cloud islands. It turned out that a reward for collecting the spirits – outside of the points – was information, and damn were the spirits all chatterboxes. They told them all about the secrets they could find on different islands, warned them of what the three bosses were capable of, and once they had captured all twenty-four, they had then been told where the three bosses were. Something they already knew, but hey, it was something.

When it came to opponents on this floor, they came in the form of birds, elementals, and even some pterodactyl-looking monsters that breathed lightning. None were a problem and were killed before they even had a chance to attack, though most foes actively avoided their group.

A bit less than halfway to the bosses, Sylphie was practically surrounded by Cloudspring Spirits, and they got an achievement.

Achievement earned: Capture more than 50 Cloudspring Spirits. 25 Nevermore Points earned.

With the achievement came more information. They were informed that if they crushed the orbs dropped from all three Lords instead of bringing them to the exit of the dungeon for an extra reward, they would be able to summon an optional and even harder boss. So that was definitely cool.

By the time Jake spotted the first large island with one of the Floor Bosses, Sylphie was drowned in spirits, and when just one more joined them, a second achievement popped up.

Achievement earned: Capture all 100 Cloudspring Spirits. 30 Nevermore Points earned.

The reward for getting every single spirit wasn't information. Instead, all of the one hundred Cloudspring Spirits merged together and formed one Cloudspring Spirit Queen. The Cloudspring Spirit Queen was only slightly larger than the smaller spirits, and Jake wondered what her function was. Something he would never come to know.

Shortly after she appeared, Sylphie let out a few screeches. The Spirit Queen seemed ecstatic, and her body began to fade and turn into a small marble before Sylphie inhaled the entire marble before burping and looking happy.

No one bothered to question the hawk. Instead, they split up to take down the three bosses. The Lords were all relatively close together, but there were still around a thousand kilometers between each island.

Contrary to the other floors, this one was not as much about finding the end goal. The islands were all placed in a long strip, growing larger as one traveled, with the final four islands being the largest by far. It was one massive island in the middle with three large islands floating around it with smaller islands in between.

Jake went for one boss, the Sword Saint another, and Sylphie a third, with the Fallen King and Dina going toward the massive central island to secure the exit Sylphie told them was there.

The three Lords were elementals, and they divvied it up by giving Sylphie the Lord of Winds, the Sword Saint the Lord of Clouds, and Jake the Lord of Lightning.

The fifth floor, still being only the fifth floor, meant that what followed was not truly a fight. Jake took down the Lord of Lightning by barraging it down with arrows from afar, while Sylphie demolished the Lord of Winds by, in her words, "out-winding it." The Sword Saint took the longest as cutting an elemental wasn't the most effective, but it was still taken down within minutes.

Each of the three Lords dropped a basketball-sized orb corresponding to their affinities, and as agreed upon, the three of them instantly broke the orbs to summon the optional boss.

And summon an optional boss it did.

After he broke the orb, the island Jake had fought the Lord of Lightning on began to crumble and released a giant arc of lightning that flew towards the central island. Shortly after, a tornado-looking beam of wind flew from another broken island before finally, a stream of clouds was launched from the final boss island.

Event unlocked.

The three Lords of the Cloudspring Archipelagos have fallen, powerless before their foes. As the three islands crumble, the Orb of the Winds, Clouds, and Lightning all lie broken. Behold, as the Monarch of the Skies awakens.

Objective: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies.

Warning: the Monarch of the Skies is an optional objective and is significantly more powerful than any prior Floor Bosses.

“Meet up at my location,” the Fallen King sent to Jake and the others as they began flying towards the central island.

On the island, a massive pillar of wind, clouds, and lightning had appeared that soared toward the sky. Far above, lightning clouds formed as the wind picked up, the occasional sound of thunder audible. It truly gave off the vibes of a proper final boss being summoned.

Meeting up with the Fallen King, Jake saw that Sylphie had already returned, and they waited only for the Sword Saint to make his way back as they observed the pillar slowly fade to reveal the form of the final boss.

Jake wasn't sure what he would have expected as he laid eyes on the Monarch of the Skies. Considering the three Lords had all been elementals, Jake had assumed that this Monarch of the Skies would be an elemental too, but what he saw instead was a humanoid creature that stood nearly ten meters tall. Feathers crackling with lightning covered the creature's entire form, only hidden by silver-ish armor that protected the Monarch's chest area, with two large white wings springing from its back. The Monarch looked androgynous, and Jake honestly had no idea what its race was either.

What he did know was that this creature was far more powerful than any Floor Boss they had faced before in Nevermore.

[Monarch of the Skies – lvl 225]

However... even if this one was stronger than anything they had ever faced in Nevermore, it was not stronger than anything Jake had ever faced before. Compared to the Isoptera Hive King, this Monarch of the Skies fell short by quite a margin. Moreover, Jake was not alone.

“Are you disappointed?” the Sword Saint, who had just returned, asked Jake as they both looked at the event boss.

“I don't know,” Jake said honestly. “But I guess I had hoped for more.”

“We are barely at the starting stages of Nevermore. This foe already surpasses what the vast majority of parties would be capable of handling,” the King chimed in.

“I know, I know,” Jake said with a sigh. “Anyway, let’s just get this over with.”

Jake wasn’t gonna lie. While he did find the experience of exploring the floors of Nevermore kind of interesting, and he enjoyed the company he was there with, the entire thing had been quite disappointing so far. He would have preferred to just skip to floor 20 or some shit. Sadly, he had to bully far weaker foes for a while longer before that was possible.

However, just as they were about to engage, the Sword Saint seemed to get an idea as he turned to Dina.

“Dina... how about taking on this foe alone?”

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Anoncument

Some of you may have seen my ping on Discord yesterday, but I am going to say it here too. A family member is in the hospital, and things aren’t looking good. Chances are, she won’t make it. I quite honestly haven’t had the mindset to be writing, so there is no chapter today. I can’t even say when the next one will be as I don’t think I can produce anything anyone wants to read right now. I wanted to write yesterday when I got back from the hospital, but I couldn’t get anything down. I couldn’t even sleep.

I don’t like sharing private details, and I honestly don’t feel like I owe it to anyone, but I still feel like I want to give the bare minimum. The one in the hospital is my grandmother. She is 96 and has lived a long life. Still doesn’t make the situation not shit.

Today also coincides with the day my book 6 releases on Amazon, and while it feels weird as fuck, I also feel like I at least need to point it out, as I am not the only one relying on my books doing well, and I wouldn’t find it fair to punish my publisher or even myself by not even mentioning it. Here is a link.

<https://www.royalroad.com/amazon/B0BW17HMDZ>

Thanks in advance for all the support. I will be on temporary hiatus for now, but will try and get back on the horse when I can.

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Chapter 661: Nevermore: Nature Magic Is Scary

The dryad didn't seem to register the words immediately but finally reacted after a second.

"Huh?" Dina asked, confused. "I... I could... but why?"

The old man shook his head and smiled. "The four of us have either fought side by side or against each other before. We know about one another. I believe it would be pertinent to get a better idea of your skills, too, before we move on to the later floors so none of us are taken by surprise."

Dina seemed to consider the words for a moment before nodding resolutely. "Alright."

"I take it you are all fine with this arrangement?" the Sword Saint asked Jake and the others.

"It is acceptable to me as long as she does not take too long," the Fallen King said.

"Ree," Sylphie said as she flew over and landed on top of Jake's head before quickly sitting down and resting. Apparently, she would need some time to properly digest the fairy queen thing.

"Fine by me," Jake also shrugged, giving his approval. He didn't really believe the Monarch of the Skies would give him a good fight, so why not share the love? Besides, he was interested in seeing how well Dina would handle the thing.

While the Monarch of the Skies wasn't some pinnacle creature, it did feel pretty powerful for its level. Chances are it also had some of that special Floor Boss extra juice that Jake noticed all the other bosses had. The extra juice came in the form of expanded resource pools, specifically their health pools. That should push the Monarch up a level.

The highest-leveled boss so far in Nevermore had been the Lords they had just killed, and all three of those had been level 212. At 225, this did put the Monarch quite a bit above anything else and twenty levels above Dina herself.

Moreover, the environment obviously favored the Monarch of the Skies. Chances are it would turn into a battle in the air, and so far, most of what Dina had shown was

summoning vines from the ground, throwing out seeds and growing soldiers, and some occasional enhancement magic.

Jake looked forward to what more she had to show, and he gladly sat back as Dina made her way down towards the large central island where the Monarch of the Skies stood with its eyes closed.

Still floating in the air a good distance away, Dina threw out two small seeds that grew to become spear-like trees. Using some kind of plant telekinesis, she kept them floating there as she took aim toward the Monarch below.

The second she threw them, the Monarch awakened. A whirlwind appeared around it instantly, and Jake and the others backed away to not get involved in the fight. The two trees entered the whirlwind unimpeded, but the ten-meter-tall winged creature still managed to dodge, resulting in the two trees stabbing into the ground, embedding themselves.

With lightning crackling on its wings, the Monarch was about to take to the air as suddenly vines exploded out of both trunks from the thrown trees, seeking to entangle its talon-like feet. It managed to avoid the roots with one of its feet, but the other was caught as Dina followed up her attack.

The ground below the Monarch erupted as hundreds of thorn-filled vines flew toward it. The Floor Boss reacted quickly and held out its hand as a lightning bolt descended from the thunderclouds above. The lightning hit the Monarch as its entire body exploded, getting rid of the vines and allowing it to get airborne. Moreover, the lightning had delivered with it a large white halberd that the boss now wielded.

"It is quite powerful," the Sword Saint commented.

"Yeah, not bad," Jake did agree. The fact that it was effectively fighting within a giant formation that assisted it sure did wonders. However, its opponent wasn't simple either.

Dina seemed almost annoyed at it for getting out of her attack. Rather than retreat, she chose to engage the Monarch of the Skies directly as the two clashed in mid-air.

That is when Jake realized something he hadn't even considered before. Dina was a druid that specialized in manipulating plants, but she was also a dryad. A part human, part plant lifeform. An obvious weakness of any kind of manipulation-based class would always be a lack of whatever they specialized in manipulating. They would try to shore up this weakness by being able to summon some of their element of choice, but this obviously came with some drawbacks and a highly increased resource consumption.

But what happens when bringing the element means bringing your own body? Well, you would have someone like Dina.

The second before she clashed with the Monarch, a sea of vines grew from her arm and speared forward toward the boss. Surprised, the Monarch stopped in its tracks and tried to retreat out of range from the wall of spiky vines, but before it could, the vines were shot out like spears, a few of them managing to stab it in its arms and legs. Sadly for Dina, the breastplate worn by the Monarch meant it avoided most of the damage, but the winner of this brief exchange was still clear.

Before the Monarch could even properly recover, Dina pulled out a staff and pointed it towards it. Jake expected to see her summon root spears or something, but instead, the staff began to glow a green light before it released what looked like a green bolt of lightning.

It was too fast for the Monarch to dodge as it was hit in the shoulder. At the spot where it had been hit, the feathers began to fall off as the flesh began to rot within seconds. Jake's eyes opened wide as she released several more green bolts of lightning while he tried to analyze the nature of her attack.

Meanwhile, the Monarch retaliated with its own lightning, the two magics clashing in mid-air and exploding upon impact in flashes of white and green. After the Monarch failed to block a bolt and found itself hit once more, Jake finally got an understanding.

Willpower-based attack.

This was... rare, but Jake had read about it. What Dina did was release bolts of will-empowered life energy into her foe, that rather than nurture life, carried with it intent to self-destruct. Which it promptly did, resulting in rot setting in and spreading to the surrounding flesh. It was an incredibly insidious type of attack and one that was quite difficult to protect against. The source of this content is *novel*fire*net*

However, in this instance, the Monarch of the Skies did have an advantage due to its significantly increased health pool, which resulted in the wounds healing quickly. Dina also realized this as she stopped her attack and changed her stance. The staff began to warp as a large blade grew out of its end, transforming it into a scythe.

The two of them flew towards each other once more, and it was clear this fight would transform into a melee battle, which did make Jake a bit worried, considering Dina was mostly a caster. However, it appeared he had once more underestimated her.

Now, there was someone Jake had heard mentioned quite a few times. Nature's Attendant had mentioned this being, and so had Dina, but Jake didn't believe they had ever seen it. Jake was naturally talking about the mysterious Bobo, the Guardian of Dina. He had hoped to see this Guardian during this fight, not realizing... Bobo had been in front of their eyes this entire time.

The large robe that usually covered Dina's entire body was torn to shreds as four spider-like limbs of wood speared out and penetrated through the breastplate of the

Monarch. The halberd that had been aimed at Dina was also stopped as several branches grew out and took the blow. This allowed Dina to properly close in, and swinging her scythe, she sent out a crescent wave of green energy that tore into the Monarch, leaving a deep cut of rotting flesh.

Jake could finally see what had been hidden beneath her thick robe and saw a wooden suit of armor covering her entire chest, abdomen, and thighs, stopping just above her knees. It extended nearly all the way to her neck, exposing only her head, arms, and lower legs. It wasn't truly a piece of armor either... it was alive.

Despite being pushed back, the Monarch of the Skies counterattacked as it raised its halberd, making a giant bolt of lightning strike down at Dina. Before it could even hit, a spear of wood was shot out from her armor to absorb the blow, allowing Dina to pursue her foe.

By now, the Monarch seemed to realize it was in a bad position as blood dripped from its chest from several barrel-sized holes, and a large part of its chest was rotting away from the scythe hit earlier. It tried to back away, but Dina pursued with impressive speed as she continued attacking with ranged attacks in the form of wooden spears. Being hit by one of these also wasn't as simple as just taking a hit.

Every wooden spear that penetrated its body bloomed into more spear-like vines that dug into the flesh of the Monarch, and as it kept trying to retreat, Jake saw something frightening. Leaves began to sprout beneath the breastplate of the Monarch as he realized that the hit from her armor – Bobo – had done more than just stabbing: it had planted seeds.

While Jake used poison, Dina did something similar but far scarier in Jake's mind. With her attacks, she implanted almost microscopic seeds that took hold inside the body of her foe. Jake hadn't even noticed it before Dina chose to activate the many seeds she had planted within the Monarch, and damn, did it look scary as thorns and vines began growing out from beneath the feathers of the Monarch as the giant creature screeched in pain.

The Monarch of the Skies still refused to give up as it screeched louder than ever before. The thunderclouds above began to gather as a giant pillar of pure lightning descended, bathing the Monarch in energy and pushing Dina back. Once the light faded, its form was once more revealed, the vines and whatnot burned away, and its entire body crackled with lightning.

Floating above the large island, it had been summoned on, it didn't notice what was about to hit it before it was too late.

Below, the entire island exploded as thousands of meter-thick vines surged upwards, grasping the form of the Monarch. The vines were instantly singed by the powerful lightning, but ten more came to take their place whenever one broke.

Seeing this, Jake realized where they had come from. Those two trees she had fired at the beginning had launched seeds into the island, and vines had slowly grown within while she fought the Monarch. Then, during the fight, she eventually pushed the Monarch back to float just above the island, where her trap had fully germinated and was ready to be activated.

Immobilized, the Monarch of the Skies tried to free itself and called down a lightning storm as a whirlwind surrounded it, cutting away at the vines, but Dina rushed forward unimpeded as her wood armor grew wooden shields to block anything headed her way. The Monarch let out a loud screech as Dina transformed her arm into a long lance of wood that penetrated into its chest. Its screech slowly turned into a scream as Dina's body burned with energy as the vine pulsed with power.

Then, a hundred vines erupted from within the Monarch of the Skies, penetrating through its skin and even its beaked mouth, effectively exploding it from within.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies. 50 Nevermore Points awarded.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Monarch of the Skies within half an hour of summoning. 25 Nevermore Points awarded.

"Ree," Sylphie commented.

"Yep," Jake agreed with a nod. "Definitely scary."

"Nature magic is notoriously weak offensively, but I must say I find myself impressed by her ability to make use of her skills so effectively," the Fallen King said with admiration.

"Makes me wonder if her being a support type is even true," Jake smiled.

"I only look more forward to her support skills after seeing her personal combat prowess," the Sword Saint said with a nod.

The dryad in question still floated in the air and looked at the dead Monarch of the Skies as the vines growing from its body began to bloom flowers of various colors. She nodded and looked proud of herself as she flew back towards them.

"I did it," she said with a smile as she stopped in front of the Sword Saint.

"That you did," the old man said with his grandfatherly smile. He then looked at her wooden armor with a raised eyebrow. "And am I right to assume that is Bobo?"

"Oh, yeah," Dina nodded as she looked proudly at her armor. Still looking down at it, she nodded a few more times before looking up. "Bobo also says hello to you all. He is a bit shy, though."

"I see, I see," the Sword Saint nodded. "Well, Bobo sure also did a nice job. Tell him that for me, okay?"

Dina smiled and gently hit her armor. "Come on, Bobo... be polite."

Jake also stood off to the side and smiled. Dina was naturally the only one who could hear her-

"Thank... you..."

A deep rumbling voice came from Dina's chest area as it moved slightly. Jake and everyone stared, surprised for a moment, as Dina looked incredibly proud as she patted the armor gently with a proud look on her face.

"Bobo is full of surprises, it seems," the old man said, being the first to properly collect his thoughts. "If I may ask... is he permanently attached to you, or can he also act more independently?"

"He can, but he doesn't like to... we are best together," Dina answered. "Grandfather gave Bobo to me when I was still small, and he has always been with me. Keeping me safe and helping me fight. He is my best friend."

Bobo seemed to move a bit at her calling him her best friend, making Dina smile even more.

Jake also couldn't help but smile at the girl and her scary wooden armor able to grow large thorns capable of tearing nearly anything apart while also offering insane defenses. It was like having an automatic defense system, and from how they fought, Dina's style was fully capable of taking advantage of Bobo.

Dina's offensive prowess was also pretty darn impressive. As the King had mentioned, then nature affinity casters tended to be quite weak offensively and in direct combat. Especially so when not in an environment beneficial to them. Dina managed to overcome the weakness of requiring a good environment by using her own body and even Bobo. She could grow plants of all kinds from her own body, and she was the perfect conduit for her own nature mana. Further amplified by her Bloodline... she was indeed a true monster.

The dead Monarch of the Skies was definitely proof she could fend for herself and didn't need babysitting even on later floors. He still wondered how she would fight something like an elemental that didn't have any life energy and didn't care about physical attacks, but he had a feeling she had tools to handle those too. In fact, he got a feeling she had a lot more to show them over the next many years as they dove further and further into Nevermore.

For now, it was time to move on. While still having small talk, they made their way to the gateway and passed through as they got their 50 Nevermore Points for passing the floor and some extra for achievements. All in all, counting all the achievements and the extra reward from slaying the Monarch of the Skies, this floor had yielded by far the most Nevermore Points.

From one floor, they had gotten 231, which was nearly a doubling of the 234 they had before.

Current Nevermore Points: 465

Jake was satisfied as they stood in the in-between room and had one more gateway available than before. One leading to the first intermitting city layer of Nevermore. After opening another disappointing lockbox of loot, there was no need to delay, as they all promptly moved on and entered the first city.

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Chapter 662: Nevermore: Dead On Arrival

Nevermore was often called the greatest dungeon in the multiverse, but it wasn't just one dungeon. In fact, it was a multitude of dungeons stacked on top of one another, and even if Nevermore broke conventional rules, it was still classified as a dungeon. However, be it due to fairness from the system or the will of the Wyrmgod himself, every single floor did not count as its own independent" dungeon."

Instead, a set number of floors in a row would as be classified together, with the five first in C-grade counting as" one dungeon." New NOVEL chapters are published on novel.fire.net

Why did this matter?

Well, for the title, of course.

[Dungeoneer X] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +20 all stats.

Jake's Dungeoneer title had upgraded to level 10, also known as the" cap" of D-grade. In E-grade, one could get up to level 5, 10 in D-grade, and 15 in C-grade. Jake also knew that every increase in the title from here on out would give +9 to all stats – tripling from the +3 it gave in D-grade.

Anyway, having an upgraded title was nice but not that impactful, and honestly, not something Jake thought much about as he and the others entered the first city floor of Nevermore.

City layers – or city floors - in Nevermore were quite peculiar. Jake had read a bit about them and knew that he shouldn't expect overly much quite yet for one simple reason: this city layer had only existed for a few years.

Like the floors, these city layers had also been "reset" and "redone" for the new integration. One could still enter the city from the previous era if no one in the party in question was from the ninety-third universe, but if anyone was, they would end up on this layer. This was another reason why many factions had quickly taken some C-grades and pretty much forced them through these first layers of Nevermore. They wanted to establish themselves and claim space on the city floor. Not that many factions had time to arrive and begin to build much of note quite yet.

Even then, it wasn't like the city was completely empty.

Jake and the others walked out of the gateway and found themselves in the middle of a nearly completely empty square. Large stone buildings surrounded them at all times, but they all seemed empty. Jake did notice a few eyes land on them shortly after they appeared, and he looked towards an empty-looking building and spotted a man peeking out towards them.

The man was surprised at being noticed and quickly retreated. Jake didn't bother trying to figure out what the guy wanted, and besides, he had a system message to skim.

You have arrived on the first city floor of Nevermore. You are currently in the northern square.

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

Short and simple, yet very informative. Like Nevermore City before they entered the dungeon, violence was not allowed, but arenas were supplied. The message also mentioned one of the other important aspects of Nevermore: Challenge Dungeons.

This was the individual aspect of Nevermore. Challenge Dungeons of varying natures that all gave Nevermore Points, just like the main floors. However, Jake had no interest in checking out quite yet. These Challenge Dungeons could be found on every single city floor and were the same throughout. Besides, if he did ever want to go back to this first city floor, he would be able to at any point as one could travel between all the city floors – or leave Nevermore altogether. Because one other big difference between the other floors and a city floor was that one could exit Nevermore from a city floor and

reenter again on that same city floor, just like the system message had mentioned. To summarise, city floors were pretty much save points for Nevermore.

Besides that, these city layers primarily functioned as places for parties to replace party members or fill empty group slots if someone happened to die. One could only do floor six onwards with people who had already done the first five, and it wasn't possible to reenter the first five to get someone up to speed, so people really didn't have a choice. This was one of the reasons the arenas were established.

Another reason for these city layers was to stock up on resources without having to leave and come back again. Additionally, people could sell special items unique to Nevermore only within the city layers. While Jake and the others hadn't found any of such special items, he knew one could find tokens that allowed one to travel back to the closest city layer, orbs that released pulses to create maps, and even items granting information on the specific floor one found themselves in.

Finally, factions used these floors for one more thing... time dilation training. One was able to compound time dilation within Nevermore, and the Wyrmgod even provided these chambers for anyone interested. Needless to say, then Jake and the others had no interest in these chambers, and they quite honestly didn't make much sense for people who were actually talented. They were primarily made for people who just wanted to quickly finish their Nevermore dive and get on the Leaderboards, or maybe to sit down and do a crafting session to not delay their party too much before moving onto the next level.

That was pretty much all these City Floors were for. Ah, but they did hold one more interesting thing:

Leaderboards.

"Do we have a reason to linger on this floor for longer than necessary? It appears deserted, and we have no need for additional resources," the King said, clearly not interested in staying in this city for long.

It made sense. While time dilation was still in effect, it wasn't as powerful on the earlier floors as on the latter ones. Jake and the others had no idea how much it differentiated, and even the Sword Saint, who had insights into the concept had time, had no way to determine it. To him, time was not dilated at all due to the system-fuckery making time appear "normal" within Nevermore.

"I want to check out the Leaderboards first," Jake said.

"That does sound worth our time," the Sword Saint agreed." Though from my understanding, the Wyrmgod is quite stingy with what information is given out."

"True, true, but it is better than nothing," Jake smiled. No one else disagreed with quickly going to check out the Leaderboards, so without further ado, they began walking through the empty city streets. Quite a few buildings were pre-constructed by the Wyrmgod, but even more empty lots were present as factions had yet to claim any land.

The further they moved toward the central square, where the Leaderboards and dungeons could both be found, the more people they also began encountering. All of them were naturally C-grade, but Jake was still taken aback as he noticed something was off: their levels.

While Jake and his party members were all below level 210 and hadn't even gained any levels yet from the first five floors, Jake saw a slew of people even towards the end of C-grade. He quickly guessed these were people brought to this floor specifically to establish a presence for whatever faction they represented and weren't actually there to do the floors.

Jake wondered if the Order had boosted some people to the floor yet, but then realized he didn't actually care as they soon enough made their way to the central square, where they finally laid their eyes on the two Leaderboards there.

"A bit lower than I expected," Jake commented as they looked at the first of the Leaderboards.

"It is the average, and considering the many groups that don't aim to accomplish anything but to get the bare minimum while taking their time, it isn't that surprising," the Sword Saint said, with the King and Dina agreeing with him.

Jake still thought it was a bit low.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-5): 226

Of these, 150 were guaranteed just for completing the floors. That meant the average group only got 76 extra points from achievements, bonus objectives, and events. Once more, it had to be noticed this was only groups who qualified for the Leaderboards by having nobody above level 210. If one counted the groups that rushed through with a bunch of people in late-tier C-grade, then the points would have been far higher. A bunch of people at level 300 boosting one lower-leveled native from the ninety-third universe would have demolished the floors quite easily, after all, and gotten all the bonus points for speed.

Looking at the next Leaderboard, Jake was once more a bit surprised.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-5): 553

"Also lower than I expected," Jake once more commented.

"There, I concur," the Sword Saint agreed. They had gotten 465 Nevermore Points, and that had been by rushing through, so to see the top group only earn 88 more points than them was honestly surprising. Then again... considering how long it had been since the integration, it was doubtful any team from the new universe had even been close to reaching the maximum threshold yet. The groups going right now consisted of those with high levels of talent and high confidence, who only cared about raking up points on the later floors.

"Are there no Leaderboards that include the Challenge Dungeons?" the Fallen King asked inquisitively. *"Or one that includes bonus points gained from any level-ups?"*

"Doesn't seem like it," Jake shrugged.

"As I said... stingy," the Sword Saint smiled and shook his head.

Either way, the Leaderboards were a bit disappointing, and their party of five quickly moved on.

Being at the central square and in the vicinity of any challenge dungeons, they decided to check out the dungeon on this city floor. Yes, dungeon, singular. It appeared there was only a single Challenge Dungeon on this floor. More would come on later floors, but Jake had still expected to see more than one.

Oh well, at least there would be more on later city floors. All Challenge Dungeons that would eventually become available could be entered from all city floors they encountered, and as they also all had limited attempts, then it was often advised to wait to enter them. Considering one couldn't truly die within the Challenge Dungeon, limited attempts were pretty much a requirement to make sure one couldn't brute force it, and honestly, giving people more than one try was already nice. On a side note, one could leave and enter, and attempts were only considered consumed if one chose to leave in the middle of a challenge or died.

Inspecting the one available dungeon, it appeared to be some kind of arena from the looks of it. Exactly what it was about, they naturally couldn't know, but Jake looked forward to checking it out later on, as some arena battling seemed fun.

Not knowing it, Jake would have his hopes of arena battles fulfilled sooner rather than later as they moved toward the sixth floor.

Now, when it came to how he would feel about these arena battles... that was an entirely different story.

In Nevermore City, activity was buzzing as always. Even during normal times, it was one of the areas in the multiverse with the most traffic, but with the new integration, it had reached a new level. A new era did not only bring with it an age of new geniuses, but the wave of Records it sent echoing through the entire multiverse also benefitted the

geniuses that already existed. This was a time of countless talents to compete, and those from the ninety-two other universes gladly rose to the occasion to challenge the newly integrated fighters.

But... even these geniuses still needed someone from the new universe to go with them if they wanted to compete on the new Leaderboards where getting titles was far easier. Finding someone who would fit in the group was hard, especially someone who could keep up with the pace of a multiversal genius. Unless they themselves were supreme geniuses, of course. Or... if they, for some reason, were specially qualified for dealing with Nevermore.

Which was the exact scenario Casper found himself. He had been busy working on New Yalsten with the others and had reached C-grade only a week prior. Shortly after his evolution, he had been contacted by his Patron – the Blightfather – and been given a direct task for the first time since the Tutorial:

Go to Nevermore and be the one party member from the new universe in a group put together by the top brass of the Risen. Casper had expected to go to Nevermore with Priscilla and others from Earth, but when the order came from the Blightfather, he had no choice.

As for who he was then going there with? As far as he could tell, the best the entire Risen faction had.

That day, Casper had arrived at the Risen compound at Nevermore. There, he had promptly been escorted to his four upcoming party members who had already arrived beforehand. Casper would lie if he said he wasn't nervous, as he could feel an aura ahead of him that surpassed his own by quite a margin.

Nevertheless...

Casper entered the room without seeing a need to knock as a woman sitting close to the door looked his way. She was the only one at the entrance, with the others likely in some of the many side rooms.

"The Dungeon Engineer, huh?" she smiled, her fangs showing. She was some kind of Beastfolk Risen.

"That's me," Casper said noncommittally. He wasn't exactly enthusiastic about being there.

"Well, ain't you a peachy one," the woman grinned even more as she jumped off the chair she had been lounging on and went closer. "Hey, I heard that new universes don't have native undead, is that true? Doesn't that mean you are a newborn?"

"No."

"No to you being a newborn or no to no undead exist-"

"Maltrax, leave him be," a voice spoke as a tall man entered the room. The moment he did, Casper felt the entire atmosphere of the room change, and even Lyra within his locket was alarmed. The sheer level of blight energy he emanated... Casper knew who it was instantly.

He was the party leader of their group and the youngest Ghost King within the last billion years. A genius nurtured within the Ghostlands from birth, who had been assessed to have a high chance of reaching godhood even in D-grade. He was, based on all Casper had heard, an absolute monster.

"I was just kidding around; no need to be so serious," the undead beastkin woman said. "Though he does feel a bit too weak to join us, doesn't he?"

"He is an engineer, is he not?" a third voice said as a woman wearing what looked like a wedding dress walked in. Thin semi-transparent cloth seemed to float around her, obscuring her form entirely outside a faintly female outline, with her body giving off intense death energy.

"I am," Casper nodded.

"Still, you should be strong, too," the beastskin complained.

"You're right; I vote for removing me from the group and me going back home," Casper said semi-jokingly.

"Hehe, at least you have some guts," the Ghost King said as his abyss-like eyes stared at Casper. "Name's Azal; a pleasure to meet you... Casper, was it?"

Casper nodded, not surprised the other party didn't really comment on his willingness to just go back home. They both knew that nobody had any say in who was in this group.

Besides, Casper had not been selected for nothing. While Casper did fall behind the usual elites when it came to pure combat prowess, this was Nevermore, not some battlefield. This was a mega-dungeon, and Casper was a dungeon engineer. To be an engineer did not simply mean he was capable of making dungeons... it also allowed him to analyze dungeons when within them. See the "code" behind their functions, and discover things a normal person couldn't, most of it through system assistance.

This advantage became readily apparent immediately upon entering the first floor.

The moment they appeared, Casper didn't delay and knelt down as he placed his palm on the hot sand. The other undead shielded themselves and him from the life-infused sunlight as Casper closed his eyes. Thirty or so seconds later, he opened them again. "Are we going for any hidden events?"

"Are there any easy ones?" the woman in her ghostly wedding dress asked.

"No, not really; they are all time-consuming. Better to just go for the boss right away," Casper shook his head. "Though I would collect those fragments for the bonus objective. There are far more than is needed, and while chances are we would get an achievement for collecting far more than a thousand, I don't believe that worth it either."

"Where is the boss?" Azal asked.

Casper quickly took out a small orb and infused some energy into it before throwing it to the Ghost King. "Should take you straight to it, but for reference, it is straight down and through the planet."

"Distance?" their fifth and final party member asked. He was a three-meter tall and lank abomination with limbs not truly fitting together, and he wore an entirely black cloak, hiding his grotesque body.

Casper did a quick scan before he sent the exact distance from them to the boss. The fabric of the dungeon was so easily readable as they were still only on the first floor.

The lank abomination nodded as spears of bone embedded themselves in the sand all around him. Energy surged as space seemed to warp, and with a nod, he stepped back as Azal entered the formation. A black abyss opened up beneath him as his body distorted, and he disappeared into the spacial tunnel digging straight through the planet.

At the same time, the ghostly bride had sent out an army of specters to collect Sunlight Fragments, joined by the beastkin woman.

Not even a minute after Azal disappeared – and less than ten minutes after entering the first floor – they got the achievement telling them of the death of the Floor Boss, and within less than an hour, they were off the floor and on to the second.

Casper simply went along with the flow and did his job. He had heard Jake had also entered, and he couldn't help but wonder how his speed compared to his old colleague and friend. Though he did feel a bit sorry for Jake... because he had to be bored out of his mind dealing with these early floors.

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Chapter 663: Nevermore: Impatience & A Witch's Evolution

Floors 1 to 5 had pretty clear goals in mind: determine the dungeon divers' ability to adapt to different environments and handle different enemy types. It also included a good deal of exploration, with a major part of each floor being about finding the exit.

Floors 6 to 10, on the other hand, had none of this. There was no difficult environment to adapt to, no mystery about where one had to go, and no doubts about the objective. These five floors were all about one thing and one thing only: combat. At least on the surface.

Jake and the four others had appeared within the entrance area to a giant colosseum. Giant, in this case, was honestly not enough to describe the sheer size of the place, as it looked more like an entire city constructed in a donut shape with a large open area in the middle. Entering the colosseum, their party was met by a guide who introduced them to the place and, along with the system message about the floor, told them all they had to know.

In order to move on to the next floor, they simply had to win ten battles and thus advance to the next rank. Contrary to earlier floors, floors 6 through 10 were connected, and all shared the same arena theme. In fact, the guide would be the same throughout all these floors as they moved on to larger arenas and colosseums every time they climbed a floor.

This setup did make earning bonus points harder as there weren't as many opportunities for achievements and bonus objectives. On floor six, the bonus objective required them to collect an adequate amount of in-depth information on at least five of their opponents, which was another aspect these floors had that the others didn't: the opportunity to prepare.

It was possible to research your foes before entering the arena with them. They could discover facts about these opponents and their abilities, and as they decided to do the bonus objective on the sixth floor, they got a good idea of the scope. It was so in-depth that they even learned one of their opponents – a giant Kraken-like land monster – had an existing injury caused by a curse that they would be able to exploit. One of the battles was also against a party of five like their own. There the Sword Saint ended up learning two of the party members used to be in a relationship. Without the girl knowing, the guy cheated with the other girl in the party and broke it off, so if they revealed this to them before the fight, it would likely make them fight worse during the actual bout as they were pissed at each other due to relationship drama.

So... yeah. That was a thing. Anyway, Jake and the others didn't really need any of this information and only gathered it for the bonus objective. The floor was also made more

annoying by the fact that one could only fight in the arena once a day, and before winning a fight, Jake and the others would have no idea who their next opponent was and who to collect information on. All this resulted in it taking them a bit over a month to do the floor as they had to wait for information brokers and stalk people. All in all, it wasn't a good time. Especially not when they didn't need what they learned at all, as every single fight on the sixth floor was utterly one-sided.

The only interesting thing was the achievements. On the sixth floor, they would get a bonus of between 1 and 6 Nevermore Points every fight based on how much the audience liked it, and from what they learned, this would be the same on floors seven, eight, nine, and ten. This meant one could double the reward for passing every floor just by being entertaining.

Jake and co ended up earning 45 points total for audience satisfaction, which was still pretty good. It turned out that a lot of people loved overpowered people doing overpowered stuff to utterly dominate their foes.

Floors seven, eight, nine, and ten were just more of the same, with the arenas getting bigger, the audience growing, and more points on the line. Floor seven had the same bonus objective of collecting information as floor six, but this time they didn't bother to do the bonus objective but just did their fights as fast as they could, meaning they completed their ten fights and, thus, the seventh floor in only ten days. Potential bonus points per battle had gone from 6 to 7, with Jake and the others doing even better than the sixth floor.

They also learned that there was an achievement that gave the exact same points as the bonus objective for fighting without gathering any information and another for completing the floor in ten days, meaning they had lost points by doing the information gathering on the sixth floor. So, yeah, they weren't gonna do that again.

On floor eight, they decided to test a bit and did the fights solo rather than as a group. No fight so far had been harder than the Monarch of the Skies, so they all easily swept through the battles one by one, completing this floor in only ten days too. They got 78/80 points for audience satisfaction, with the Fallen King and Dina being the only ones to lose points during their solo fights.

The two were – naturally so – bullied for this as they moved on to the ninth floor. Mostly the same as before, with them once more doing the fights solo for extra entertainment value. The only fight of interest here from Jake's point of view was when he faced a party that had pretty interesting synergy and used mixes of water, lightning, and earth magic to lock down and kill him. Not because Jake was in any real danger but because it was his first time trying an instantly-summoned lightning bath.

It was only when they reached the tenth floor that things changed a bit again. This was the final colosseum, and once more, they had ten battles to finish. However, once they had done the tenth battle, they unlocked the option to do a final event round, the same

as on the fifth floor. This final battle would be against the current "champions" of the arena and consisted of a full party of humanoids.

Considering the levels of their opponents had increased, they decided to not send anyone solo to take on this final challenge. Not because they doubted that any single one of them could solo this final fight, but because chances are it would take a while, and nobody wanted to wait around before moving on to later floors. Hence why all five of them entered the arena and utterly demolished the poor champions before they all moved on.

The constant one-day waits between fights had annoyed the hell out of Jake. Sylphie and the King also weren't happy. Dina and the Sword Saint took it in strides as the Sword Saint enjoyed taking his time working on his profession by painting in between fights, and Jake learned that Dina had a special spatial storage with an entire garden within that she took her time tending to during their waits.

Jake also got some alchemy in, but that still left Sylphie and the Fallen King. Neither had professions, so all they could do was meditate or work on skills if they wanted to stay productive. Sylphie especially found this downtime difficult, as at least the King had lived for long enough for the wait to not feel that bad, while Sylphie was used to constantly having something to do. Ultimately, she ended up sleeping most of the time while digesting the natural treasures she had eaten.

On the topic of his special puzzle cube that he had gotten as a gift at the Chosen ceremony, he held off on playing with that as he feared he would find it too entertaining. Jake felt confident later floors would have even more downtime or quiet periods considering they had fifty entire years, so he would show patience and play with it when the time was right.

After floor ten was complete, they moved on to their second city layer and had, points-wise, gotten quite the increase.

Nevermore Points: 1512

They had done far more achievements than on the prior floors, as the only true judgment here was how well one fought. There were far fewer hidden points to be found, which was also reflected when they reached the Leaderboards on this floor and compared their score with the current record.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-10): 1650

While they had been 88 behind on floor five, they were now only 138 behind, which means they only lost 50 additional compared to the top team. As for how well they did in comparison to the average party... well, the gap had only widened.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-10): 706

As for this second city layer, well, it was even less populated than the first one by quite a margin. There was simply no reason to stay there, so they quickly moved on and went to floor eleven and onwards.

By now, Jake and company only had one priority: to reach the harder floors as fast as possible. And with that mentality, they truly picked up speed and blazed through floor after floor.

“Is it heretical to want to rip a Chosen apart?” Miranda asked Lillian as they talked within a large tent set up not far outside of the Fort.

“Probably,” Lillian shrugged. “But I would assume it can be forgiven considering the circumstances he put you in.”

“Yeah, let’s go with that,” Miranda smiled. Looking at the map on the table in front of her, she felt pretty damn stressed. After returning to Earth, things had been much more hectic than she would have liked, but honestly, not more than she expected.

One hundred and twenty million slaves. That was what she had to deal with, but at least she had been helped along by one thing: her C-grade evolution. That’s right, after returning from the Chosen ceremony, Miranda had finally chosen to evolve, and damn was she glad she had waited because she had a strong feeling her patience had paid off.

Her profession at least seemed to indicate this:

Court Witch of the Primordial’s Chosen – It is said that behind every influential leader is a court wizard offering advice – or in your case, a court witch. As the foremost confidant of Jake Thayne, the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and Harbinger of Primeval Origins, you have taken upon yourself the task of operating as his liaison and right hand. Be it managing his territory, exerting his will upon the world, or simply interpreting and acting out his intent, you will find yourself well-equipped through your diverse set of skills. As your Records blend together with the Chosen and you continue to walk your Path, so shall success follow as you bathe in the shadow of greatness. Be warned that should you lose the confidence of the Primordial’s Chosen, you will not escape unscathed. Stat Bonuses per level: +100 Willpower, +100 Free Points.

This profession was interesting and didn’t feel like a direct upgrade to the Mistress of Haven profession she had in D-grade. It still had many of the same aspects and was still inherently tied to Jake, but it also mixed in more aspects of who Miranda herself was. Just the fact that it was called Court Witch meant it was truly based on her and felt more personal. It had also gone beyond simply being about managing cities and territory, with that restriction of requiring her to defend the city of Haven gone. Something she was quite relieved about, as the entire Ell’Hakan situation had put her

on edge, and it was honestly a miracle – or perhaps the plan of the enemy Chosen – that the city had remained under her control.

Now, after her evolution, she was only required to keep Jake confident in her. Something she had no idea how to do and, for some reason, barely felt she even had to. He cared for so little of what she did as long as she acted within his moral compass and didn't do things to piss him off... heck, she had a feeling she could decide to dedicate the entire budget of the World Council to constructing a base on the moon, and all he would do was shrug and say "cool," while maybe visiting for fun.

One interesting note about this profession was also how it referred to Jake. It put the fact he was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and that he was a "Harbinger of Primeval Origins" side by side. That the system chose to do this truly hammered home how impactful his feat of creating the True Royal had been, and the fact that everyone knew it now made the sheer level of Records matter so much more. This detail for the description was one of the reasons she felt confident that evolving after the ceremony counted, as she doubted she would have gotten a profession offering 200 stats per level – only 40 below the theoretical maximum – without it.

As for her class, well, she wouldn't complain about that one either.

Verdant Witch Sister – The Verdant Lagoon lies waiting, ready to listen to your beck and call, ready to consume any who dare stand in your way. Recognized as part of the coven's sisterhood, the Verdant Witches truly view you as one of their own, and your connection to the Verdant Lagoon is more powerful than ever, allowing you to pull on powers from the ethereal domain. As a Verdant Witch, you are a spellcaster focusing on magic rituals and intricate spells, making preparation your key to victory. All who dare intrude upon your domain should tread carefully lest they find themselves swallowed by the Lagoon. Beware that should you lose the trust of the Verdant Witches and be cut off from the Verdant Lagoon, the consequences will be highly unpredictable and potentially fatal. However, if you succeed in your Path, you shall one day eternally claim a part of the Lagoon as your very own. Stat Bonuses per level: +60 Will, +55 Wis, +45 Int, +30 Vit, +20 Per, +50 Free Points.

This class was also far better than she had in any way expected. 260 stats per level was considered really good, even if it wasn't absolutely top-tier.

Miranda didn't have the best profession or class in F-grade, she had average or maybe slightly above average in E-grade, good ones in D-grade, and now pretty excellent ones in C-grade. She knew that compared to someone like Jake, she still fell behind, but with every step, she was slightly closing the gap. One could get far, far more stats in C-grade than all the grades before it combined, even more so in B-grade, A-grade, and S-grade. It was possible to close the gap, with earlier disadvantages – and advantages – in lower grades mattering less and less the further one went. Find the newest release on [movel](#) [fire](#) [met](#)

When it came to the class itself, this one naturally came due to her connection with the Verdant Witches. The fact that they had included her in important meetings, asked for her advice on how to “keep Jake happy” and treated her like more than just a D-grade had led to this being offered. It indicated that she was moving at least a little closer to being considered an equal of the Godqueens. She still had a far way to go, but at least it was something.

As for what the class gave her, it was a bit more complicated. During her time with the witches, Miranda had learned that the Verdant Lagoon was a bit more than simply their divine realm. True, it was also their divine realm, and they had even created it, but the place had grown to resemble something greater. A conceptual existence, almost, that one could call upon. Maybe it was because they were witches, but even if they were “only” Godqueens, they were considered borderline invincible if one dared intrude upon their realm. A verdant witch like Miranda also pulled on the Verdant Lagoon and its mystical powers, allowing her to display feats above what she should actually be capable of, and if she became a god, a part of the Lagoon would come to be within her own divine realm, independent yet linked to the same concept as the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon.

All this is to say that her class was damn good, and Miranda was already working on securing Earth better by making use of it.

Anyway, her evolution was done partly because it was time after the ceremony and partly because she would need it to deal with what was to come. The slaves had not begun arriving yet not only due to Miranda and Lillian stopping it, but also because it took the many factions time to set everything up.

As for why Miranda had stopped it... quite a few reasons. First of all, getting accommodations for over a hundred million people was difficult, especially when one factored in that a lot of them would be lower grades that still needed food and whatnot. Considering they didn’t want to treat them badly either, they also needed the housing to be proper.

Then there was convincing the World Council that having them come was fine. Arthur had been receptive so far, but convincing him that bringing over a hundred million slaves wasn’t some invasion-level event wasn’t easy. She needed him on board to not cause widespread panic.

Oh yeah, and they would also get representatives from the United Tribes coming. They were guests and they would have to provide wholly different kinds of accommodations for them.

Did Miranda mention the issues popping up from the Fallen King effectively abandoning his domain and the Sky Whale being busy dealing with that?

And the growing fanaticism spread by Felix after his return?

Miranda kept staring down at the map of the entire camp they were constructing to receive all the slaves as Lillian pointed something out.

"I heard that quite a few races don't get along together, so would it be an idea to not mix the beastkin, humans, elves, and whatnot? Build natural dividers?"

"Oh... oh yeah, that too," Miranda nodded. "Lillian, why did I agree to this job again?"

"Because you are ambitious and, even if you don't want to admit it, greedy for power and influence, and you recognize that riding Lord Thayne's coattails is beneficial to achieving these goals?"

"Right, right," Miranda nodded. "Silly me."

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Chapter 664: Nevermore: Grinding Through the Floors As Competition Tightens

Due to the inability to give out concrete information about the floors of Nevermore, no one even knew how many there were in the C-grade section. Jake and Co naturally also didn't know, but they could infer based on how slowly the levels of enemies increased. To see the average levels of enemies go up by 1 to 3 per floor was expected, which meant that the "easy" section of Nevermore that they planned on blazing through was much longer than they had initially expected.

Nevertheless, they went through with impressive speed and cleared floor after floor as the levels of their foes slowly increased.

Floor fifteen had a Floor Boss at level 224, with the optional event boss at 235 only.

Floor twenty, level 232 for the Floor Boss, with the event boss only at 240.

Floor twenty-five, Floor Boss level 238, event boss level 245.

Floor thirty, Floor Boss 245, event boss 250.

This seemed like a semi-rapid increase to some, but one had to put it into perspective.

Jake, on his lonesome, had managed to take down the Hive King and Hive Queen, which were both above level 270, so for him to face level 250s, even if they were event bosses, wasn't too difficult as he had also grown stronger since then. The Fallen King also displayed power equal to Jake, the Sword Saint having not needed to get serious yet, and Sylphie and Dina easily doing their jobs.

Some of the floors they encountered could be cheesed, and the challenge it offered circumvented entirely, but on the majority, they just had to face whatever challenge it provided head-on. As they also began encountering floors more like the first ones where a big part of the task was finding the Floor Boss, Jake finally bit the bullet and did his damn job as the resident hunter of the group:

He started tracking.

While sending out seed soldiers or having Jake fly really high up and scout was effective, it was far from the most efficient approach they could take. With that in mind, Jake took out his old tracking skill and got to work.

The first thing he identified was that all Floor Bosses did indeed have unique advantages in the form of increased resources, which was important for the next part. Because they also all had a particular... trait to their energy signature. Once Jake figured this out, things got a lot easier as he no longer had to search only for powerful energy signatures but one particular aspect of a mana signature.

Jake also began to truly embrace his instinctual nature when tracking. He began to trust his intuition more, relying less on physical evidence and more on faint, nearly undetectable traces of auras left behind. His ability to recognize these auras was something he worked on together with the Fallen King, as the Unique Lifeform could often detect "echoes" of presences, but he had no way to properly differentiate them. Jake could.

By floor thirty, Jake had gone from being a shitty hunter in the tracking department to quite a proficient one, which was also reflected by his new tracking skill.

[Traditional Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)] - The hunter does not sit silently in his lodge but actively hunts for his prey. Unlocks proficiency in tracking down prey based on limited clues left behind, including both magical and physical ones. Also allows the hunter to more easily identify characteristics of the game, including mana signatures and aura. Allows the hunter to more easily distinguish and analyze physical tracks. Adds a bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

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[Bestial Hunter's Tracking (Epic)] – A hunter tracks his prey with his mind; the beast tracks through instinct. You use both. Grants high proficiency in tracking

down prey as long as you know their basic signatures, be they physical or magical ones. Makes it far easier to distinguish different kinds of tracks. Relying on your instincts, you are capable of picking up tracks and clues about your prey that others may be unable to, and while tracking, all your senses can be focused on the act. Adds a noticeable bonus to the effect of Perception while tracking.

Two skill upgrades later, the Floor Bosses could no longer hide. Not that they tried to, or that if they did, it would have helped, as Jake's extreme Perception allowed him to track them down even if they made simplistic attempts to obscure their locations.

This ability to track down their targets far quicker sped up the non-linear floors significantly, but even then, it still took them a long time to reach the city floor after floor thirty. Fourteen months and a few days, to be accurate. That was from when they entered Nevermore till they reached floor 30, mind you. Read complete version only at [movel♦firt♦met](#)

While Jake had not gotten any levels out of the first five floors and only a single level in his profession from the next five, doing twenty more floors with ever-increasing levels over so many months still resulted in some progress.

Jake would not call it fast, considering how long it had taken, but it wasn't terrible either if one took into account how long it could take to level in C-grade.

For his profession, he had ended up netting 4 levels since entering Nevermore – or a bit more than one every four months.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 207 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

With him barely doing any alchemy outside of when they had downtime and him primarily experimenting whenever he did do alchemy, it wasn't that bad, honestly.

Due to the still relatively low level of the enemies he faced and the fact he was doing everything with a party, there had been little that could challenge them so far. Due to that, they got fewer levels. Still, he had gotten a total of six levels in his class, so it wasn't all bad.

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 204 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

...

*****DING!** Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 209 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

And with that had naturally also come the race levels.

*****DING!** Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 205 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

...

*****DING!** Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 209 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Annoyingly so, despite his progress, this still put Jake below the level 210 limit... as the only one in his party.

[Fallen King – lvl 214]

[Juvenile Sylphian Hawk– lvl 222]

[Dryad – lvl 212]

[Human – lvl 211]

It had rapidly become clear that Jake earned less experience than everyone else, with Sylphie leveling up far faster than the others. Jake knew this was partly due to her still “growing” as she was only a juvenile. That, coupled with all the treasures she had consumed throughout their exploration of the many floors, it shouldn’t be that surprising.

Then there was the Fallen King, who was also a monster and could consume natural treasures to gain experience. However, compared to Sylphie, the King was far more fastidious and only consumed very specific items, and the items he did want were often something Sylphie also wanted.

The Sword Saint and Dina outpacing Jake’s leveling speed was simply due to the difference in their Paths. Dina was also part monster, and she could level her race passively, but according to her, it had no impact. As a dryad, her way to level passively included her “taking roots” and sitting still for a few centuries. So, for her to level fast was due to her druidic nature, and her supporting the group with different magical buffs and whatnot still had a tangible impact, even in easier fights.

When it came to the old man, he just didn’t have the same demerits as Jake’s class, even if he did express that he got more out of duels rather than group battles.

Jake was a bit miffed at finding himself the lowest-leveled individual, but it was made up for by reaching the city layer after the thirtieth floor, where they once more made their way to the Leaderboards.

One thing they had gotten aplenty during this descent was Nevermore Points. The growth in this department had been quite substantial, the last twenty floors nearly increasing their total tenfold.

Nevermore Points: 14622

Honestly, looking at the points made Jake feel a bit silly for even caring about whatever they may have missed on earlier floors. What truly mattered was completing more floors than anyone else to get high scores; the biggest achievements always seemed to come from doing the hardest challenges. The prevalence of these event bosses on every floor before a city meant that unless a group was good at fighting, they would miss out on a lot.

Putting it into perspective, just completing floors 26-30 had earned them 1400 points without any bonus objectives, achievements, events, or anything like that. 1400 was nearly as many as they had made on floors 1-10 total, truly hammering home how much the points on later floors mattered compared to the earlier ones.

As for how this compared to the average? Well, quite favorably.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-30): 5503

Jake wasn't quite sure what to think about this average. It seemed so unbelievably low, but then again, the average was indeed just the average. He did wonder when they would stop seeing a true average, as there simply weren't enough people doing it, but clearly, that wasn't quite yet.

As for why Jake felt better about his level after seeing the Leaderboards... well, it was due to the final one. Had they taken the top spot yet? No, but they were pretty damn close.

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-30): 14954

332 Nevermore Points. That was all that separated Jake's party from the current record-holders. One good achievement or event away from claiming the top spot.

Jake had talked to the others, and it probably wasn't actually the same team who had the top score on these floors. Chances are that by floor 30, the people who could get a high score and have also already gone so deep this early in the integration were people like Jake and his group that wanted to reach the later levels as fast as possible to get as many points as they possibly could. Fifty years was a long time, but Jake and company had already burned through a year and three months. No one knew what kind of levels

they would encounter later on that potentially had mandatory waiting periods like the arena. Floors 11-30 had all been relatively simple, all just big worlds with different objectives and no big scenarios, meaning they had been allowed to do them relatively quickly. There had only been one partial water level too...

Standing and looking at the Leaderboards, the Sword Saint also noted something.

"Pretty empty here, isn't it?" the old man spoke while looking around.

They were the only ones standing in the massive square in front of the large Leaderboards, with only empty buildings surrounding them. Well, mostly empty.

"There are a few people around, but they seem to mostly be scouts or something," Jake shrugged. "All of them are high level too, so they probably don't expect to be detected."

"I merely find it peculiar the difference is so stark," the Sword Saint smiled.

The city after floor twenty-five had been surprisingly populated, far more so than even the ones after floors fifteen and twenty.

"Well... there are only that many C-grades from the new universe, right?" Dina said. "If they are good enough to bring to floor thirty, don't you want those C-grades to keep going and not settle down?"

"I guess that is possible," Jake said.

"It is also possible they simply travel back to floor twenty-five. Is it not pointless to perform major constructions and invest in every single city layer when travel between the layers is so easy?" the Fallen King asked.

"They do it for the prestige," the Sword Saint smiled. "To be on a higher floor is a show of power."

"Ree," Sylphie chimed in.

"Good point," Jake nodded as he translated. "Same as how the best birds get the highest nests in the trees and can look down on the worse birds while not getting pooped on."

"That... kind of makes sense?" Dina said, a bit confused.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched, offended.

"Yeah, of course you always make sense," Jake smiled as he rubbed her feathers.

“Sure...” Dina muttered, not entirely convinced. Overall their group dynamic had improved over all these months, and Dina had opened up more. She was still pretty shy, but by now, Jake was certain that was pretty much just her personality.

“Let’s not delay anymore and proceed to the next floor? Hopefully, the difficulty will begin to spike soon,” the Fallen King said, his impatience growing over this period.

“Yeah, let us,” Jake agreed. Seeing as there were no complaints, the group proceeded to the next gateway leading toward the next floor. They all shared the hope that things would get harder from here and get offered a proper challenge.

Little did they know that the thirty-first floor would become the first major roadblock for most parties, even the extremely talented ones, as they were about to encounter something quite a bit different than any prior floors.

While Jake and his party were busy diving further and further into Nevermore, they were unaware of the competition that had now begun arriving in Nevermore City. The records they had seen on the Leaderboards on floors five, ten, fifteen, and twenty had all been surpassed already by new parties diving into the dungeon. If it was due to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper entering or simply that the invisible hand of the system was at work, no one knew. All they did know was that a time of competition had truly arrived at Nevermore as pinnacle groups appeared from all over the multiverse one by one.

Yip of Yore’s Chosen, Ell’Hakan. The disciple of the former champion of Nevermore in the last era, entering shortly after the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Ghost King Azal. One of the most talented Risen ever seen arriving shortly after.

High Justicar Elevian, entering with the Augur of Hope, Jacob, as the representative from the new universe.

Warlord Davion of Valhal. Entering with a party of supreme elites, his mandatory party member from the new universe, a Runemaiden named Carmen. As simply the person from the new universe they needed to enter, there were few expectations of her, yet the first thing she did after arriving at Nevermore City was enter the arena. A hundred consecutive victories later, she was dragged away by her party to enter the dungeon, little doubt remaining of her skill.

Countless more factions arrived within weeks of each other, many of them not even advertising their participation. It was suspected that nearly all major factions sent several elite groups, with additional groups also arriving from the Order of the Malefic Viper only two weeks after the Chosen had entered, led by the Malefic Dragonkin, Draskil.

Several independently powerful people also made their entrance along with many more parties from major factions. Three additional Unique Lifeforms after the Fallen King

were even spotted, two of which hailed from the new universe. The United Tribes appeared to have allied with one of these darlings of the multiverse, making many also consider them contenders for the top spot on the Leaderboards.

When the usual information brokers began to believe no more exceptional groups would appear, a surprise addition few had expected stepped out of one of the public teleporters in in Nevermore City as this particular faction, despite their prominence, did not have a permanent compound at Nevermore.

A party had arrived from the Dao Sect – the organization founded by the Primordial known as the Daofather. They were a faction that rarely even sent people to Nevermore as they preferred to isolate themselves from the rest of the multiverse. They even had a philosophy counterproductive to most norms, as they viewed killing as something to be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Yet they had shown up, and they had shown up in force. The high-level information brokers quickly gathered information on four of the individuals in the group, all of which were personal disciples of gods. Still, when it came to the apparent leader of this group, they had difficulties. They knew he had to be from the new universe, as none of the other four were.

In the few hours this group spent in Nevermore City before entering the dungeon, these information brokers learned only two things about this mysterious leader.

The first was that he was the Chosen of one of the twelve Daolords of the Dao Sect, the Lifesoul Daolord. A true pinnacle god.

Secondly was a name. Not a Daoist title, which the members of the Dao Sect liked to adopt, but an actual name:

Eron.

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Chapter 665: Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth

The thirty-first floor felt different the moment they arrived. They walked out of the gateway and into a large chamber that looked out of some temple, with white pillars lining the walls and a large elevated stone platform in the middle. Towards the other end of the chamber was a massive gate with a glowing rune on it, emanating impressive power. Through his sphere, Jake also felt that outside of these chamber walls, only the

void existed, meaning they were definitely not meant to try and go there. Not that he even thought they could, as the walls gave him the feeling they were nigh-indestructible.

However, none of these things explained why this place felt different. The explanation for that came from the mana in the air... rather than being the usual environmental mana, this was not in any way natural. Exchanging a glance with the Fallen King and feeling Sylphie shuffle a bit on his shoulder, they all felt it.

This was the domain of a living being, or perhaps they were even within the body of some creature, though that didn't seem likely considering the void outside the walls. No, chances are, they were in a claimed domain akin to a world formed by a high-grade space mage.

As they all took in the environment, the introduction to the floor appeared.

Welcome to the Thirty-first floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 14622

Staring at the message, one thing instantly sprung to his eyes. This was the first floor without a bonus objective. Perhaps that meant achievements and bonus events were also limited on this floor. Seeing the name, though, Jake felt quite a bit more confident. Labyrinth... Jake was good at labyrinths.

Jake was about to speak but stopped himself as he faintly felt a new presence appear.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome! Oh, I am so excited to have some more visitors! Such esteemed guests too!" a jovial voice echoed as the entire chamber lit up. Lights of all colors of the rainbow lined the walls as an entire light show began, and on the central platform, a figure appeared as space warped.

Jake was instantly put on alert as he observed the being.

Blue skin, two legs, and two arms with a generally humanoid form, making Jake almost mistake them for a blue human. Yet the creature had four eyes on its head, a large mouth, no nose, and instead of hair, short tendrils that slightly wriggled every time the creature spoke grew out of its scalp. A loose-fitting blue robe covered its body, only held

in place by a belt, but this did mean Jake couldn't see if the creature had any other peculiar features hidden beneath.

"My name is Minaga, your glorious host. Truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance," the creature spoke with a big smile as he looked at Jake and the others as the entire light show died down. Jake used Identify and was taken aback.

[Minaga – lvl 275]

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this Minaga was more powerful than any C-grade he had ever stood before. Definitely stronger than anything in Nevermore... which did make Jake wonder why he – Jake was pretty sure the creature identified as male - had shown up at the beginning of this floor.

As Jake wondered this, he felt the Fallen King tense up at his side from the creature laying his eyes on him, and as the being spoke... he understood why.

"Oh, a fellow Unique Lifeform? How fun, how fun," this Minaga said as he looked down at the Fallen King for a few moments before shifting his gaze to Jake. "And a C-grade Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Even a Transcendent? Oh, is that a mutated version of Nature's Attendant's Bloodline? Interesting, interesting... but not quite as interesting as you, Sylphian Hawk! Never even heard of your race before! I know Sylphs, but... oh wait, too much information, right? Ha ha!"

"I am beginning to get the feeling you have not shown up before us as an opponent," the Sword Saint spoke as he bowed. "I am Miyamoto."

"Right on!" Minaga said with a grin. "As I said, then I am your host! It is your honor and your privilege to have me let you go through the wonderful labyrinth that I have spent oh-so-long constructing."

"Are you a dungeon master of some kind?" Jake asked curiously. "Do you perhaps work for the Wyrmgod and made this floor for him?"

Based on how this Unique Lifeform spoke, he obviously knew of the outside world, meaning he was likely someone who had existed on the outside before this. Perhaps someone who had just entered Nevermore around the last integration.

"I work *with*, not *for* the Wyrmgod, but otherwise, your assessment is correct... Jake, was it?"

"I never told you my name."

"Right, you didn't. Anyway, let's get this show on the road!" the creature said, refusing to elaborate.

“Who are you?” the King asked, refusing to let the topic go.

“I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, but more commonly just known as Minaga. Oh, well, I guess, seeing as you are all pretty influential people, I can give a small hint. I know who you all are, and you know so little about me, so it’s only fair. I am the creator of this labyrinth, and I am more than you see before you right now. But most importantly, I like to snack on mana berries,” the being said with a grin.

“Very informative,” Jake shook his head. “Either way, you seem to know about us, and you are not particularly willing to tell us much about you, but can you at least tell us what we are meant to do here? Seeing as the gate behind you is still shut closed, I assume we must have you open it?”

“Straight to the point! I like it! Unlike Vilastromoz, he never likes getting to the point... unless the point is a poisoned needle he pricks you with, in which case he can be a bit too happy getting to the point,” Minaga said as he made an overdramatic sigh. “But you are right. See, I wanted to make this entire thing a bit more interesting, so before you enter my labyrinth, you have a choice to make!”

Opening his arms, the entire room lit up once more as five giant pillars of light descended from nowhere, each of the pillars having a giant floating rune within that corresponded to a word. Jake quickly checked them all from left to right.

Initiate – Apprentice – Adept – Mage – Archmage This chapter is updated by *novel•fire•net*

“Seeing as we are all smart people, I don’t think I have to explain to you what we have there. That’s right, it’s, of course, different difficulties! A floor with multiple difficulty levels from the very beginning is quite innovative, eh?” Minaga rhetorically asked in a proud tone.

“Naturally, it’s a great idea. I came up with it, after all. Alright, alright, it isn’t overly original, but you didn’t see it on any prior floors, now did you? So, any questions?”

“When you say difficulty level, how exactly does it impact the floor?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Everything,” Minaga smiled. “Size, danger, enemy level, more powerful variants, the bosses, complexity of the labyrinth. It is quite an extensive makeover. Also, it isn’t just this floor. My labyrinth is kind of big, so I decided to just make it take up ten floors to make it more fun.”

Jake frowned a bit at hearing it was ten... wasn’t there meant to be a city layer after floor thirty-fiv-

"You are probably thinking, 'but isn't there a city layer after floor thirty-five?' and you are right that there should be, but you see, I decided to make it a part of the labyrinth! Once more, innovation at its finest. Now, which difficulty do you all want? Do note that you can only lower or increase it by one level every time you enter a new floor."

There wasn't really any need to discuss it, was there? Jake quickly exchanged a glance with the others and was about to answer as their "host" spoke once more.

"Actually, why do I even ask? You are, of course, going for the archmage difficulty, right?" Minaga asked as he tilted his head while looking at them. "If you didn't, that would be pretty darn pathetic considering your party setup. Oh, and also, doing it all on the Archmage difficulty gives the best rewards, so I highly recommend it. Maybe there is even something special at the end if you do it all on the highest difficulty... hint hint."

"Can't see why we wouldn't go for the Archmage difficulty," Jake shrugged. "It isn't like Nevermore was particularly challenging before this. Wait, unless choosing the highest difficulty means submerging the entire labyrinth underwater..."

"No worries, no worries, no water theme here," Minaga shook his head. "You know, I never even liked these water-themed floors? Yet the Wyrmgod insists on having them every damn era for some silly reason. Sure, you can argue it is unfair for aquatic lifeforms that Nevermore doesn't really cater to them, but it isn't like the system doesn't go out of its way to help them deal with the harsh reality of dry land."

"Well, great. How do we select the difficulty?" Jake asked, glad that at least the Unique Lifeform had some idea of how to design a proper dungeon floor.

"You already have," Minaga grinned as four of the pillars disappeared, leaving only the final one in place. It lit up with intense light before it exploded in a cascade of multicolored wisps, bathing the chamber. Their host looked damn proud of the display as he smiled at the group.

"With that done, good luck to you all! Ah, and Jake, don't worry too much about all that Yip of Yore business; I am sure you got it covered! Then again, I will definitely say the exact same thing to Ell'Hakan when he appears and tell him not to worry about you, but don't let that take away from me encouraging you right now! You dying would also make a bunch of factions sad, especially the Endless Empire, so at least don't die inside my labyrinth, alright? Dealing with complaints is so annoying," Minaga said in his usual jovial tone. "Now, let the challenge begin! Don't get too lost inside, okay?"

With those words, the grand gate behind him opened. Jake stared at the creature while processing what he had just said and his clearly contemporary information. Minaga gave them a final grin and a farewell as he slowly began fading away.

"I'll be watching with high expectations! Oh, and of course, remember to have fun!"

Seeing as he was gone and the path forward was open, the Fallen King scoffed.

“What an insufferable creature,” the Unique Lifeform complained about the other Unique Lifeform.

“I thought he was kind of funny...” Dina said, a bit unsure.

“This creature is clearly not some random dungeon monster or Floor Boss, and he seems fully aware of what is happening in the outside world in real time,” the Sword Saint mused. “The level of 275 is clearly not accurate either, though he did register to me as truly only at that level.”

“Maybe some kind of cloning skill?” Jake wondered aloud. “Or perhaps summoning of some kind. There could be a lot of explanations. Shit, maybe he just has an earpiece and has someone talking in his ear, telling him what to do and say.”

“I don’t,” the voice of Minaga suddenly echoed through the room.

They all stood silently for a few seconds until it became clear the damn guy had no intentions of saying anything more or being anything other than an echoing voice.

“As I said, absolutely insufferable,” the King once more said.

“Ree?” Sylphie tilted her head.

“Yeah, I also think the comedic timing was pretty good. The Fallen King is just mad this Unique Lifeform is more unique than him,” Jake joked around. “But I do agree it would be fun to prove him wrong.”

“Good luck with that!”

Jake smiled at the encouraging voice as he looked towards the gate leading onwards.
“Oh, we won’t need luck.”

“He, he... I think you will. Did I forget to mention one of the more interesting properties of my little labyrinth?”

Something came out of the gate leading into the labyrinth as he said this. A dense blueish mist or perhaps fog entered the room, and Jake frowned as it slowly reached them. Seeing through the fog was incredibly difficult, and Jake found his vision limited to only a few hundred meters ahead of him. And he was the one best off due to his high Perception stat.

The others could barely see a few dozen meters ahead, with even skills getting limited. More than that, Jake felt like the atmosphere was somehow denser. Wanting to test the

environment, he tried using One Step, but rather than teleport to the other side of the room, he only moved eight or so meters.

“Not that easy, huh?”Minaga said jokingly. **“This is a special something I cooked up to not make this entire labyrinth so easily passed. Space mages are damn annoying and find ways to surpass things, and scouting skills would nullify much of the challenge, so I got rid of them. On, and hey, seeing as none of you seem into that divination stuff, I guess I can share that I even created false flags and whatnot to make divination actively harmful. I know, I know, my genius once more shines through. Ah, but don’t worry, the rooms with fighting in them don’t have the mist present, only the hallways.”**

“Are you going to narrate and keep talking throughout this entire labyrinth?” Jake asked.

“A privilege, is it not?”

“More like an added challenge through constant auditory mental attacks,” Jake said jokingly while shaking his head.

“You know, the vast majority of people really avoid saying anything negative aloud as they are afraid I will up the difficulty or because they think I have some other way to screw them over. To clarify, I do. Not that I am actually offended; a bit of banter is what makes the world spin. Besides, if any of you were negatively tangibly affected simply by my talking, then that seems more like a you-problem and less of a me-problem. In which case, I shall simply view the situation as me helping you overcome your weak mentality. Or watch you die. A lot of people that weak-minded usually just die.”

“Sure, sure,” Jake nodded as he turned and looked at the others through the blue mist. “Let’s get going?”

“Let us,” the Sword Saint agreed.

None of them wanted to delay more than necessary as they moved into Minaga’s Labyrinth through the giant gate. The hall they entered was massive, nearly twenty meters across and forty meters high, with an arced ceiling. Jake watched out for traps as they walked through using his sphere but spotted nothing.

Seeing as it was relatively safe, they picked up the pace and rushed through straight ahead. Rushed, in this case, not actually being that fast, as none of their movement-related skills worked properly. Even just running wasn’t as fast as it should be due to the mist. On their way, they encountered several side paths but kept going forward until, soon enough, they met another large magical gate. Studying it, Jake saw that it had four magical seals on it of some kind.

“Oh, what is this? A sealed gate you must pass to keep moving forward? Looks like you will need four keys to unlock it. Where could these keys be? Perhaps some of the side paths you passed earlier lead to rooms that may offer a key, or maybe they lead to dead ends or traps. I guess you will have to go check.”

Jake stared at the gate and slowly nodded. All kinds of perception-related abilities were limited. Sylphie even complained about the wind being completely silent. This place was designed to force people to slowly explore each path. Of course... there was one thing Minaga could not address.

Closing his eyes, Jake focused as he took a deep breath. A Pulse of Perception echoed out of his being as he opened his eyes again and smiled.

It was time to take their dear host down a peg.

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Chapter 666: Nevermore: The Devil Is In the Details

”Lucky bunch! Found your way to the first room right off the bat without encountering any dead ends! Now to find the key... if there even is one here!” Minaga said with his usual glee as Jake and company walked out of what looked like a wall of fog and entered a massive chamber. As their host had explained, these large chambers did not have any of the usual mist, and it felt liberating to finally be free of the restrictive environment.

On second thought, merely calling the chamber they had entered massive was a bit fallacious. It was pretty darn humongous and seemed to be at least a good hundred kilometers deep with a width of about two kilometers. This narrowness was heavily used, as what appeared in the distance was a derelict-looking massive castle with plenty of defenses in front of it.

In front of the castle, a dozen rows of ramparts went from wall to wall, with every one of these walls filled with creatures. Taking a deep breath, Jake could practically smell the death energy emanating from the chamber, which made sense considering the enemies he saw on the ramparts.

Using Identity, the theme was pretty damn obvious.

[Skeleton Swordsman – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Spearman– lvl 240]

[Skeleton Marksman – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Mage – lvl 240]

[Skeleton Captain – lvl 245]

“Skeletons, huh,” Jake muttered. “So original.”

He and the others waited for a few seconds, but nothing came. Jake looked at the ceiling of the chamber, wondering if their dear host had decided to leave, but he still felt them being observed. Maybe he didn’t talk while they were inside the chambers?

“I assume there is some kind of boss here,” the Sword Saint said.

“Let me check real quick,” Jake said as he jumped and summoned his wings. He flew all the way to the ceiling in little time and peered past the many ramparts towards the castle. There, standing on a large tower atop the castle, he saw a large skeleton in fine ivory armor surrounded by several Skeleton Captains.

[Skeleton Bonelord – lvl 250]

“Found it, level 250 at the central castle. Likely the one with the key. If not, it should be easy to find if we make it to the castle,” Jake said through the golden mark left by the King.

Now, why was Jake so sure the key was there in the room?

Finding the room itself had been pretty simple using his Pulse of Perception. Throughout the last fifteen months in Nevermore, Jake had to use far more Pulses than ever before, allowing him to slowly build up more and more resistance to the point where he could now do it pretty comfortably at regular intervals without getting a headache.

On the way, they avoided dozens of dead-end paths, traps, and hallways that would make you walk in circles for a few hours, if not days, while heading straight for this large one.

However, this wasn’t the only room he saw. In fact, Jake spotted four during their run, but this was the only one he had bothered entering, which leads back to the original question... why was he so sure the key was in this room and not any of the prior ones? The answer was easy:

Intuition.

Jake didn't just have his sphere in his arsenal of cheats. He also had all his other totally balanced advantages. His intuition had told him this was the room to check out, so even if Minaga tried to muddy the water by hinting that maybe the key wasn't there, Jake didn't listen.

Looking at the boss in the distance, Jake pulled out his bow and took aim as he began charging an Arcane Powershot. He saw no reason not to rush through this room and move on quickly, and on the way there, he and the others had agreed to do things fast. Jake wanted to get a good opening shot on the boss, and if they had to face every enemy on the floor at once, so be it.

After he had sufficiently charged the attack, Jake let go of the string, releasing an explosion of arcane energy as his arrow of destruction surged forward. Jake had expected it to soar toward the boss and potentially even blow it off the tower, but things did not go as expected. The second the arrow appeared above the first of the many defensive ramparts leading further into the room, a barrier sprung up, making Jake's arrow explode while only leaving the shimmering white wall of energy with a few cracks on it.

Below, on the rampart, Jake saw over fifty Skeleton Mages stand and channel with their staffs, led by a Captain also holding a staff. The barrier extended up from the ramparts but did not cover the gate leading below, making it quite apparent you were meant to through there and not use ranged attacks from afar. In essence, Minaga wanted to force them into a melee.

"Seems like we will have to go through each rampart individually," the Sword Saint said, having seen Jake's failed attack.

"Or continue to bombard the barrier until it breaks," Jake offered.

"There are too many... it will be faster to just go through directly," the old man said dismissively.

"I concur with the swordsman; trying to destroy each barrier individually is a waste of time," the Fallen King agreed. *"It isn't like the alternative will be that more difficult."*

Jake surrendered to their will and put away his bow as he flew downwards to join his party that was already charging the first rampart. When they got close, the mages stopped channeling energy into the barrier to face them in combat as nearly a hundred melee-focused skeletons stood in defensive stances just past the gate.

The two groups clashed. One with hundreds of skeletons twenty to thirty levels above their opponents, and the other three humanoids, a bird, and a Unique Lifeform. The result was as expected.

Bones went flying everywhere as a giant golden hammer was swung sideways into a crowd of skeletons, crescent waves of water cut bones apart and sent limbs flying, arcane explosions bombarded all the skeleton mages as arrows fell from the sky while roots shot up from the ground, making them unable to dodge.

On the second rampart in the distance, nearly a hundred Skeleton Marksmen released a rain of arrows, but the attacks were all met with a green whirlwind that scattered their attack. Without even bothering to make sure they finished off all the skeletons, their party moved forward while staying close to each other to avoid getting ganged up on.

The second rampart met a similar fate, followed by the third and the fourth. For the fifth, the entire wall was torn apart as the Fallen King released a golden beam of energy to blow away all the skeletons guarding it. Jake, not wanting to be outdone, went ham at the sixth one as a fully-charged Arcane Powershot one-shot the Captain of the skeletons while blowing up several more skeletons unlucky enough to stand too close. Joining in on the fun, the Sword Saint went in first on the seventh as he used his Rainblade and released a torrent of slashes, killing dozens of skeletons within a minute while also taking down the Captain. Sylphie and Dina didn't get to take down a rampart solo as Jake, the King, and the Sword Saint all felt competitive while facing the remaining five, going all-out until they finally reached the castle.

With a roar, the Bonelord released its aura as all the remaining skeletons seemed to get some kind of buff. The Captains around the boss also seemed to get stronger as they all jumped off the tower and ran down the side of the castle walls towards Jake and company.

One of them was blasted into the wall by an arrow before it had even gotten a quarter of the way, with a second getting embedded by a substantial wave of force. The Bonelord seemed angry and jumped off the tower, too, as it pulled out a giant axe of bones and began flying at high speed, aiming directly at Dina, who was manipulating a forest of vines to rip apart skeleton soldiers chasing from behind.

It never even got close as the Sword Saint met it mid-air, and after a brief exchange of blows, the Bonelord was forced back with a few cuts on its otherwise pristine armor but was otherwise unharmed. What little injuries it had taken rapidly healed as it released a dense white aura of pure death energy. All around it, the death mana from the many slain skeletons began to gather and empower the Bonelord as it resumed its attack on the old swordsman.

The two of them had a pretty damn ferocious battle for several minutes as the Sword Saint failed to ever get any substantial advantage, even after he made slight use of his boosting skill. Jake ended up joining in as the constant army of skeletons storming out from within the castle started to die down, and Dina handled all those chasing after them from the earlier ramparts. Sylphie and the Fallen King would also soon be done with the Captains and join them.

With Jake and the Sword Saint both, they managed to push back the Bonelord despite it constantly healing and getting empowered for every skeleton that died around them. It was burning through energy at a ludicrous pace as Jake counted himself blowing off the Bonelord's head at least ten times. It kept fighting with its axe and released death affinity attacks and ranged bone spurs, occasionally forcing the two of them on the defensive.

When Sylphie joined them, as the King had the remaining skeletons handled, they finally managed to get the decisive blow, and soon enough, the Bonelord stopped regenerating and died. The second it fell, the wisps of deathly fire burning within the eyes of all the skeletons were also snuffed out as they crumbled like marionettes with their strings cut.

As the body of the Bonelord crumbled to dust, a magical rune floated up from its body before flashing and disappearing. Jake faintly saw that a small tattoo of the same rune had appeared on the back of his hand. Needless to say, this was one of the keys.

"Let's go," Jake said as they rushed out of the room towards where the next key was. As they made it back to the hallway and into it, the disembodied voice of Minaga once more joined them.

"You know, that was pretty damn good! Made it look easy. There was even a key for you! Three more to go, and you can open the gate and continue. You got lucky once, but I shall still wish you luck in having a repeat!"

Rushing out of the second room with the second key in hand, a crumbling volcano, and hundreds of dead elementals of the lava and earth variety in their wake, their dear host spoke again.

"I must say, you are quite a lucky bunch! Straight from one room holding a key into the next! Almost makes me think you found a way to circumvent all my checks and balances and aren't just getting extremely lucky, but that can't be, right? Nah, definitely not, so watch out for traps and find the right path to the next key... if you can!"

"See, something unlikely happening two times is a coincidence, but three times? Now, that is a pattern. Then again, some people are really just *that* lucky, you know? Even I cannot get around some of the more intangible aspects of this world, and I guess it is entirely possible you merely have increased luck or perhaps some kind of reality-bending skill? Though my mist would stop that... hm... I guess there is also that... Nah, that is too much of an assumption!"

"So, by now, I think we all know this isn't how things are supposed to work, and you clearly found a way to not only be aware of the layout of the labyrinth but also correctly determine which rooms hold keys, which is honestly impressive. See, if you, my dear guests, could do one of these things, that would be one

thing, but both? Really? Isn't that a bit too much? This is why designing a perfect dungeon is impossible and why we can't have nice things. Damn Bloodlines and Transcendents ruining everything."

Jake and company were making their way back towards the gate that required the four keys at a brisk pace as they listened to Minaga complain about their group. It had to be noted that he only complained. There was no interference or even direct questions posed to any of them. It was more like he was just voicing his own thoughts while forcing Jake and company to listen.

"Two Bloodlines and one Transcendent... oh yeah, and a Unique Lifeform. I guess I can't rule out some Unique skill that I wasn't able to account for either, but I definitely think it is one of the other three suspects. Now, the swordsman doesn't strike me as the kind to have a skill allowing him to find stuff easier, much less have a Transcendent skill related to it, so I will temporarily rule him out, which narrows it down to one of two Bloodlines."

Jake would lie if he thought that Minaga wouldn't figure out what his Bloodline was didn't cross his mind. Even if Minaga didn't figure it out, the Wyrmgod clearly would. Considering they would spend fifty years there... shit; the Wyrmgod probably already had a good idea.

The thing is, Jake didn't want to fuck himself over by getting fewer points than he should have. Additionally, it would feel wrong to fuck over his party members if Jake decided to effectively nerf himself and keep his true capabilities hidden.

"Dina is the granddaughter of Nature's Attendant, so she is a candidate. Assuming she is also capable of communicating with plants the same way he is, I can't really see it being her, though. Of course, it is entirely possible her Bloodline mutated, and she can now communicate with something else I hadn't accounted for, but with her skillset and the serious lack of anything to even converse with, I am inclined to rule her out. Which leaves us with Jake." Original content can be found at *novel✕fire✕net*

Jake kept quiet as he was inclined to hear what the guy thought his Bloodline was about.

"Based on everything publicly displayed so far, it appears to be related to presences. I also have my own pet theory that your Origin-manipulation is at least partly rooted in your Bloodline, so that strengthens the presence-related Bloodline theory. This initially made me guess that maybe your Bloodline allows you to also detect presences far more easily, and by using that, you would be able to locate rooms that contained presences... the thing is, how would that help you navigate the hallways? Pick the rooms with keys out from those without? Well, of course, it wouldn't, so that leaves a few possibilities. It either isn't your

Bloodline, your Bloodline is quite a bit different than anyone had estimated, or it really isn't you but one of your other party members."

"What do you think the answer is?" Jake asked.

"That it is you and that the current information of what your Bloodline is capable of is severely limited, making it far more powerful than anyone truly knows. Well, anyone besides the Malefic Viper. To make someone at a low grade their Chosen, they have to have something very special about them, and I am willing to bet your Bloodline is just that special."

Jake was silent for a moment as he wondered aloud. "Which begs the question... what will be your response?"

"Now...oh... oh wait! You think that I think you are cheating and unhappy with that? True, true; I am a bit miffed, but to say I am unhappy? Far from it! You break my labyrinth all you want and use any advantage you can possibly get! Go ham; that is what you are in Nevermore for, isn't it? To truly let loose. Don't worry about me sharing details about your Bloodline either. I am a strict believer in confidentiality! Only me and the Wyrmgod are aware of anything happening here, and none of us are sharing."

"I guess that is a little comforting," Jake said, not entirely sure if he believed him.

"Besides, Jake... do you really think this is the first time I have encountered anything like this? Even if you can perfectly navigate the labyrinth, that doesn't mean this will be a cakewalk. I made this place to challenge everyone and to do that, I had to consider a lot of things. Many potential guests have vast skill sets, including Transcendents and Bloodlines. Can I make a perfect labyrinth? No, but I can try. The devil is in the details, and trust me, I am verydetail-orientated. So keep having fun, and keep breaking stuff. I'll be watching with glee. Okay, I might complain a bit, but don't take it to heart!"

Jake shook his head, and he and his party finally appeared before the gate leading forward. Lifting his hand, the tattoos on his hand began glowing as they all flew off it straight towards the gate. The four runes all began glowing before merging together... and the second they did, the entire door turned red.

All of the runes began warping as they formed four words.

Demon Seal Don't Open.

The door slammed open, and all the mist in the hallway was pushed away as a torrent of flames spewed out, forcing Jake and the others to jump back. Behind the door was a swirling portal, and as Jake was still trying to figure out what was going on, two large claws grabbed the sides of the now-open door.

“I did tell you... the devil is in the details.”

An aura rushed out of the portal as a five-meter-tall creature pulled itself out of the gate, and Jake barely had time to use Identify as it attacked.

[Demon Lord – lvl 270]

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Chapter 667: Nevermore: Demon Lord

Jake was blasted backward as he blocked with a barrier of stable arcane mana. A torrent of flames bellowed out from the Demon Lord, obscuring its form even as it walked forward. As the one closest to the gate, Jake had taken the brunt of it, but he had reacted quickly due to his danger sense, not truly taking any damage.

A wall of roots shot up from the ground just after Jake got shot back, but a blast of deep red flames removed it instantly. Everyone retreated back to Jake as the Demon Lord walked through the burning wall of vines, properly revealing its form for the first time.

As Jake had initially seen, it was about five meters tall and had rock-like outgrowths on its skin; all of them were cracked with red energy pulsing beneath. It carried a large sword that looked like it was made of stone with red glowing veins of lava running through it and otherwise didn't have any equipment, its bottom side covered with a loin cloth of sorts. The demon's entire body released a constant stream of heat energy, and its form burned perpetually. If its skin was red due to the fire or it was just its usual skin tone, Jake didn't know. Its head looked vaguely humanoid with two large curled horns like that of a goat, and it had two burning red eyes that stared down the party in front of it.

There was no doubt about it... this was the strongest foe they had faced in Nevermore so far. That entire difficulty-setting thing allowed them to encounter opponents worth fighting far sooner than expected; this Demon Lord was proof of that.

Jake grinned as the Demon Lord also assessed the five of them. The Demon Lord sneered as it spoke in a deep voice, its words infused with Willpower.

“Kneel.”

That command became the starting shot as their entire party moved in unison. The Demon Lord legitimately seemed taken by surprise at their immediate response, but it

still managed to react. A blast of force blasted it in the side, making the demon stumble slightly as it blocked a blow from the Sword Saint, roaring at the water mixed into his attacks.

Jake shot an arrow toward the demon's ankle to try and limit its movements, but it managed to shift its stance and do an upward slash, sending out a massive wave of fire that sent the Sword Saint retreating. Just as it was about to do a follow-up, a green hawk barreled into it from behind, Sylphie having turned herself into wind earlier to get around the demon.

Sylphie managed to punch a hole in the demon's backside from the impact but still found herself on the defensive as the wound released a blast of fire, and the blood that dripped down the demon's body burned like lava.

Dina also finally released a proper attack as a massive spear of wood shot towards the Demon Lord, forcing it to block with the flat side of its large blade. The impact still sent it skirting backward and gave Jake and the King an opportunity to each land a ranged blow in the form of a golden blast of force and an arrow. As the demon stumbled, the Sword Saint got close and cut its leg, aiming to sever the tendons on its ankles. Assuming it had any.

The Demon Lord roared and slammed its sword into the ground with both hands. A massive blast of fire exploded out from its body, forcing them all to disengage. When the Demon Lord's form was revealed again, it looked calmer. It also seemed to have truly realized it was surrounded by powerful people. It regarded them for a moment before grunting.

"Very well."

It squeezed the handle of its sword, and the stone-like sword cracked. Stone slowly fell away, revealing a pulsing orange blade of metal that released heat powerful enough to make Jake activate Scales of the Malefic Viper just to be on the safe side. Dina also responded quickly and sent out green waves of energy toward each of them, resulting in a faint glowing green barrier covering their bodies. Jake instantly felt the temperature lower and gave Dina a nod as they prepared to reengage the demon.

The demon swung its empowered blade toward the people in front of it and sent out a crescent wave of flames. A golden magic barrier met the flames, and Jake jumped back as he began charging his Arcane Powershot. The Sword Saint stormed forward after the King dispelled the barrier, and together with Sylphie, the two of them engaged their opponent in a melee. The Fallen King also began charging some magic of his own as Dina retreated back and stood beside Jake as she also began preparing a spell of her own.

Aware of what they were doing, the Demon Lord wanted to stop them, but the Sword Saint wouldn't allow it. He activated his boosting skill properly for the first time since entering Nevermore, and Sylphie soon followed suit as the Demon Lord got more and

more aggressive. They both needed to avoid the sword at all costs, and Jake saw that Dina's protection spell wouldn't last much longer against the intense fire energy.

Luckily it didn't have to.

Jake was ready and sent the mental go-ahead to the Fallen King. The Unique Lifeform reacted instantly as two massive golden chains erupted from his hands and flew straight toward the Demon Lord. The demon tried to avoid them, but just then, thorned roots shot up from the ground and entrapped its feet, allowing the chains to hit.

Less than a quarter of a second later, an arcane explosion was released as an Arcane Powershot shot through the air, releasing a devastating trail of destruction. The Demon Lord roared as it blocked with one of its arms, not able to raise its blade in time.

Despite the power of Jake's attack, the Demon Lord managed to partly block the hit. Its arm had a huge chunk of flesh blown off, revealing the obsidian-like bone beneath, but the Demon Lord also borrowed the momentum from the impact to retreat. The Sword Saint still managed to give chase, and using his Rainblade, he did an upwards cut aimed straight at where Jake had also just hit. Once more, the Demon Lord was ready to respond, but the Fallen King yanked the golden chains, making the demon fail to dodge and allowing the Sword Saint to land a solid cut. Even then, the arm was not fully severed; the sword stopped by the bone, only cutting halfway through.

Just as Jake feared their attack had failed, a green bullet swept through the hallway. The arm was hit straight on, and in an explosion of fire, blood, and bone, the lower arm of the Demon Lord was severed just below the elbow.

Sylphie materialized not far from Jake, a few of her feathers burned despite her ethereal form when attacking the demon. Jake had already pulled out another arrow and was prepared to continue his attack when the Demon Lord once more erupted in crimson flames. The golden chains of the Fallen King rapidly melted away, and the demon retreated back, but it was once more caught by Dina attempting to immobilize it. The Fallen King also didn't take its chain being melted lightly as the Unique Lifeform flew forward, his ivory claw now glowing golden.

Jake, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie also gave chase as the Demon King took blow after blow. Its body was honestly ridiculously tough, its metallic bones so durable that causing any proper damage was difficult. Dina had to soon focus solely on protecting them from the extreme heat aura from the Demon Lord.

The demon's sword was still by far the most dangerous thing. Due to overconfidence in his barrier, the Fallen King had attempted to get close and land a solid blow, believing his defenses would hold up. This was proven not to be the case when the King was slammed in the chest, the barrier breaking, and the Fallen King being sent flying several kilometers down the hallway. The Sword Saint also failed to respond in time at one time

when the large Demon Lord used the severed bone on its hand to stab him in the shoulder, leaving a nasty burning wound.

They all felt pressured, but the situation was still under control. Yet the Demon Lord didn't seem afraid in any way, just annoyed. It fought valiantly, but it was slower than any one of them besides Dina and the Fallen King, so it failed to do a lot of damage that Dina couldn't quickly handle. The Sword Saint also managed to nullify many of the major fire attacks, though it did look like his own blows utilizing the concept of rain failed to do much. Nevertheless, the wounds accumulated on the Demon Lord, and considering its missing hand, it was only a matter of time.

At least, they thought it was. Sure, they had considered the Demon Lord had some hidden tricks, but what it did next was still surprising.

Swinging the blade widely, a wave of fire was sent out, making Jake and the others momentarily retreat like always. Usually, when this happened, it just gave Jake time to charge up an attack, but this time the Demon Lord changed its behavior entirely.

Rather than keep attacking, it straightened its back and scoffed.

"Pathetic... this body," the Demon Lord said as it frowned deeply before turning to the five of them. "You are worthy adversaries. We will meet again."

With its one remaining hand, the Demon Lord stuck the sword into the ground, and a pentagram-shaped magic circle appeared beneath its feet. Jake reacted quickly and fired an arrow, but a red barrier covered the demon, and before anyone else could attack, a red flash of light brought the Demon Lord away. The source of this content is novel~fire~net

What the fuck? Jake cursed internally at the fucking thing just running away. He was about to yell at their host when a system message popped up.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Demon Lord during your first encounter. 250 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, so at least they got a bunch of points for it. Jake still didn't feel satisfied.

"Should we have gone all-out using boosting skills and everything?" he questioned aloud.

"I... I don't think that would work. That was a Demon Lord, after all," Dina said, shaking her head.

The four of them turned to look at Dina, with even Sylphie, who had landed on Jake's shoulder, tilting her head.

Dina seemed to get what they wanted, as she explained. "That is a Demon Lord, a very particular subspecies of the demon race. Demon Lords are notoriously difficult to kill, and they are even able to resurrect if slain. These are not true resurrections but more like their remnant energy regathers, and an entirely new creature with a new Truesoul is born in its place, though at a slightly lower level in most cases. Due to this, many just seal away Demon Lords instead. In the end, time kills everything that is not a god, no matter how tricky they may be."

"Oh," Jake said, wondering why he had never heard about them before while also thinking that sounded kind of similar to some of the fiction he used to read before the system. "Do they also have inherent knowledge like True Royals?"

"A little, but it is very limited, so for one to be able to speak is already proof it has lived for a pretty long time, and even if all Demon Lords are born C-grade at minimum, being halfway to B-grade may mean it has gained those levels itself. Demon Lords are also usually born through large-scale sacrificial rituals, which means they usually have subordinates... this one was alone and weakened after being sealed in for a long time," Dina shook her head.

"I see," Jake nodded. Its comment about its body being pathetic was likely genuine. They hadn't faced the Demon Lord at full power.

"Does that mean that even if we killed this Demon Lord, it would only be temporary? That we would face it again later on?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Well... usually they take at least a decade or so to resurrect, so probably not?" Dina said, a bit unsure.

"Wait, if they can keep resurrecting, doesn't that mean whenever a Demon Lord is spawned, there will always be one more in the multiverse?" Jake questioned.

"They can still die permanently dependent on the way they are killed, and the amount of times they resurrect is still limited. The problem is that you can't really know how many resurrections a particular Demon Lord has left, hence why most prefer to seal them," Dina once more explained.

"Definitely going for the kill next time either way," Jake said, getting a nod from the Sword Saint and a screech of agreement from Sylphie.

"I believe I can make its death quite a bit more permanent than usual," the King shared. "As long as you shatter the soul enough, the regathering of energy should at least be slowed down enough for it to take millennia for any new Demon Lord to emerge if what you explained is correct."

"Aight," Jake said approvingly. "Now, let's check what was behind that damn gate."

During the fight, they had traveled several kilometers down the hallway as more space helped them avoid the large sweeping fire attacks. Now with the Demon Lord gone, they could rush back down the hall and finally see what had been behind the gate requiring four damn keys.

Making it there, they first saw that the portal was gone, and behind it was a relatively small chamber, barely wider than the normal hallway. On the other side of this small chamber was the gateway leading onto the next floor, making Jake and the others feel pretty relieved.

“So, at least this was the right way,” Jake smiled.

“No, it wasn’t,” Minaga chimed in.

“Clearly was. I see the gateway right there,” Jake shrugged.

“I guess it depends on your definition of what the right way is. This was technically one of the ways you could take, but not really the one most are expected to take, so to call it the right way isn’t entirely accurate.”

“This seemed like the most straightforward way, though. Humor me, if you will. What was the other way we could have gone?” Jake asked, partly to have the Unique Lifeform divulge more information about the labyrinth and partly because he was genuinely curious.

“See, if you had done any of the other rooms that you so quickly avoided, you would have known that there was a second way into this room that wasn’t through the gate that would also unleash the Demon Lord. The friendlies in these mystical rooms you so adamantly avoided would have told you that through the efforts of a cult of demon-worshippers, a Demon Lord has been summoned. They would then have led you to a mage who could use the four keys to instead teleport you to that central platform right there.”

A spotlight appeared from nothingness in the middle of the room, highlighting a slightly elevated stone platform with several patterns carved into it.

“I am trying to tell a story here, too, you know? Not the best story, maybe, but I am trying. Granted, I care more about the mechanics of an experience over the background story, but I still put in effort, so you will learn this lore if you want to or not!”

“Fine, fine,” Jake said, not wanting to argue. “But do tell me, since you keep insisting we did it wrong... would the other way have given more Nevermore Points? Would it have been faster?”

“...”

“How do you even make audible silence? That makes no sense-“

“Would you look at that? The entire first layer of the labyrinth is now collapsing after you so haphazardly released the Demon Lord! Hurry into the gateway before it is too late!”

Jake was about to respond to what he thought was an obvious joke as the ceiling began to crack, and in the hallway behind them, the entire thing began to collapse in on itself.

“Fucking hell,” Jake cursed as he and the others charged forward.

“Did you find it necessary to annoy him??” the Sword Saint said as they reached the gateway.

“In my defense, I think he is genuinely enjoying this,” Jake smiled as they entered the gateway and moved onto the first in-between room of Minaga’s Labyrinth.

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

Chapter 668: Nevermore: "Seriously? Again?"

Going through the gateway leading out of the thirty-first floor, Jake wasn’t exactly sure what he had expected. Considering the uniqueness of these next ten floors and Minaga being the one in charge, it wasn’t even sure there would be an in-between room. There was one, but it wasn’t at all what Jake had predicted.

All the prior in-between rooms had consisted of three gates – one they exit from, one leading to the next floor, and one to exit Nevermore. Besides that, there was a place for lockboxes to spawn... and that was it. They were barebones and functional, with it clearly being meant to just be a room you quickly went through.

As for Minaga’s version of an in-between room?

“This is nice,” Dina said just as they arrived, and she looked around.

“Certainly a relaxing atmosphere,” the Sword Saint agreed.

What they had walked into looked like the lounge of a five-star hotel. Red carpets covered the floor, a large open bar, a sitting area with lounge chairs, an elevated platform that looked to be made out of wood already with a lockbox on it, and generally, this entire hall was just a big and welcoming space. In Jake’s sphere, he even saw that

there were several more rooms, including five bedrooms with attached bathrooms, with each of these bedrooms also having a “crafting room” attached. Based on the void behind those doors, Jake guessed that the room changed based on who entered. Finally, Jake saw a fucking open-air bath. Did they need an open-air bath? They didn’t, but it was there.

“Minaga is truly an evil mastermind,” Jake said with respect. “Trying to make the parties attempting the labyrinth waste time in these in-between rooms and thus have less time doing the actual dungeon.”

“Now that is just mean,”Minaga said in a fake sulking tone.

“Sure, sure,” Jake smiled. Just then, they also got a bunch of system messages making Jake smile even more.

Thirty-first floor completed. 310 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor in less than a day (24 hours). 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor without any party member taking damage from any trap. 300 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor without interacting with any friendly creatures. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-first floor while only entering a maximum of four challenge rooms. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

The achievements were just rolling in as they got far more points than on any floor prior. Jake did find it a bit odd there wasn’t a single mention of the fact they had chosen the Archmage difficulty, but it was also entirely possible that the reward would come at a later point.

“Certainly a lot of points,” the Sword Saint said, satisfied.

“We may have taken the top spot if there was a Leaderboard after the thirty-first floor,” Jake said with a smile.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched as she flew over to the lockbox in the room.

“Yeah, I guess you can open it,” Jake said, hearing Sylphie excited to see what was inside. Many of the rewards they had gotten had turned out to be natural treasures or even raw materials their party could use, and most of it had thus also been consumed by Sylphie. It was only natural she was excited about opening each and every lockbox now.

Poking the box with her talon, it opened, and from within, a small shield-looking item floated out. It was no more than ten centimeters tall and had a heater shield design with a glowing flame symbol carved into it. The entire thing look to be made of gold, except for the orange glowing flame symbol. Jake used Identify and raised an eyebrow at the description.

[Greater Firebane Talisman (Ancient)] – Infuse power into the talisman and grant significantly increased resistance to all fire affinity attacks for one hour (60 minutes) to you and all nearby party members. Has limited charges, and once the charges are used up, the talisman will break. This item cannot be used outside of Nevermore and will cease to exist if brought out for too long. Charges remaining: 3

“Very clearly an item offered for either a later environment or a rematch with the Demon Lord. Perhaps both, considering it has a total of three charges,” the Fallen King voiced his thoughts.

“It would be good against the Demon Lord,” Dina agreed, having been the one to primarily deal with it. “The passive fire aura was quite powerful even for a level 270 Demon Lord, and if the next time we encounter the demon, it is even stronger, then I am not sure I would be able to properly fight it off.”

“Then we will have to simply deal with it ourselves,” the Fallen King said a bit dismissively.

Jake kind of agreed. While having Dina help with it was nice, Jake still had his scales, and if he used Arcane Awakening at full power, the passive shield from that, so he should be fine. The King was also good, leaving her only with Sylphie and the Sword Saint, but they could also take care of themselves.

“In either case, can you carry it, Dina?” Jake asked.

“Me?” she asked, a bit taken aback.

“Well, you are the support, and you seem good at judging when to use it,” Jake smiled encouragingly.

“I find it admirable,” the King said, making Jake nod approvingly before he promptly stopped as the King followed up. *“I find it admirable that Jake recognizes he would have forgotten about the item’s existence ten seconds after putting it in his spatial storage, so he gave it to someone else.”*

“Hey, that ain’t fair,” Jake fought back.

“There... there was that compass on the twenty-fourth floor...” Dina muttered.

“Ree!” Sylphie valiantly came to Jake’s defense.

“Yeah, Sylphie is right. We didn’t need it, so who cares?” he said, knowing it was a losing battle.

“Chances are we could also proceed without this Firebane Talisman, but not using it strikes me as wasteful, seeing as it cannot even be brought out of Nevermore,” the Sword Saint piled on.

“So I gave it to Dina, case closed,” Jake said as he did the number one strategy to get out of trouble: misdirect.

“Hey, Minaga, I have a question. If you are willing to answer, that is.”

“It is pretty hard to know if I am going to answer before you ask the question,” Minaga answered with a hint of snark.

“Sorry, sorry. I do love the break room, by the way. I wanted to ask about the time-based achievement we got. More accurately, how they work. 500 points seem like a lot, but at the same time, few would have a chance to do it that fast, so is the achievement for doing it within a day the only one?” Jake asked, wanting to fish for some information.

“Well, there is one that gives 100 points for doing it in less than a week, 200 points for less than five days, 350 points for less than three days, and finally, 500 points for less than a day. Congratulations, you got the best one there, but you did miss out on other achievements!” This chapter is updated by [novel-fire-net](#)

“I see,” Jake nodded. “Just to ask... was it possible to kill the Demon Lord during our first encounter?”

“Naturally, it was possible... same as you could have attacked me in the opening room if you so desired. Not saying doing either would have done you any good, but it was an option,” Minaga said in his usual cheerful voice. **“Now, enjoy the break room and relax! At least try out the free bar.”**

Minaga was gone again, and while Jake did want to move on quickly, he kind of got the feeling keeping Minaga happy would do him good. That some eccentric dungeon master was part of Nevermore, a transformed World Wonder, and that you had to keep the weird guy happy to not get fucked over was admittedly a bit weird... but what can you do about it? Seeing as Minaga made the entire thirty-first floor collapse behind them was kind of proof Minaga could actually influence the dungeon if he so wanted, even if the collapse had just been a joke.

In that sense, it was also a bit comforting that he had done nothing to mess with Jake. He could have easily scrambled the hallways, switched the locations of rooms with keys, reassigned which monsters had keys, and a slew of other things, but he had done

none of it. So while Jake didn't think Minaga would outright work against him, it seemed silly to risk it, so he bit the bullet and sat down at the bar.

Looking at all the flasks on display, he extended a string of mana and picked out a few that seemed interesting. Dina and the Sword Saint walked over to join him as Jake began just mixing stuff at random, making different drinks. He had about a ninety-percent failure rate, but he did manage to make some stuff that at least didn't make him reek. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also allowed him to sense the general level of alcohol within each bottle. This was mainly important to make sure Sylphie didn't have any, as she was still too young to drink. Dina also didn't like alcohol, so they went to the section with non-alcoholic drinks.

"Why do you inferior lifeforms even consume these things?" the Fallen King asked, clearly just jealous he was the only one who couldn't enjoy Jake's mixing skills.

"Because we can, and some of them are tasty," Jake smiled. "I could ask you the same about consuming natural treasures. You have eaten literal rocks."

"They were precious gemstones containing soul-"

"Shiny rocks, then," Jake grinned.

The five of them stayed in this in-between room longer than they had planned, thoroughly falling for Minaga's trick. Then again, perhaps it was good for them to have a mental reset, and Jake had a strong feeling that was what these rooms were designed for. The five of them had not even dealt with the oppressive mist for a full day, but being within it just for a few hours was suffocating. Without Jake's sphere or other things to help you find your way, Jake could see others spend months just walking in a fog.

Yeah, he could see why someone would need a drink and a nice soak in the open-air bath after that.

Jake and company still only stayed for a few hours as they checked out the local amenities before moving on to the thirty-second floor.

Walking through the gateway, they found themselves in a pretty similar room to the one on the thirty-first. A few seconds after they appeared, the description of the floor once more popped up too.

Welcome to the Thirty-second floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 2)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 16682

The first thing Jake noticed was the name of the floor. To just call it part two was honestly lazy, and he would have expected more of Minaga. Alas, Jake would let it go in an act of benevolence.

As expected, on the central platform of the room, Minaga once more popped into existence, though he didn't bother with the light show this time around.

"Hello there! Long time no see," Minaga said in his usual joking tone. "I guess we all know what we are doing here. Are you going to be pathetic disappointments to all of the gods that blessed you and be the saddest excuse for a Unique Lifeform I have ever seen, or are you going to keep going at the Archmage difficulty? You can totally downgrade if you want to act like little-"

"Same difficulty," Jake waved him off.

"Surprising," Minaga said in a deadpan tone.

"Say," the Sword Saint began, "the first time around, you mentioned that one could increase or decrease the difficulty by one at the start of every floor. Does that mean there is a difficulty above Archmage we can increase it to?"

Jake looked at the Sword Saint and gave him a mental thumbs up. He hadn't even considered that.

"That is a very good question," Minaga said with a smile. "But no, there is not. I should probably change the wording in the initial briefing, huh? Well, good catch either way!"

Achievement earned: Ask Minaga a good question. 1 Nevermore Points earned.

The system announcement surprised all of them as Jake stared at the Unique Lifeform. "Really?"

"Are you complaining?" Minaga asked teasingly. "Can't take them back, but I can make sure you won't get any more."

"Nope, definitely not complaining, just surprised," Jake quickly backtracked.

"Oh, then no worries, no worries," Minaga waved him off. "Now for the second thing we have to deal with..."

Minaga stood on the platform with his usual smile as he seemed to be waiting for something. Jake exchanged a glance with the others, but none had any idea what the hell he wanted them to do. After nearly ten seconds of awkward silence, Minaga scratched his chin.

“Nothing?”

“What did you expect?” Jake asked.

“Well, I just said it was an option to attack me, so... you know,” Minaga shrugged.

“But you also said it wouldn’t necessarily do us any good, and I have a strong feeling it will end badly if we did attack,” Jake pointed out.

“Oh, it definitely would have. But you also didn’t attack because we are becoming friends, and it would feel bad to attack me, right?”

“Oh, definitely that also,” Jake agreed.

“I knew we had built a good rapport,” Minaga smiled. “Now go forth and conquer the second part of my labyrinth! This one will be different; I can promise you that!”

With that, Minaga was gone again. The five of them exchanged glances as the large gate leading into the labyrinth began opening. As it opened, the familiar fog once more came out, and without hesitation, Jake and the others made their way inside. Releasing a Pulse of Perception, Jake scanned what was ahead of them, and on a cursory glance, it looked mostly the same, except he saw humanoid figures actually walking in some of the halls.

Jake also spotted one other thing. Only about a hundred meters into the hallway. A lone humanoid figure was sitting on the ground and leaning against the wall. Jake shared his findings, and they quickly made it to this lone figure.

They couldn’t see if they were human or not, as the person was fully covered in metallic armor that now had red scars all over it and several melted pieces. The moment they got close, the armored person lazily turned their head.

“You... were you the ones who released that monster?” a strained male voice came out. Jake used Identify and was kind of surprised by the level being the same as the Demon Lord.

[Knight of Light’s Dawn – lvl 270]

“*He is dying,*” Dina shared through their link. Considering she said it with such certainty, Jake saw no reason to doubt her and, thus, no reason to lie.

“If you are talking about the Demon Lord, then yes,” Jake answered. “But accidentally.”

“Curse you... curse all of you!” the Knight man said as he tried to stand up, but he stumbled and fell to the ground instantly as he stopped moving.

“*Dead*,” the Fallen King said.

“Not entirely,” the Sword Saint frowned as the corpse began leaking dark energy. An energy that was familiar to Jake.

A curse manifested from the corpse of the Knight. It took a vaguely humanoid form as the monster lifted one of its arms and pointed at their party.

“Absolve yourselves!”

The curse exploded outwards from the body and towards them as a bonus objective finally appeared before their eyes.

Bonus objective gained: Slay the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner to dispel the curse.

Yet just as the curse was about to invade their bodies, Jake took out Eternal Hunger. The curse energy trying to attack instantly stopped as his katar released a pulse of energy, and without even having the slightest chance to resist, every single speck of energy released was absorbed by his weapon.

“Not bad,” Jake said, seeing that Eternal Hunger had quite liked the curse. High-quality curse, but a bit lacking in the energy department. At least none of them had been affected at all, so that was nice.

“Seriously? Again?” the exasperated voice of Minaga echoed. **“I am trying to teach you about consequences here.”**

Jake shrugged. “Should have had a better curse.”

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

Chapter 669: Nevermore: Ritual In the Rain

Even if they didn’t have to do the bonus objective to dispel the curse, they still wanted to kill this Prime Summoner, as it would no doubt reward extra Nevermore Points. Jake

couldn't really say he felt sorry about breaking whatever scenario Minaga had planned, though he could see what their host had been going for.

If they had done the first part without freeing the Demon Lord but had instead gotten help to teleport here, they would have met this Knight who was tasked with guarding the gate. He would then tell them about rumors of cultists recently appearing further into the labyrinth and task them with slaying the Prime Summoner because he feared that this cultist was trying to free the Demon Lord.

Jake and company had instead freed the Demon Lord themselves, and the Demon Lord had attacked and killed the Knight. Seeing them as intruders, the Knight would use a curse to make Jake and the others kill this Prime Summoner instead of merely asking them to do it. The curse would only have resulted in slightly lower overall resource pools and evil whispers from the dead Knight, admonishing them for their crimes and screaming at them to kill the Prime Summoner, so it would have been more annoying than impactful.

Now, back in the original story where Jake and company didn't free the Demon Lord. What would have happened when they finally reached the Prime Summoner was that they would find her just as she was about to succeed. Luckily, they would have arrived just in time – no matter if they had spent an hour or a year walking the hallways – and would naturally best the evil Prime Summoner. However, just as she was about to die, she would sacrifice herself to still release the Demon Lord.

One might ask why Jake knew all this? Well...

“Then, when the Demon Lord is summoned, a magical circle will appear at the entrance of the room, and the formation mage who helped you in the first part will appear together with the Knight. The Knight will engage the Demon Lord, and they will have a totally epic battle! The Knight of Light’s Dawn versus the evil Demon Lord! Sadly the Knight is no match. He will tell you to run, and the mage will assist in teleporting you away into another part of the labyrinth. Sure, you would also be able to join the Knight and fight the Demon Lord as you did before and then have the demon teleport away again if you wanted to do that, and that would give an achievement, but I definitely find the first scenario way more fun. Ah, but the Knight would still die, having overused his boosting skill during the fight. This always happens... well, unless you knock the Knight out before he can use it. That has happened, but he stays back to protect this part of the labyrinth anyway, so it doesn’t do much in later parts... though that again rewards an achievement.”

Minaga had decided that while their party rushed through the hallways, he would narrate the entire story they had missed and really go into detail about the different scenarios they were now locked out of. Jake wouldn't exactly call the story good or original, and Minaga did also interject with clarifications that the story was written solely to set up good challenges and not actually to tell some exciting story. Though... even if

he did say this, Minaga also seemed overly interested in sharing his so-called “bad” story.

Besides an even more talkative Minaga, the thirty-second floor was quite similar to the thirty-first, with the biggest difference being that the hallways were no longer empty of life. Patrols of cultists wandered about, which usually wouldn’t be that much of a challenge, except that they had to fight them within the fog. Perceiving your surroundings and moving about was made more difficult, but at least this also affected the cultists as both sides struggled.

These cultists usually patrolled around in groups of three to seven, with their levels being around level 240. Jake had identified three types of cultists so far.

[Demonic Cultist Flameblade – lvl 242]

These were the usual fire types, and all acted like fanboys of the Demon Lord. They had similar skills, and their identical weapons all looked like replicas of the Demon Lord’s sword. They were pretty easy to deal with overall, as their blades all lit up and made them easily locatable, even within the fog.

[Demonic Cultist Cauterizer – lvl 241] READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [novel~](#)

Fire healers. Somehow their fire was able to mend injuries, really bending the definition of cauterize to straight up make it healing. They could also do some offensive fire magic, making them double as mages. Individually they were very squishy, and Sylphie, in particular, liked killing them as she broke through the defenders.

This brings us to the last type of enemy.

[Demonic Cultist Bulwark – lvl 242]

These were pretty standard defensive warriors wielding large shields, though they did also have the entire fire theme by making barriers of fire, and they could even release torrents of fire from their spiky shields. Usually, these Bulwarks worked hand in hand with the Cauterizers, but due to the small size of the groups, every encounter was too one-sided to truly get into insight into their synergy. These patrols were clearly just made to put the people exploring on their toes, and Minaga also shared some other reasons.

“Thematically, the patrols are to signify that the demonic cult has claimed this entire part of the labyrinth as their own. Mechanically, it is to combat a very obvious strategy many groups would have no doubt made use of on the prior floor: divide and conquer. While a lot of Perception-related abilities are blocked, blocking everything that allows party members to locate and keep track of one another is simply not feasible, and I wouldn’t want to even if I could. So, in order to make splitting up less safe, I introduced these patrols into the hallways. Sure,

for a team like yours, you could still split up, but for the average party – even those capable of doing the labyrinth on Archmage difficulty – it would be incredibly dangerous and a risk they didn't wanna take. It isn't like a normal group can send their healer running around solo and expect them to return unscathed."

"That does actually make perfect sense," Jake said as they walked away from another patrol they had just killed.

"However, it is also to communicate to the challengers when they are closing in on this Prime Summoner," the Sword Saint stated.

Jake had already pretty much confirmed this through his Pulses of Perception, and the Sword Saint had also easily figured it out. The patrols all came from somewhere, and by backtracking their paths, one would get closer and closer to the headquarters of these demonic summoners.

Of course, it wasn't entirely that simple. Some groups came from other rooms not containing the Prime Summoner, and some even purposefully tried to lead Jake and company into traps, but with Jake in the lead, they kept their course straight and rapidly made progress toward the Prime Summoner. At the edge of his most recent Pulse of Perception, he saw a room bigger than any before on this floor, so he felt pretty confident it was there. Extremely confident, actually, as he also applied his improved tracking skills and, despite the fog, vaguely got the feeling that the strongest source of demonic energy was in that direction. This was definitely helped along by his Bloodline-empowered intuition too.

Minaga had also clearly noticed this as he made a few snide comments here and there. Their group had already decided to replicate what they did on the prior floor and not bother with all the optional rooms. The only potentially optional thing they would do was to kill this Prime Summoner for the bonus points. Was it possible that skipping this step would reward some kind of achievement? Sure, but it was equally possible it would just result in them missing out on points.

Soon enough, they reached their destination. This was an even larger room than any they had encountered before, and as on the prior floor, the fog dispersed as they walked through the fog wall and entered. Instantly as they set foot inside the room, Jake's danger sense reacted.

Several Demonic Cultist Flameblades descended upon them, but an expanded golden barrier from the King sent them all stumbling back. Jake pulled out his bow and sent one of them flying even further back as the Sword Saint, Dina, and Sylphie also released their own attacks, making quick work of their welcome party.

Needless to say, this would not be a stealth mission. The design of this massive room reminded Jake of an old temple, but it was so large that towards the back of this temple,

a large cathedral sat. Jake used his tracking skill quickly, and without the fog, it was clear as day.

"Prime Summoner is in the cathedral," Jake shared with the party.

"Let's make haste and quickly dispose of the trash before getting there," the Fallen King said as he rose into the air. The large temple hall was filled with cultists, and Jake spotted at least a few thousand, though it had to be noted that the vast majority of them were truly in the trash mob category. In fact, more than ninety percent had barely reached C-grade.

[Demonic Cultist – lvl 201]

The races of these cultists varied widely. Beastfolk, humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes, and a bunch of more exotic humanoid races Jake didn't know. All of them burned with fanaticism and gladly picked up arms against the evil invaders, all spurred on by some of the higher-leveled cultists among them.

Just then, a massive projected head of a woman wearing a mask appeared in the sky.

"Lord Gubrothas has already informed me of your meddling, outsiders. For daring to lift a hand against his honored lord, the only true recompense is death. Rejoice, as your souls will be used to fuel my ascension. Attack, my faithful!" the lunatic woman yelled.

The group of fanatics was thrown into a frenzy as Jake and the others prepared to fight, but as they were about to step forward, the Sword Saint spoke.

"Would you allow me?" asked the Sword Saint as he walked forward. "This place seems fitting for something I have been waiting to reveal."

"Go right ahead," Jake said, wondering what the old man wanted to show them.

He smiled as he drew his blade, and his aura spiked. Toward the ceiling of the room, rain clouds appeared out of nowhere as a light drizzle fell upon the entire hall. The Sword Saint charged forward into a crowd of Demonic Cultist Flameblades and Bulwarks, moving away from the rest of the party.

Sylphie was about to take flight, but Jake lifted his hand and gently pushed her down on his shoulder. "Let the old man have his fun." The Fallen King also summoned a golden barrier to cover them and block the rain, as well as any wayward attacks.

They had times like these on prior floors where they allowed one of them to have a bit of a solo show. It was a way to not make them too bored and a chance to show off their skills. Jake and the others thus stood back and observed the Sword Saint engage an entire army of cultists in melee as they stood back near the entrance of the hall.

He had fully activated his boosting skill and expertly dodged every single attack as the rain fell down all around him, soaking the floor of the temple and creating puddles everywhere. The rain weakened all of the fire affinity fighters, and after a few minutes of the Sword Saint just cutting down cultist after cultist, the big boss made her appearance.

From the cathedral, the Prime Summoner stepped out together with two actual demons. Jake checked them all from afar to see if the old man could still deal with them.

[Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner – lvl 260]

[Demon Guardian – lvl 255]

It would be tight, but Jake had confidence. The Sword Saint was incredibly well-versed against opponents like these. They were humanoid, used fire affinity abilities, and the primary foe was a caster. Jake had seen him fight large beasts and struggle, but against other humanoids, he was an absolute monster.

Jake also noticed something else was off. The movements of his opponents were slow... too slow. Somehow, the rain seemed to stick to them and make their movements slower, making Jake consider if perhaps the Sword Saint had gotten inspiration from the underwater level or something. However, what Dina said next dispelled that thought.

“Time... every raindrop is infused with the concept of time,” Dina said with astonishment.

Taken aback, Jake reassessed the situation. He always scanned the environment but hadn’t bothered checking out the individual raindrops. Upon doing so, he realized Dina was right. Every single raindrop contained a bit of time energy. Individually, it was meaningless, but as the rain accumulated, it would rapidly build up and have a noticeable effect. But... the energy expenditure had to be utterly insane doing it, and checking the Sword Saint, Jake did notice some sweat mixed in with the raindrops. He was truly straining himself just to keep up the massive chamber-spanning domain.

Things got worse as the two Demon Guardians properly joined the brawl, and the Prime Summoner began doing some magic in the background. The regular cultists had never truly joined the fight, but now all grouped around the Summoner as she raised her hands to the sky.

“Loyal subjects... today is the day we ascend!”

She yelled loudly as a giant magical circle appeared, spanning a huge section of the chamber. All of the regular cultists began chanting, and the energy level in the room began rising as the Prime Summoner’s aura grew.

Jake had read enough about rituals to know what this was. He was about to tell the King to dispel the barrier and have them join the fight before the ritual could complete, but before he could, the Sword Saint spoke through their telepathic mark.

“Jake, I remember you being curious about my mythical rarity skill. Well, formerly mythical, now legendary,” the Sword Saint asked, making Jake stop.

Opening his eyes wide, Jake sent a mental confirmation.

“I would advise you to strengthen the barrier, Fallen King. This attack is indiscriminate,” he added. The King reacted as he infused the barrier around them with his golden energy, and Dina also assisted as she put a green membrane around it to strengthen it further.

Retreating from his foes, the Sword Saint took a deep breath as he shifted his stance and knelt down while holding the blade with the tip of the blade resting against the floor like he was about to do an upwards sweep.

Then, it happened. The raindrops falling all over the massive chamber stopped moving in mid-air as they simply floated there. An incredibly intense aura erupted from the Sword Saint, and Jake saw the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner react with panic as all of the raindrops began moving backward in time, the puddles on the floor starting to slowly drip upwards.

“What is-“ the Summoner began, but she was cut off.

The Sword Saint raised his blade in one fluid motion as the rain followed suit.

“Rain of Time: Reversal.”

Rain reversed in time as every droplet that had fallen became a small blade piercing the clouds above. The entire chamber rumbled as the ground was torn up, an area of several square kilometers seemingly lifting off the ground as heavenly destruction sundered the hall. Within less than a second, every single raindrop had been sent flying back to the clouds above.

Raindrops, each only containing enough energy to lightly injure a peak E-grade or early D-grade... but when there were millions, the result was devastating.

Jake was taken aback by the attack, but what happened next was almost as ludicrous. The Sword Saint raised his blade, and the rainclouds above descended upon him like a whirlwind, the energy entering his body as Jake slowly felt the old man be revitalized. Not only had he reversed the raindrops... he had returned a large amount of the resources he had spent on the skill.

Looking out at the chamber, the chaos had finally started dying down, and the scene of the Sword Saint's devastation was revealed. The entire terrain was filled with small pencil-sized holes all over, and in the center of it all kneeled the Prime Summoner, blood running down her lips. The two demons also still lived, standing at her sides.

As for the weaker cultists... not a single one remained. Only a few sparse but heavily injured Flameblades, Caulerizers, and Guardians were spread here and there.

"You... you ruined everything! I was to ascend!" the Prime Summoner screamed, her ritual having failed with the deaths of thousands of her subjects and the circle itself being utterly torn apart.

"Yeah, well, tough shit," Jake said as the King had long dispelled the barrier, and he had walked over and joined the Sword Saint.

"I... **I will kill you all!**" she screamed as her body erupted in power, and the two Demon Guardians both bulked up.

Anyway, skipping the boring part, the group walked towards the cathedral to check what was in there ten minutes later, leaving only corpses in their wake. Jake even got a level, and they all got a nice achievement when the Prime Summoner died.

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 210 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Bonus Objective Completed: Defeat the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Defeat the Demonic Cultist Prime Summoner before she can carry out her ascension ritual. 250 Nevermore Points earned.

All in all, good stuff.

Seeing the achievement of not allowing the ritual to happen, Jake was glad they had stopped it, though he also wanted to see what would have happened if they had allowed her to do it. As for why they were headed towards the cathedral... well, Jake had spotted something interesting there. Or, more accurately, someone interesting.

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

Chapter 670: Nevermore: Two Old Men

The cathedral had, amazingly so, not at all been affected by the attack from the Sword Saint. It was maybe protected by some magical barrier, or perhaps the construction was indeed durable enough to handle his weird reversal of the rain.

This meant that the interior was also spotless and bereft of damage. It was also entirely empty, save for a hidden cellar dungeon with no obvious entrance. Jake managed to sniff out how to enter through his sphere, and they found a secret door opened by someone pulling on a lantern hanging from a pillar. Yes, Minaga was that cliché.

"Do you believe this individual will be a foe?" the Sword Saint asked as they walked down the newly revealed stairs. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel✕fire✕net*

"I doubt it. The dude is in chains and in a sealed room, so unless they are really shitty hosts, then I would assume it is a prisoner," Jake answered.

Even if he didn't share it, Jake did have an idea who this person could be based on the stories Minaga had shared. Upon entering the hidden prisoner dungeon, his suspicions were pretty much confirmed as he saw an old disheveled man chained to a wall within a sealed-in red barrier.

[Old Royal Mage – lvl 250]

Again, a very original name from Minaga. At least the Demon Lord had a name based on what the Prime Summoner said.

After they entered the room, the old mage also seemed to notice them, but he didn't even look up.

"Just kill me already... I will never betray my comrades!" he said in a valiant tone.

Jake wanted to praise Minaga for his wonderful dialogue, but the Sword Saint spoke first. "We are not with the demonic cult, but those who have come to slay them."

The old man looked up and laid his eyes on them. "Truly? I feared all was lost when the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas was released from the seal that we of the Mage Court laid down five hundred years ago. In an attempt to help the citizens, I came here to try and stop the Prime Summoner from assisting the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas regain his former strength, but I was too late and was instead captured. Tell me, did you succeed in stopping her from ascending to a Prime Consort of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas?"

Who the hell just goes on a tirade like that after one reassurance we are the good guys!? Jake wanted to scream, but the old swordsman stayed in character.

"Her foul ritual was ended by my blade, and the cultists slain for their evil acts," he said in a serious tone.

"Good, good... did the Knight of Light's Dawn join you? He was said to have guarded the entrance to this labyrinth, and I fear the worst if he encountered the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas. Even if the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas was weakened... tell me, is he safe?" the Old Royal Mage asked.

Does he really have to refer to the Demon Lord as "evil Demon Lord Gubrothas" every time? Jake questioned as he kept his mouth shut.

"Sadly, the Knight valiantly fought the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas but failed to stop him. With his dying breath, he tasked us with stopping the Prime Summoner. That we found you here is simply a blessed happenstance," the Sword Saint said in a comforting tone. "Please, allow us to free you."

The Royal Mage nodded, and Jake and the others proceeded to dismantle the barrier and free the mage from his chains. Jake was primarily interested in the magic circle they had used for the prison. The chains served as energy-sappers and made the person too weak to use their physical strength to rip themselves free, while the formation drained their resource at all times, making them even weaker in all other aspects. However, Jake believed the most important function was the formation's ability to disrupt energy movements, even within the body of the affected person. It acted almost like a neurotoxin, making Jake very curious.

As the two old men once more spoke, Jake subtly disassembled the entire prison cell and stored it away, including the chains on the wall and floor tiles the magical circle had been carved on.

"Thank you, thank you, oh valiant heroes. Please, with the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas now freed, he must be stopped, but I fear he has already managed to reach his castle deep within the labyrinth. I... I wish we could seal him once more, but I am too weak. Heroes, do you believe yourselves capable of facing the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas? That you can bring peace and justice?" the Royal Mage asked in his usual dramatic and severe tone.

"That is a quest we would take upon ourselves with honor," the Sword Saint nodded.

"I cannot express my gratitude enough, heroes," the old mage said with a big smile. "Allow me to assist you in your quest."

The old man made a magical seal with his hands and summoned a small golden stone with magical scripts on it that Jake promptly Identified.

[Anti-Demon Sword-Sealing Stone (Unique)] – A stone created by the Old Royal Mage capable of temporarily weakening the Demon Lord by sealing in his sword. The duration of the seal is one minute (60 seconds). This item cannot be used outside of Nevermore and will cease to exist if brought out for too long. Will break upon usage.

"In an attempt to assist the Knight of Light's Dawn, I created this Sealing Stone, but sadly I could never use it... please, would you take it instead? Use it to slay the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas?" the Old Royal Mage asked as he held up the stone.

To Jake's surprise, the Sword Saint shook his hand as he closed the hands of the Old Royal Mage around the stone. "No, this quest is ours alone, and we shall slay the Demon Lord using our own power. We have already encountered him once, and the last time, he cowardly fled. I thank you for the offer, but your job is done, and you can rest. We will handle the rest."

"Truly?" the old mage asked in disbelief. "The evil Demon Lord Gubrothas is not easily bested... even if you faced him once, he will be far stronger when you face him in his domain."

"No matter where or when, he shall fall to us. Evil shall never prevail; I swear my life on that," the Sword Saint said.

"Very well, I shall respect your conviction, and once more, I thank you, heroes," the old man bowed deeply.

Achievement earned: Locate and free the Old Royal Mage and reject the Anti-Demon Sword-Sealing Stone. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

So that's why he rejected it... bonus points. Yay, Jake thought, giving a mental thumb up to the Sword Saint.

The old mage seemed to be deep in thought for a moment before he smiled at them. "Even without the seal, allow me to assist you in reaching the deeper parts. We have a stronghold that should still hold due to formations of old laid down by the court. It is close to the next entryway leading further into the demon's domain."

Jake instantly caught on and sent a mental negative to the Sword Saint. Chances are this stronghold would be within a room and thus make them lose out on an achievement for doing the minimum number of rooms possible.

"Once more, I thank you for the offer, but we wish to scour the halls to truly wipe out the foul cultists that still wander them," the Sword Saint said in a solemn tone.

"I understand," the mage said with a nod. "In that case, all I can give you is my well-wishes. Go forth and be the arbiters of justice."

"That we shall," the Sword Saint nodded and bowed as he turned around and began walking out of the cathedral. Jake looked at the old mage for a second before mimicking the actions of the Sword Saint and also bowing as he followed after. Everyone except for the Fallen King did a small bow, with even Sylphie trying it.

Following the Sword Saint out of the cathedral and back towards the hallway, Jake gave the old man a questioning look.

"I did theater back in my school days," the old man revealed. "It has been... hm, must be a century since then? How time flies..."

"Old fart," Jake snorted jokingly, the old man just smiling in response.

They didn't need to talk much more as they made their way back into the hallway, and Jake once more proceeded with guiding the group towards the exit. With commentary, of course.

"Such a missed opportunity. You should have just teleported with the Old Royal Mage. Even if you didn't want to wait for him to recover, Jake could have just handed him a mana potion to get him up to speed. It would have been faster by a lot, and you would have been able to see the cool stronghold and even interact with all the people who live there. There are a bunch of individuals with very interesting information, including a former member of the cult, an old nobleman, and the squire of the Knight of Light's Dawn, that died at the beginning of this floor. Who knows, maybe they would even give you some reward for slaying the Prime Summoner? At the very least, you would have seen them all react to the Old Royal Mage reuniting with old friends. It would have been really touching. His granddaughter would even be there and hand you all these small flower crowns to wear for freeing her grandpa..."

"Or, we could get the bonus achievement points by only doing the minimum amount of rooms," Jake countered.

"Well, considering the room with the Prime Summoner was only for the bonus objective, you could have skipped that too."

"Yeah, but seeing as it is the bonus objective, and coupled with the points for freeing the Old Royal Mage, I'm gonna bet it has at least equal or more points, especially with the two achievements we just got. Oh yeah, and the experience was also pretty worth it," Jake said with a light smile as he turned to the group. "Patrol ahead on the right, two-point-five kilometers."

The Fallen King and Sylphie responded as they picked up speed and went ahead of the group to clean up the patrol.

"Why do I get the feeling you said that out loud and not through telepathy just to annoy me?" Minaga asked.

"I have no idea why you would possibly think that," Jake said before he looked at the Sword Saint and Dina. "We should reach the end in about thirty minutes, just got eleven left turns and eight right turns before we reach the final room."

"You are definitely doing it on purpose."

"All in your imagination," Jake shrugged. Soon the Fallen King and Sylphie rejoined them as they passed through the place where the two of them had utterly slaughtered the patrol.

From there on out, it was just a rush to the final room with the gateway in it. This room was also filled with cultists and even had a level 255 Cultist Leader who ended up being weaker than the Prime Summoner. Or maybe he would have been stronger if the guy had managed to finish his large-scale ritual, but they promptly killed him before the guy had a chance to. Without further ado, they entered the gateway to finish off the thirty-second floor even faster than they did the thirty-first.

Thirty-second floor completed. 320 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor in less than a day (24 hours). 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor without allowing the Demonic Cultists to perform any of their planned rituals. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor without receiving assistance from any friendly creatures. 350 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-second floor while only entering a maximum of two challenge rooms. 300 Nevermore Points earned.

Appearing in the in-between lounge, Jake admired all the achievements just rolling in.

"We managed to stop all the rituals?" Dina asked, a bit confused. "That seemed... too easy? There were only those two..."

"No, there were not only two, there was a total of nine rituals going on across this entire labyrinth, but even the slowest one – besides the two mandatory ones you did – would take around a full day to complete. Honestly, I am questioning why I even decided it was a good idea to add an achievement for not allowing any rituals to go off while also having one to complete it in under a day. Seems a bit like an unnecessary double reward... oh well, what can you do about it? I guess

you did interrupt two rituals, so it wasn't like it was totally free," Minaga answered Dina.

"Oh... thank you for telling me," Dina said with a small bow.

"See, Jake? That is how you treat an all-powerful dungeon master who wields your fate in his hands," Minaga took a jab at Jake.

"Noted and ignored," Jake smiled. "Though I have an even more important question than Dina."

"...what?"

"Are the drinks in the bar different in this in-between room from the ones before?"

"... yeah, they are... why?"

"Any recommendations?" Jake asked genuinely. "I didn't do that well last time. I reckoned you would have some good recipes."

"Mixing Ualberry Juice and... actually, get over there and let me guide you. As an alchemist, you should be able to properly mix drinks at least. It can't be worse than last time. That was a damn atrocity," Minaga said, oddly engaged.

"Sir, yes, sir," Jake said as he popped over to the bar. The next two hours were spent with Jake getting guided by Minaga on how to mix some banger drinks, and he learned a lot about different foodstuffs of the multiverse.

Sylphie also opened the lockbox in the room as he was working at the bar, and inside, they found a staff suited for a mage. A fire mage, more specifically, as the staff gave off intense fire affinity energy. This made Dina visibly upset with the thought of getting it, so they decided to just decide by random chance, with the Fallen King eventually winning.

They had primarily chosen to relax a bit in the in-between room because the Sword Saint needed to fully get back in top condition after using his Rain of Time and boosting skills. That Jake got a lesson in drink mixing was just a bonus.

After resting, they entered the next floor as usual and once more appeared in a pretty much identical room to the thirty-first and thirty-second floors. And as was also customary, they got their usual welcome message.

Welcome to the Thirty-third floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 3)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Free at least a quarter (25%) of the prisoners trapped on the thirty-third floor (0%).

Current progress: Prisoners freed (0%). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 19203

Minaga appeared in all his glory with a huge grin on his face while they were all reading the description of this floor.

"Hello again!" Minaga said with a big smile.

"Hello again indeed," Jake smiled. "Will this floor be different from the last two?"

"Oh... this floor is truly special... because this time, your cheating skills won't give you any big advantage; I can promise you that!" Minaga said, full of confidence. "Oh, and I already set the difficulty to Archmage again. If you have any complaints, voice them in 3... 2... 1. Okay, it is set now."

"No complaints about the difficulty," Jake said with a shrug. "But not sure I believe the first part."

"You will... oh, you will!" Minaga said with maniacal laughter as he disappeared from the room, and his voice echoed as the door in the distance began glowing red as it opened.

"Do tell me... how are you going to cheat this time around, huh!?"

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

Chapter 671: Nevermore: A Different But Welcome Experience

For the first time since entering Minaga's Labyrinth, Jake had truly met his match. Minaga had claimed Jake wouldn't be able to "cheat" on this floor, and Jake had obviously not believed him. It wasn't that there was no way to cheat him, just that doing it would fuck over others far too much.

Make the labyrinth randomly shuffle around to make Jake's Pulse of Perception useless? That would make it utterly impossible to find anything and have all exploration just be pure luck, something Jake was certain Minaga didn't want.

Make it so the rooms only reveal what is inside when you enter? Well, the rooms existed and weren't generated when they entered, so this would be a huge change in how the entire dungeon worked. It would also mess with people who used more mundane skills. Minaga even commented on Jake using tracking as a way more legit way of finding things, so he doubted the dungeon master wanted to stop everything.

Increasing the distances to make Jake's scanning range not big enough would also just ruin the entire labyrinth. If the only way to nerf Jake was to make things take too long, it would make all the time-based achievements useless.

Minaga did also reveal that these labyrinths were, of course, the same for everyone. Even if Minaga messed around, he still had a strong sense of fairness and cared a lot about balance. That was why he had not made any direct moves to make Jake less of a cheat but just allowed him to do as he did while complaining. However, on this floor, things were different.

"Do you see now? Tell me, Jake, how are you going to ruin all sense of exploration on this floor?" Minaga said, sounding like a true maniac.

He had won. Jake had to face that. Staring through the now-open gate leading into the labyrinth and after using a Pulse of Perception, it was clear that Jake had indeed been thoroughly countered by Minaga designing this floor in a fashion he hadn't even imagined would make sense for a labyrinth.

"You can't, can you!? Ha ha!"

"You are an absolute madman," Jake muttered as he stared at his mental map of parts of the floor. "How does this even qualify as a labyrinth anymore?"

What Minaga had done was indeed ingenious. He had gotten rid of all of Jake's usual advantages when exploring the complex mix of hallways with one small trick:

Just don't make it a labyrinth.

"That's right! Completely linear, on-rails floor with not a single ounce of exploration! Just run straight down the middle till you reach the next floor, and you're done!"Minaga laughed. **"Of course, you can also choose to stop and save the prisoners, so maybe you think you can use your cheating skills to locate them... but they are also right there out in the open! No secrets here!"**

"I am not certain this even qualifies as a labyrinth," the Sword Saint commented.

"Alright, so I did admittedly take some creative liberty with this design, but you only see it as a problem because you view this floor in isolation. I see these floors as one continuous labyrinth, so even if this part is straightforward, it is only a small part of the whole," Minaga explained, sounding significantly less maniacal.

"That makes sense," Dina nodded.

"Ree!" Sylphie chimed in.

"See, they get it! Especially the Sylphian Hawk!"

"I guess so," Jake muttered at Sylphie's apt metaphor. She said that saying this floor was not a labyrinth was like saying that if a beast in the forest had a hill as their domain, then the hill wasn't a part of the forest anymore, which of course, wouldn't make sense because while hills were not forests, hills could still be in forests. Same as a straight path could not be called a labyrinth, but a labyrinth could have parts that were straightforward.

"Rather than discuss the definition of a labyrinth, shouldn't we proceed into the floor?" the Fallen King said.

"We should," the Sword Saint agreed.

Jake didn't complain either as they walked through the gate leading into a small hallway that was no more than twenty meters long before they entered their first room. These hallways had extra-thick fog that not even Jake could see through in any way, and they limited movement so much that they had to just walk.

Entering the first room, Jake understood why the thick fog was there: it was to do so one couldn't just look through the fog and scout the next room... but also to do so whatever was on the floor couldn't spot them before they entered.

They found themselves standing within a large open room more extensive than the one the Prime Summoner had been in. Jake estimated it had to be at least fifty kilometers long and about ten kilometers wide, and it was filled to the brim with life.

However, not the friendly kind if their names were anything to go by.

[Demon Guard – lvl 248]

[Demon Torturer – lvl 251]

That's right, they were all demons. The entire floor was designed to have a bunch of spread camps and villages, with one large tower at the back of the room. There, from over forty-five kilometers away, Jake spotted a figure sitting and meditating on a chair atop the big tower overlooking the entire room.

[Demon Warden – lvl 255]

If one hadn't noticed yet, then the names of all these demons had a theme of sorts. They were all guarding something. That something being large groups of people sealed within barriers in all of the camps and villages.

[Prisoner – lvl 175]

Jake also spotted a few C-grades, but they were mostly D-grades and even had a few E-grades mixed in. As he scouted the room, he also noticed that this entrance area was shrouded. Based on what Jake could see, nothing could detect them ten meters from the entryway, which was the only reason no one had spotted them yet. The reason for this magic circle was also pretty obvious.

"The second we make a move... those prisoners will be in deep shit," Jake muttered to the group.

"They appear to be kept as potential sacrifices," the Sword Saint muttered.

"Which means that when we are discovered, a good portion of them will be sacrificed relatively quickly," the Fallen King said. "So we will have to decide whether we want to save as many as possible or rush this entire floor. If we split up and secure a camp each, we should be able to ensure to reach the 25% for the bonus objective. However, we will also need to be careful, any accidental attack could kill a significant portion of them, and while we may be careful, I doubt the demons care."

"Ree," Sylphie said with a low screech.

"Stealth is an option... but how many of us are good at it?" Jake asked. "I can do some stealth, but..."

He looked at the others beside him.

"Ree!" Sylphie said proudly.

"I think we already talked about giant tornadoes hiding you, not counting as being invisible," Jake pointed out.

"Ree?"

"Yes, even if the tornado does so that none of them can see anything," Jake said with a bit of exasperation.

"Ree..." Sylphie seemed a bit sad.

Jake felt a bit bad about ruining her plan, but someone had to say it. As they were trying to figure out what to do, Dina was kneeling on the ground and feeling the soil. That was Jake noticed that the ground was indeed different here. Rather than the hard rock of the chamber floor, it was more like normal soil found on the outside. Looking at Dina, he realized what she was trying to find out.

“Dina, what are you looking for?” the Sword Saint also asked curiously.

“There are a total of fourteen barriers with sealed prisoners within, right?” Dina asked.

Jake released another Pulse of Perception to scout the room and nodded. “Yeah, fourteen.”

Dina nodded along. “Give me ten minutes, and I will make sure they are safe.”

“You’re going to go through the ground, aren’t you?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, I will create protection for them by summoning vines,” she nodded as Jake saw her begin to infuse energy into the ground. Jake noticed the formation hiding their presence, beginning to slowly fade as she did this, and he responded by creating a barrier of stable arcane energy all around them that he colored the same as the background. Was this perfect stealth? No, but it appeared to be good enough, as Dina’s actions were not very flashy to begin with.

While Dina prepared, Jake and the three others also made plans for where to strike. Their main problem was the size of the room, so they needed someone to get to the back fast, preferably before the Warden had time to make a move. Jake ended up taking this upon himself as he opened a small hole in the stable arcane barrier and snuck out as he activated his stealth skill for the first time in a good while. With it, he also used something else he hadn’t really used before: his new cloak. It allowed him to be far more hidden while in the shadows, and as luck would have it, these demons weren’t a big fan of having a lot of light around and primarily used open fires everywhere, which cast plenty of shadows for Jake to stick to.

He quite easily made it to the back of the room undetected, helped along by none of the demons really being on guard, despite being called literal Guards. The Enforcers were mainly inside buildings chilling, with the guards just lazily patrolling about and the torturers seemingly working on their torture tools that none of them seemed ever use. All the prisoners just stood catatonically within their sealed-in barriers with blank expressions waiting to be rescued. It was some real NPC behavior.

Either way, once he got to the back of the room, Jake sent a mental confirmation to the rest of the team, who had all prepared to launch their own attacks. Jake had been tasked with dealing with the Warden as quickly as possible, and he had more than gladly taken that task upon himself.

Finding a good position in the shadows, Jake took out the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter he had prepared on his way there and began charging his Arcane Powershot. He remained undetected as the cloak didn't just hide his person but even his actions and energies, as per the description:

“Allows the wearer to meld into the shadows when they stand still or move slowly, masking their presence and all of their actions, including energies. Improved further if already dwelling in the shadows.”

Jake had been a bit skeptical of how well it would work and was fully prepared to be discovered instantly, but the Demon Warden remained oblivious even as someone charged an attack behind his back, only a few hundred meters away. Once Jake had fully charged the Arcane Powershot, it was time.

“Go!” Jake sent through their link as he let go of the string and unleashed his attack. The second he did so, the cloak failed to suppress his energies any longer as his body exploded with arcane energy, lighting up the entire back part of the room with a pink-purple light.

At that very moment, they all made their moves at once. In every single village or camp with prisoners, vines erupted from the ground and embraced the barriers sealing in the prisoners as bark began to grow all over the vines to protect them further. Smaller vines also tore up the ritual circle, making it inactive and ensuring the demons could not harm any of the people within.

A giant golden beam of pure energy exploded from the entrance area of the room and struck one of the camps without any prisoners in it, resulting in a giant explosion that leveled the entire thing. A green tornado shot across the terrain towards the middle of the room and one of the larger villages with one of the larger prison populations, and on the entire left side of the room, rain began to fall as a swordsman stormed forward.

The Demon Warden – Jake's target and the boss of this room – was alarmed and shot up from his seat at seeing roots shoot up all over the place. He had barely managed to stand up as he turned and, with wide eyes, raised a hand to try and block the arrow coming his way.

Red shards flew everywhere as the crystalline barrier shattered, and the arrow sank into his chest, sending the demon flying backward. In mid-air, the Demon Warden managed to stabilize as a fist-sized hole now marred his chest, but he didn't even have to orient himself before another shot hit him from above, launching him down toward the ground.

Jake had instantly jumped into the air after releasing the initial arrow to launch one from an upwards angle to ground the Demon Warden. He proceeded to unleash a rain of arrows down at the Demon Warden, but a giant red disc blocked it and launched itself upwards toward Jake.

Dodging it, Jake refused to let up as he shot another rain of arrows. The demon once more blocked with a barrier, but all of the arrows suddenly bent and flew around it the moment they got close, hitting the boss anyway.

With a roar, the Demon Warden flew up from below, his body filled with wounds. An inferno erupted around him as burning crystals materialized. He stared at Jake with hatred but didn't speak as he flew forward, wanting to face Jake in melee.

Jake humored him as they clashed in mid-air, and it quickly became clear what he was dealing with. *A pugilist.*

The demon covered his hands in crystal-like skin and even used the floating crystals around him to further empower his attacks or launch strikes using them. Sadly for the guy, Jake had fought far better... and he was not at all the same melee fighter as he had been back then.

Less skilled than Carmen...

Jake proceeded to dodge under the hand of the demon and punch him in the stomach with a katar. He reacted by trying to kick Jake, but Jake raised his own leg to block as he stabbed the demon in its already outstretched arm. The Warden tried to pull away, but Jake gave chase and refused to let up.

He knew he was on a bit of a timer. The death of the Warden would hopefully lead to some level of panic amongst the guards, so for the first time since entering Nevermore, Jake activated his boosting skill and got serious.

Every hit by the demon was countered as Jake focused on destroying its hands first. The crystals were strong, yes, but against this Blackpoint Nanoblade, they still faltered. The indestructible nature of Eternal Hunger also allowed him to not care about the tip breaking as he met the demon punch for punch, coming out on top every time.

Desperation from the demon began to set in. The Warden had failed to meaningfully land any blows on Jake, and the assistance he had expected to come was occupied elsewhere. Realizing this, the Demon Warden went on one last offensive, knowing that if it managed to significantly injure Jake, it would have a chance to regroup with its allies.

That was never going to happen.

The Demon Warden exploded forward as its entire body was temporarily covered in deep red spiked crystals. Jake flew to meet it, but just before they clashed, reality split.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter momentarily froze the Demon Warden as Jake slammed two Descending Dark Fangs into its chest just before it was capable of moving again and used its full power on the hunter that had entered melee with it.

The Warden slammed its fist together in a giant explosion of crystals and flames, but rather than crush the human, all its fists met was the shadowy curse energy of Eternal Shadow.

Still confused, the Demon Warden had no time to react as an arrow pierced it straight in the eye and embedded itself deep within its skull – fired from the real Jake, who had jumped back as he used his mythical skill.

The arrow had included all the Hunting Momentum Jake had built up during the fight, and it resulted in the arrow only stopping when it reached the back of the demon's skull. The Warden stumbled as Jake switched the balance of the arrow, making it explode within its head.

Somehow he still lived, but Jake followed up with an Arcane Powershot, shooting the head straight off the Warden.

****You have slain [Demon Warden – lvl 255] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

From there on out, it was just a cleanup of the entire room as they decided to kill every single demon there. Hey, it had to give an achievement, right? Of course, Jake didn't expect to get that achievement quite yet, because they had far more rooms to go in this on-rails portion of Minaga's Labyrinth.

Not that Jake was complaining. Also, finally getting in some pure combat was a good reprieve from just walking through hallways and something Jake got a feeling they all enjoyed – even Dina. Surprisingly enough, there was one more person who also enjoyed it.

“See, this is how things are supposed to be! Through pure skill and power, you manage to overcome the floor and conquer! I knew you could do it! Definitely giving Dina MVP for this one, by the way.”

“I thought you couldn't speak while within the rooms but only the hallways?” Jake asked as they were still not done with the demon cleanup.

“Oh yeah, got a bit too excited there. Act like I didn't say anything, alright? Good not-a-talk, Minaga out!” UPDATE FROM *novel~fire~net*

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Chapter 672: Nevermore: An Expansive Spectrum of Emotions

After Jake had killed the Warden, the demons more or less fell apart, and it was just a cleanup from there. A few of them had tried to get to the prisoners during the attack, but Dina's bark-covered roots had completely stopped all their attempts.

Jake joined the others in killing, and in the end, they finished off every single demon, with not a single prisoner dying. To make things even better, Jake got an unexpected level upon killing one of the last Torturers still left alive.

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 211 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

As for the progress of saved prisoners, it turned out that despite saving everyone, they had not yet completed the bonus objective of saving at least 25% of the prisoners.

Current progress: Prisoners freed (20%).

This was honestly expected as Jake saw far more rooms ahead of them in this linear part of the labyrinth. In fact, he had a strong feeling there was more than five total, which he sure wouldn't complain about. Nevermore had so far not really been that interesting in the combat department, outside of maybe the bout with the Demon Lord, but the Warden had been decent in Jake's mind, and even the average demon enemy on this floor could pose a danger if he let his guard down. It was a great change of pace from walking through hallways with no real danger – outside of the traps that Jake easily led them around.

Of course, some parts of Minaga's Labyrinth remained the same. Such as their host's commentary and the utterly outrageous "people" they could meet and talk to. The leader of the saved prisoners in this room was a prime example. Latest content published on *novel•fire•net*

"Thank you, heroes, for saving us from the demons. After we heard of the return of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, we feared all was lost and had resigned ourselves to our fates. Now that you have shown up, we have hope once more," the old man that looked a bit too much like the Old Royal Mage said as he bowed to them. "Please do your utmost to bring justice to us all and continue on your honourous quest. We shall stay here and rebuild that which was lost."

Jake and company had gathered all the prisoners they had saved after Dina led down her vines, and one of the only C-grades among them seemed to suddenly come alive and told them this. To the cheers of *exactly* two-hundred prisoners, they moved towards the next room.

Before they even entered it, Minaga spoke, clearly not caring that much about his earlier ruse of never talking while they were inside rooms.

“Managing to free all the prisoners so easily while not truly facing any difficulties dealing with your foes... impressive indeed! Now, the difficulty will increase slightly with each coming room, so do not be so sure you will be able to use the same strategy twice in a row!”

Upon entering the second room and scouting it, Jake turned to Dina. “We are using the exact same strategy two times in a row.”

The room was nearly identical to the first one except for a change in layout, a few higher-leveled demons around, and a Warden one level higher than the last one. They did an exact repeat of the strategy from the last room, and it went off just like before. Almost a bit too much like before, considering the words of the second old man representing the saved prisoners.

“Thank you, brave heroes, for saving us from the demons. After the return of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, we all feared that we were doomed and had resigned ourselves to our fates. Now that you have shown up, we can hope for a better future once more. Please do your utmost to restore justice and continue on your valiant quest. We shall stay here and rebuild.”

Bonus Objective Completed: Save at least 25% of the prisoners. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Current progress: Prisoners freed (40%).

Walking to the next hallway, Jake failed to resist.

“Minaga... please tell me you outsourced whatever bloody dialogue these people use,” Jake said.

“I am not the one who decides what they say! It is entirely caused by you, and I am sure they are genuinely just showing their appreciation and-“

“Bullshit,” Jake called him out.

“Alright, fair, I made them, but that doesn’t mean I just decided what they say. Now, this may get a bit philosophical, but hear me out. Normal creatures in the multiverse are born without purpose, even those we usually say have one. Many would argue something like a True Royal is born with the purpose of ruling their Lineage, but that is strictly incorrect. It is just the most obvious Path to them. If they so wished, they could choose to break that Path entirely and actively go against it. Their Records allow it, and they have the ability to do whatever they want. In the eyes of the system, their purpose is their own to find.”

Jake slowly nodded along, kind of understanding what Minaga was talking about. The system cared a lot about freedom and allowing everyone to find their own Paths. However, these creatures in dungeons were different, which Minaga expanded on as he continued.

“Meanwhile, creatures like these prisoners have no Paths. They were truly born with just one purpose, and it isn’t possible for them to break it. As I am sure you all know, then in natural dungeons, it is possible to actually bring out the creatures, though only one version can exist in the real world. However, that isn’t true for many dungeons created by dungeon engineers, as the dungeon is inherently tied to them. Unless the creature in question was brought from the outside and into the dungeon, that is, but in most cases, only an Image of the creature is made while doing this, with the true version persisting in the world outside. Ah, by the way, funny fact, if you take the Image of a creature that is already dead in the real world outside of a dungeon, it will instantly die. Actually, not that funny of a fact on second thought... anyway, my point is that nearly all the creatures you encounter within Nevermore are made entirely for Nevermore, never existed in the real world, and are all purpose-built for the dungeon. Anything they say or do is done with a purpose, but that purpose is never their own – only the wish of their creator. In summary, even if they do possess free will and have free thoughts, it is useless to them, so their way of speaking is only made with purpose, not with any intent or actual emotion behind it.”

“That got... deeper than I had expected,” Jake muttered as he and the others stopped before the hallway leading into the third room to listen to Minaga’s ramble to finish. “Are they sapient?”

“Oh, they are, which may make this seem a bit darker. You see, there have been parties in the past convincing these creatures that they can become true living beings like everyone else, with their own futures and Paths. Naturally, that isn’t the case, but it is technically a possibility to convince all the survivors on prior floors to follow you here by making contracts with them and such. They will still be unable to enter the city layer and continue onwards after the thirty-fifth floor. However, if they are under the illusion of free will till then, they would be quite handy helpers, especially the Knight of Light’s Dawn and Old Royal Mage. Oh, you just reminded me there was also an interesting demon prince that entered with a party and ended up with the Demon Lord joining him, so I had to adapt the scenario quite a bit moving forward... nothing for you guys to worry about, though. You are experiencing the vanilla quest. Well, if we ignore the fact you ignore all my storytelling and just brute-force through everything while cheesing every floor, that is.”

“I see,” Jake nodded, trying not to think too much about it as they entered the third room, where they would use the same strategy once more.

However, he couldn't help but think about certain someone really good at manipulating people.

This brought up a scary thought... Ell'Hakan could manipulate emotions, and seeing as Minaga already seemed friendly towards everyone who entered the dungeon and his seemingly near-omnipotent ability to affect the dungeon as he desired, could Ell'Hakan convince Minaga to help? Could he make Minaga tell him everything there was to know while assisting them directly through different means?

No matter how powerful Minaga was, Ell'Hakan had a Bloodline, so his ability would still work. Seeing as Minaga seemed aware of what was happening even in other versions of the floors, should he warn him? Jake considered as he spoke up.

"Hey... would it be possible for someone with a Bloodline to influence you?" Jake asked.

"Considering you have a Bloodline and influenced me quite a lot already by infuriatingly so ruining all exploration aspects of my labyrinth, then I would say the answer is yes," the dungeon master answered.

The Sword Saint seemed to catch on to what Jake was asking and followed up. "I think what Jake is asking is if someone with a Bloodline focused on manipulating others would be able to influence you. Especially considering the fact you show up in front of us at the beginning of every floor."

"While I won't answer that with a definite no... then I must say it is funny that you would ask. If you are worried about what I think you are worried about, then don't. You are talking to Minaga here; who the hell do you think I am?"

"A powerful yet utterly insane and unstable Unique Lifeform who likes to create dungeons while constantly complaining to the people actually doing said dungeons?" Jake asked rhetorically.

"You're goddamn right."

Ell'Hakan stepped onto the thirty-first floor, followed closely by the carefully curated party members Yip of Yore had introduced to him. While he was generally satisfied with them, especially the Saintess from the Holy Church, then he still had a gnawing feeling. In all honesty, neither he nor Yip had expected the Chosen of the Malefic Viper to get a good party considering the relative uncertainty around him. Most factions would hesitate to send their top talent with him, so it was regrettable to see he had managed to gather quite the group. Especially that he had managed to convince the Unique Lifeform to join him.

The Ashen Phantom Devourer was someone Ell'Hakan had tried and failed to make a permanent ally, but the innate pride of a Unique Lifeform was not something even his

Bloodline could overcome. He had managed to convince it to work with them, but in the end, the Devourer had always seen itself as superior, which was also why Ell'Hakan had been fine with sacrificing it, even if having it be a permanent fixture in his faction would have been preferable.

Dispelling the thought, Ell'Hakan focused on the task at hand. Shortly after entering the floor, the usual prompt was presented.

Welcome to the Thirty-first floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 14930

Reading it over, Ell'Hakan nodded at their luck. A labyrinth. The Priestess from the Holy Church was an expert in divination, and with their tracker also on the team, this level should be a breeze. Their entire party was designed to handle Nevermore, after all – an advantage they did have over the Malefic's Chosen's party.

As he considered this advantage, something slightly unexpected happened.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome! Ah, some interesting visitors this time around, eh!?" a voice suddenly echoed throughout the entire room as lights flashed, marking the appearance of a creature. Ell'Hakan's party was on high alert, but he raised a hand as he felt not a single aggressive emotion from the creature that had just appeared. In fact, the mix he felt was oddly upbeat but a bit too complex to easily read intent from. That there was no intent to attack was at least lucky, considering the level and power of the being.

[Minaga – lvl 275]

"My name is Minaga, your incredible host. You are indeed one interesting bunch, I must say!" the creature named Minaga said with a smile. Ell'Hakan was already at work reading the creature as it looked at him.

"Ell'Hakan, right? From what I heard, your Bloodline allows you to read and influence emotions, which seems pretty accurate. However, I gotta warn you, using your ability on me won't do much," Minaga shrugged.

"I see that my efforts were in vain," Ell'Hakan nodded as he smiled. However, even if the creature said he had failed, Ell'Hakan felt something far different. He felt himself influence the creature a lot and the emotions he was reading changed rapidly. This was the thing about eccentric beings... their emotional landscapes were vast and easily affected. Even if they were aware of his influence, it never really mattered.

"See, why do I get the feeling you don't actually think that?" Minaga said as he shook his head. "But alright, I'll play ball. Give it your best shot. Truly take a good look at my wonderful emotional spectrum."

Ell'Hakan, at that time, recalled a moment during his youth. When scanning emotions, he had several ways of doing it. Reading the emotions of individuals was intimate and difficult. Any person possesses a vast emotional spectrum at all times, with some elements stronger than others, and it was only when certain emotions surpassed a threshold he had enough to work with and amplify. Due to this, he could only influence a few people at once if he did anything complex.

However, he had learned that he could only read individuals. Instead, he could focus on all the presences in an area and read the composite of all their emotions, understanding the "vibe" of the place. This "vibe" he could then influence. All the sapient races had some innate desire to follow the flock, so if the majority of people around you believed one thing, chances are the outliers would just follow them. If not, then their own beliefs would, at the very least, be shaken, the common emotion would appear and thus be amplified, effectively making the person fall in line.

Back in his youth, Ell'Hakan had tried to influence a lot of people at once by reading their emotions in a detailed fashion. The sheer overload of information had left him bedridden with a horrible headache for over a week, as it had happened before the system, so he had never tried it again. Now, with the system, he could influence several people at once in a detailed way...

But...

Reading the emotions of the creature called Minaga just then was different. Because at that very moment, he felt like the emotional spectrum before him infinitely expanded as the emotions of countless creatures drilled into his mind. Ell'Hakan wanted to scream as he held his head, but he couldn't even move his hands as he felt utterly overloaded before he felt the entire world fade, millions of identical voices echoing at once...

"When you stare into the mind of Minaga... the mind of Minaga stares back at you."

Then, a moment later, Ell'Hakan found himself standing there like nothing had happened. His head was clear, but his party members stared at him, making him know what he had just experienced was real. He knew he had been healed... but...

Clenching his fists, he stared at the creature, not daring to even get a glimpse of emotions.

“Now, while that was a nice greeting and all, we should really get on with my labyrinth! As I am incredibly creative and awesome, I decided to shake things up and came up with a total of five difficulties! Yes, that’s right, five entire difficulties for you to choose from, isn’t that-“

Ell’Hakan barely listened as he stared at the monster, shivering as he recalled what he had felt moments prior. One thing was certain... this Minaga was in no way a creature to take lightly. Even more certain was that they could not disrespect him under any circumstances, and moving forward, they had to be incredibly careful with their words lest they offend him.

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Chapter 673: Nevermore: The Thirty-Fourth Floor

“I rate this floor nine out of ten when it comes to combat but a solid negative one out of ten when it comes to creativity. You just copy-pasted rooms over and over again. Downright shameful,” Jake admonished Minaga out loud as he stood atop a tower identical to four other towers in prior rooms.

“Oh, well, thank you for your expert review of my labyrinth! Do tell me, for how many years have you been making dungeons since you are such a master at it?” Minaga fired back with plenty of snark.

“I don’t need to be an expert in feces to know when I see a piece of crap,” Jake grinned.

“See, while you think you like constant diversity in encounters, you actually don’t. This was meant to be a gauntlet of rooms where you would take breaks in between, strategize, and get better and better at dealing with the demons as time went on. So they have to be similar for your prior experiences in all the earlier rooms to matter.”

“Didn’t I say I rate it nine out of ten for combat? Combat was good,” Jake smiled as he looked at his party members finishing off the last demons in the distance.

The thirty-third floor proved to be far longer than any of the earlier ones. Granted, it was probably meant to take around the same time for the average party, but considering

Jake could cheese every single labyrinth they had entered so far, this one became the big time sink.

A total of fifteen rooms had been in their way, with the first five looking like outside areas with camps and villages housing prisoners. As Minaga said, then these five rooms had all been pretty much identical, which meant that their strategy, which had worked perfectly the first two times around, could easily be applied three more times.

This naturally resulted in some damn good points through all the achievements they earned.

Current progress: Prisoners freed (100%).

Achievement earned: Free at least half (50%) of the prisoners. 100 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Free at three-quarters (75%) of the prisoners. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Free all (100%) of the prisoners. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

900 Nevermore Points total if you include the 200 from just completing the objective of saving twenty-five percent. This was already a massive windfall, but Jake could see how these achievements – especially the last one – could be difficult. An E-grade could easily die from some random shockwave or explosion during a fight, making a 100% completion impossible. It was only because of Dina that they managed to do it perfectly, as she protected them thoroughly with her vine shells.

After the prisoner rooms, there were no more bonus objectives. Just ten more rooms of pure fighting as it thematically was like they entered deeper and deeper into demon territory. The environment began to change from room to room, with lava pits appearing everywhere and more demonic structures popping up. The last five rooms had all been large military cities that all had a big tower in the center, which was the one Jake was currently standing on as his party finished off demons beneath. Could he help them with ranged support? Sure, but when he did that on the last floor, the Fallen King complained, so he didn't. Besides, splitting up like this rewarded more experience. He had helped right after killing the boss as he could get kills without ruining someone else's fight, but at this point, it was just cleanup work.

And on the topic of experience... Jake had managed to convince his party to leave the bosses in each room to him. This was not only due to his own vanity but also because he was truly the best person in their party at killing these bosses. Jake had to admit that when it came to killing foes of equal level, the Fallen King had him beat, and the Sword Saint was a close third after him, but against foes 40 to 50 levels above them?

Jake was by far the strongest. He had so many skills that scaled off level disparity between him and his foe, with Big Game Hunter being the biggest one. This meant that Jake had finally gotten in some good fights, but more importantly... he had gotten levels.

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 212 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 216 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 211 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

...

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 213 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Five class levels didn't seem like a lot, but it had only taken them a week to clear their way to the final room. Jake getting three race levels meant he was the one who had gotten the most over this week, including Sylphie. He knew he had a lot of experience to catch up on and plenty of Records, so he was sure as hell prepared to finally pick up some momentum while he had it. His primary reason for going to Nevermore was to gain levels, after all.

"Well, I guess you did like the fights and even did these rooms the most legitimate way, not abusing your Bloodline or anything like that," Minaga commented. **"However, I feel like giving me nine out of ten feels almost insulting. Eight out of ten I would get, but nine just feels like you are rubbing it in that I didn't get top marks, but I was still damn close."**

"I can downgrade it to an eight?"

"Rather tell me what a ten out of ten is."

"A fight where all five of us have to come together and fight in order to win. Maybe the rematch with the Demon King will be a ten out of ten?" Jake teased. He was even being nice to give it a nine, to begin with. Though perhaps he only felt it had been so fun due to how starved of a good fight he had been. Even if he said the fights had been good, he had yet to truly be pushed to his limits.

"Let's hope for that then," Minaga said just as Jake got a notification.

Achievement earned: Kill every single demon on the thirty-third floor. 150 Nevermore Points earned.

“A bit stingy on the points here?” Jake asked with a raised eyebrow.

“To be fair, killing everything isn’t actually that big of an achievement, considering they don’t really hide or anything. It just rewards you for not rushing to the end after killing the boss without cleaning up. Most people do stay behind to grind levels, and it isn’t like you can “fail” this achievement like how the prisoners can die,”Minaga countered.

“Aight, guess I shouldn’t complain too much,” Jake smiled. He looked towards the place where the entrance to the next hallway would usually be and instead saw the gateway leading to the in-between room. After a quick mental confirmation from the others, Jake flew down as they regrouped in front of the gate before promptly walking through.

“How refreshing,” the Sword Saint instantly commented once they entered the cozy lounge. “The atmosphere was beginning to get to me at times.”

“Yeah... I didn’t like it either,” Dina concurred.

“Could have been more comfortable for sure,” Jake agreed. The fire affinity floors had been a bit suffocating due to the high heat and constant smoke in the air, and while it hadn’t really impacted their fighting power, it had still been a bother.

A second or so later, the usual notifications popped up too.

Thirty-third floor completed. 330 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-third floor in less than a week (7 days). 200 Nevermore Points earned.

“Fewer points than on any prior floors... though I guess we did do the bonus objective achievements related to the prisoners,” Jake said.

“And you did miss some other stuff, too, like finding out more information about the Demon Lord from the demons there and thus learning a few interesting titbits of lore,” Minaga came in. **“It wouldn’t have given that many points, but I am sure you would have enjoyed the details. Want some insight now? Totally free.”**

Jake looked at the others and knew that they would need some time to fully recover anyway, so he shrugged as he went over to the bar. “Go right ahead.”

“Great! So, the Demon Lord was originally spawned a long time ago in...”

The group split up as the Sword Saint went to the open-air bath to cool off. Dina decided to stay with Jake to have some drinks while taking care of the garden she had hidden in her spatial storage, Sylphie decided to take a nap on the counter, and the Fallen King floated into one of the bedrooms to meditate.

They spent a few hours relaxing as Jake heard Minaga go all out with his story about how the Demon Lord was summoned through a mad sacrifice by some second-born prince who wanted to get power so he worked with the demonic cult, but the Demon Lord couldn't be controlled and ended up breaking free and summoned an army of demons to accompany it. These demons ended up eventually being pushed out of the kingdom and now controlled their own land while waiting for the Demon Lord to return. The area of the labyrinth they were now entering was the demon's domain.

How exactly all this made sense considering they were within a labyrinth in a dungeon, Jake wasn't entirely sure of, but Minaga excused it with them only seeing set areas of each kingdom and such. Jake guessed it was a bit like how one couldn't exactly explore all the areas of a kingdom in video games but only had set instances.

After their time of relaxation, they moved onto the thirty-fourth floor, not at all sure what to expect. Thematically, they had now entered the inner walls of the Demon Lord's compound, but Jake assumed they would not meet the boss before the thirty-fifth floor, so he wondered what would be there.

"Say, will this floor also be completely and utterly uncheeseable?" Jake asked.

"I don't think uncheeseable is even a word."

"What a nice attempt to avoid answering my question," Jake grinned.

"Fine, sure, you probably can cheese a bunch of stuff and cheat a lot, but it won't be as easy as you think it will! This floor is even more special than any of those prior, and I am not lying when I say I am interested in seeing how you will handle it. So good luck!"

"Alright, alright, let's see what you have cooked up this time," Jake said as their group went through the gateway and entered the thirty-fourth floor. Once more, they were met with a system message with details of the floor.

Welcome to the Thirty-fourth floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 4)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Find the three Secret Scrolls (0/3).

Current progress: Secret Scrolls found (0/3). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 20783

And as always, Minaga popped in, and they had a nice round of difficult-choosing where they naturally went ahead with the Archmage difficulty before Minaga popped out of existence and they walked through the large gate and into the labyrinth proper.

However... Jake instantly noticed something was off as the gate opened. Rather than a long hallway, it was just a brief walk into a room where, surprisingly enough, a demon was waiting. Something he promptly informed his party of, along with what else he saw ahead.

"It looks like we are walking into some kind of small city room right off the bat, not unlike those we just cleared, but rather than an entire city, it is more like a district. Also, we will appear in a house with a demon that I think is friendly, based on how it seems to be waiting, so don't blow it up before it can talk," Jake said.

"Within a city already? Perhaps this layer will not be pure combat," the Sword Saint muttered.

"Based on what Minaga said, it's probably not. Also, seeing as we have to find something called Secret Scrolls, their locations are likely hidden, and we need to find them somehow."

"Rather than theorize needlessly, why not just find out once we enter the room," the Fallen King said dismissively.

The King had spoken through their telepathic link, and Jake chose to also respond through it too.

"How come you seem to be in such a shitty mood ever since we entered the labyrinth-part of Nevermore?" Jake asked.

"Because we are under the constant gaze of a Unique Lifeform, slaves to its whims and desires," the Fallen King said, clearly annoyed.

"So, it is down to you, as a Unique Lifeform, just not liking other Unique Lifeforms?" Jake asked. *"Man, and I thought you and that Ashen Phantom Devourer having hate-boners for each other was just a unique circumstance, but it is something natural?"*

"An apex creature will naturally not desire others to dare approach its station. Unique Lifeforms instinctively compete and are the closest thing to relatives we can have. That we wish to dominate one another and prove our superiority is only to be expected."

"Not gonna lie, pretty sure Minaga has you thoroughly handled when it comes to being superior," Jake joked.

"Utter nonsense. This Unique Lifeform is clearly not only a level 275 creature but merely one iteration of something greater, which must mean it is far older than we know. The only true advantage it has over I is time. That does not make this Minaga superior to me, only temporarily ahead," the Fallen King said very dismissively. Follow current novels on [novel·fire·net](http://novel.fire.net)

"You sound a bit like me there," Jake joked. It kind of mirrored his emotions toward any god. Sure, they were far stronger than he was right now, but he would reach their level in due time. *"Anyway, I got it now. You are being silent because you feel temporarily inferior to Minaga."*

"... let us just finish these ten floors and move on..."

Jake just grinned as they walked out of the fog and found themselves standing in the cellar of a house where a hooded demon sat waiting for them. It was an older-looking male with old gray horns and a beard, making Jake more sure than ever that Minaga liked to make every damn character that spoke an old bearded man.

"You look like you have been expecting us," Jake said as he looked at the demon.

The demon man nodded to them as he looked up. "Indeed I have. I had heard rumors you would arrive... finally, we have a chance to fight back. After the return of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, we demons that hoped for peace with the other enlightened races found ourselves ostracized and even sacrificed, while the worshippers of the demonic cult have risen in esteem due to the freeing of the Demon Lord. However, with you here now, not all is lost. There are some problems, though. The castle is sealed off, and in order to enter, we must find out how. No... you must find out how..."

"Where exactly are we?" the Sword Saint asked.

Taking out an orb, the old demon showed them a general layout of the city and even several adjacent rooms with hallways leading to them. As Jake looked at it, the demon spoke again.

"Welcome to the Demon Lord's harem."

His what now?

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

Chapter 674: Nevermore: Demon Lord's Harem

Jake's first question when he heard about the Demon Lord having a harem regarded the logistics. You see, the Demon Lord was quite large, while all the regular demons he saw in his sphere were human-sized, so...

Anyway, not important. What was important was the entire theming of the thirty-fourth floor, as the friendly demon explained it to them.

"The evil Demon Lord Gubrothas had a harem back before he was sealed away consisting of nine Mistresses and one Prime Consort that he valued above everything else. In the years waiting for his return, the Prime Consort took control and was the most powerful person outside of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas himself. She was the original leader of the Demonic Cult, and after the summoning, she embraced the demonic path and became a half-demon herself. The nine Mistresses and the Prime Consort have been in a power struggle for a long, and some have even been disillusioned due to the prolonged absence of their lord. However, more importantly, are the young candidates and common Courtesans hoping to ascend to become Mistresses. Many of them have been here for many years and know secrets that can help us, such as how to open the seal to the castle of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, though I suspect that key is held only by the Prime Consort. I also heard that three Secret Scrolls have been given to three of his Mistresses. Locating those will also assist us moving forward."

In essence, this room, if not entire floor of Nevermore, was pretty much a large red-light district. Jake's first thought was just quickly finding their targets and going on a slaughter. However...

"Please try to not cause unnecessary death... many of those who live here are those who never truly joined the army of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas. You must be selective and only kill those who are truly evil while sparing the innocent. We must not raise too much suspicion either, as I fear the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas may choose to temporarily completely seal away the castle or perhaps even flee."

It was a nice request that Jake would certainly have ignored. The problem was, it wasn't actually a request.

Floor Penalty activated. Killing any non-designated target on this floor will result in a subtraction of Nevermore Points. This subtraction grows exponentially based on how many "innocents" are killed. Using Identify will inform you whether a being is innocent, undetermined, or free to kill.

"Wait, what the hell?" Jake asked after reading it. "Negative points for killing? What kind of dungeon is this?"

“The type that punishes people who go full murderhobo for no reason.”

“First of all, how do you even know the word murderhobo? Secondly, how come just killing everything on any prior floor was totally fine?” Jake asked with a bit of exasperation.

“The answer to your first question is that I am smart, and the answer to the second is that I am talented at making diverse encounters,” Minaga said, clearly proud of himself. **“Does make life hard for you, huh? Can’t just kill everything and move on? Also, do you like how it contrasts to the prior floor, where it was all about killing?”**

“Not a big fan, no,” Jake muttered. “But we could just head straight for the Prime Consort, kill her, and move on, right?”

Minaga didn’t answer. Instead, the Sword Saint shook his head. “That would result in no bonus points being gained, I assume. I am not saying we can’t send one person to quickly finish off the Prime Consort, but that may raise suspicions... I think taking it slow may be for the best.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jake said. “But how will we even be able to sneak around? I can maybe see the two of us put on some big robes, but the others...”

Jake looked at the plant lady, the green bird, and the large floating Unique Lifeform. They didn’t exactly fit into a city of demons. At least there were still cultists walking around, many of those humans, but that would only help Jake and the Sword Saint.

“Ah, do not worry, I have prepared identities for all of you,” the demon in the room said, almost like Jake’s words had triggered a dialogue response. “Here, take these identification badges, and you will be believed to be part of the Demonic Cult.”

“How does that make any sense,” Jake said as the demon took out five badges, each of them flying towards a member of Jake’s party. It didn’t change their appearance or anything. All it did was add a slight change to the feeling of their aura.

“And this actually works?” Jake asked the demon.

“The Demonic Cult often has new members joining from the old kingdom, so your appearance should not raise any suspicion, and your identities are perfect as long as you are careful and don’t divulge who you truly are. Now please, you must locate the three Secret Scrolls and find the key to unlocking the castle so you can finish your quest and slay the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas and restore order. Obtaining the three Secret Scrolls is also imperative as it will no doubt help you in the final fight against the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas.”

Still incredibly skeptical, Jake pointed to Sylphie and the Fallen King. “You mean to tell me that a Demonic Cult consistent only of humanoids will not at all question the appearance of a green hawk and a Unique Lifeform?”

“The Demonic Cult often has new members joining from the old kingdom, so your appearance should not raise any suspicion, and your identities are perfect as long as you are careful and don’t divulge who-“

“Seriously?” Jake cut him off, hearing the exact same dialogue.

“The Demonic Cult often has new members joining-“

“Thank you for your guidance. We will do our utmost,” the Sword Saint then cut him off as he bowed.

“I wish you luck. Please bring the Secret Scrolls back here when you have them all, and I shall decipher them,” the demon said, finally changing what he said.

Jake looked at the demon as it seemed to enter a catatonic state, just staring into the wall.

“You mean to tell me that these people are actually sapient creatures, Minaga?” Jake questioned.

“They just have very selective hearing and short-term memory loss; what can I say? Anyway, I will echo his words and wish you luck... I look forward to seeing your performances. Ah, but just one more tip for you. Well, you and the swordsman.”

“What is it?” Jake asked.

“While it is an entirely valid strategy, one I would even recommend for most parties, I will warn you about sleeping with too many of the Courtesans, and I would definitely warn you about trying to get any of them preg-“

“Minaga,” Jake cut him off as he raised a hand. “What the actual fuck?”

“What? Oh, you think I am joking? I had a guy decide to settle down here and abandon his party after falling in love with one of the Courtesans. True, he will be kicked out when the fifty years run out, but the dude was still delusional to the extreme, and last time I checked, he got two kids, and he probably fucked up his own Records pretty badly. Casually sleeping with them is totally fine, though, and a great way to get information.”

“Is this not too disadvantaged towards non-male individuals and monsters attempting the dungeon?” the Sword Saint asked, seemingly unbothered.

“There are plenty of incubi and men around too, and no one said the Mistresses or even Prime Consort don’t have quite... interesting tastes.”

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, seemingly confused about the entire conversation they were having.

“Don’t worry about it. Minaga is just talking nonsense,” Jake reassured her.

“Up to you how you do it, but putting on some charm may prove very beneficial... anyway, that is the last hint I will give. Have fun!”

With that, Minaga popped out. Well, he was never there to begin with, but... yeah. Jake and the others were left to wonder how to proceed on this floor, with Jake being quite unsure for the first time since entering Nevermore. Through his Pulse of Perception, he could locate several interesting places, but if killing was not an option...

“Let us begin by scouting the city a bit more carefully and confirm that we can indeed blend into the crowd before we decide to make any more moves,” the Sword Saint said.

“Yeah,” Jake agreed, primarily because he had no other ideas. As a group, they went through a secret exit leading to the cellar and entered the house of the old demon before promptly leaving to the street of this district of the city that was designated as the “Demon Lord’s harem.”

In all honesty, it was a bit of a silly name, considering there were plenty of people there that had nothing to do with this harem. The name was probably only what it was because the Prime Consort and the Mistresses ruled the area. And, of course, because Minaga had named it.

Once outside, Jake was more than ready to be jumped by some of the many guards walking about. However, to his surprise, the first guard they met outside just walked up to them and nodded as Jake used Identify. Follow current NOVELS on *novel**fire**net*

[Celibate Demon Guard – lvl 250 - Innocent]

“Hello there, I haven’t seen any of you around before. Are you new members of the Demonic Cult?” he asked.

Jake was momentarily not sure what to say as he once more took a look at their party. There was no fucking way anyone would think they were actually new members. He also confirmed that Identify designated the guy as innocent, so killing was indeed not an option.

“Yes, we are. We arrived not too long ago after hearing about the return of the honored Demon Lord,” the Sword Saint answered for their group with a smile.

“Ah, I see. We have had quite a few new visitors recently,” the guard nodded. “Carry on then, and enjoy your stay! Sadly the castle is closed off right now, much to the disappointment of the Mistresses and the Prime Consort. It makes me fear the loneliness and lack of attention from the Demon Lord may leave them vulnerable to being approached by those with untoward intentions. Do inform the guard if you come across any such individuals.”

“Who would dare do such a thing?” the Sword Saint said, looking horrified. “And how would such a thing even happen? I am certain the Mistresses and Prime Consort are all under heavy protection within their residences, and it isn’t as easy as just walking in there to get an audience.”

“It indeed isn’t that easy,” the guard nodded. “However, these insidious individuals instead approach the young Courtesans belonging to the factions of a specific Mistress to get an audience, and then through the Mistresses associated with her, they approach the Prime Consort. Recently there are even been rumors of a lot of these individuals approaching the Courtesans in the inns, but as it isn’t against the rules for the Courtesans to spend time with others before they become official Mistresses, then we as guards can’t do anything about it.”

“We will be certain to keep an eye out for such individuals,” the Sword Saint nodded with determination.

“It is good to see such upstanding individuals,” the guard said with a smile. “Here, take this signet and show it to a guard if you wish to report someone. It will also help other guards not suspect you are one of these horrible people who wish to take advantage of the naivety of a young Courtesan or even a Mistress.”

“Thank you for doing such a splendid job to keep them all safe,” the old man said with a deep bow.

The guard nodded before walking away.

Jake just stood there staring as the Sword Saint had a small signet in his hand that gave off an interesting aura.

“I must admit, this is a lot easier than I had expected,” the Sword Saint muttered.

“Yeah,” Dina nodded.

Jake didn’t wanna comment on the stupidity he had just observed. Though one part of him wished it was that easy to get information out of people in real life.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked.

“As long as you are certain you can stay hidden,” Jake shrugged. “And remember not to kill anyone that Identify marks as Innocent. Actually, probably just avoid killing anyone, period.”

“Ree,” Sylphie agreed as she turned into wind and disappeared.

“Are you certain sending off the Sylphian will end well?” the Fallen King asked. “She is not the most subtle.”

“That is true,” Jake said. “But she has an overpowered ability to make people like her, so I have a feeling she will be just fine. If she will accomplish anything, now that is a total toss-up.”

“Sylphie is pretty smart when it matters,” Dina nodded, approving of the bird.

“Very well,” the Fallen King said. “I am uncertain what my role will be on this floor, but if it is desired, then I can accomplish whatever task is assigned to me.”

“I believe it would be pertinent to first follow the tip given by the guard and investigate the inns to find Courtesans we can form positive relations to, and through them, meet a Mistress. As long as we can speak to one Mistress, it should allow us far more insight into the actual political landscape of this floor and make better decisions from there. I have also checked the fabricated identities we have been given, and nothing links our party together, so splitting up is also a good option. If there are different competing factions – something there always is in a harem - then having a person in each camp would be preferable as often internal information is biased, and we will have to know both sides to make the best decisions,” the Sword Saint said.

Jake slowly nodded, not hearing anything wrong with that. The others also seemed in agreement, probably because none of them knew what to do.

“Would anyone complain if I took Dina with me? If we approach the Courtesans as a group of two, it will make them less suspicious we are trying anything. We can try to infiltrate one faction can try to enter one through another channel, with perhaps even Sylphie getting lucky. Fallen King, I would advise you to try and approach some guards and join them. Considering your status as a Unique Lifeform makes you incapable of reproduction, you will likely be considered a “safe” guard, based on the other’s description of celibate,” the old man continued.

The Fallen King nodded along as the Sword Saint looked at Jake. “What are your plans?”

“I will try to go for a tavern too, I guess, with my target being to reach the Prime Consort as soon as possible, whatever means possible. Chances are we will have to kill her one way or another... and as always, I will take on the job of handling the floor boss,” Jake said.

“We must still bide our time,” the Sword Saint said. “As that old demon warned us, then raising a ruckus will result in making our task a lot harder, and it is likely it will make finding these Secret Scrolls impossible.”

“Oh, I won’t go to fight her directly,” Jake smiled. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t handle her through other means.”

“While Minaga did mention it as an option, seducing the Prime Consort may be a bit difficult for you, but I implore you to give it a shot,” the Sword Saint said skeptically yet encouragingly.

Jake stared at him, trying *really* hard to see if the old man was joking. He wasn’t.

“I am talking about alchemy.”

“Oh,” the Sword Saint muttered. “I guess that works too.”

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

Chapter 675: Nevermore: Mistresses

It may be difficult to believe, but Jake had barely done any proper dating or really gone to any bars throughout his life. On second thought, it probably was entirely believable, considering he was just coasting through life before the system, with little care about anything, just taking it one day at a time.

Even after the system, he hadn’t really done that much with other people that would be considered “normal.” Due to this, Jake felt far from confident as he entered a bar and looked around the place. It was old and medieval-looking and was filled with people in black hoods, demons, and women and men who wore less than they probably should. Jake Identified a shirtless man currently chatting up a cultist and saw the general level.

[Courtesan – lvl 204 - Innocent]

“Gotta admit, I thought Courtesan was reserved for women,” Jake muttered to himself while still at the door.

“**Gender-neutral, actually,**” Minaga spoke.

“Really?” Jake asked. “Huh, I guess you learn something new every day.”

“Not gonna lie, I am actually unsure if it is gender-neutral, but if it isn’t, then why did your translation skill translate to it? Definitely couldn’t be my mistake, so let’s just go with it being neutral, alright?”

Jake nodded and smirked, not wanting to get into the most useless argument imaginable.

Nobody in the inn reacted despite the echoing voice of Minaga and Jake standing right there in the doorway. It was as if he was invisible before he made his presence known by speaking to anyone or making too big of an action. Looking at the person the male Courtesan was talking to, he saw a hooded man at quite a lot higher level.

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[High-ranking Demonic Cultist – lvl 256 - Undetermined]

It was Jake’s first time running into the Undetermined tag. He would likely have to learn information about the person before he would know if they were a valid kill target or not, but he didn’t really need to. Instead, he chose to just go to the bar and order something to drink. Before he had entered, Jake had taken a break in an alley and dolled himself up a little.

And when he said he “dolled himself up,” he meant that he had used Shroud of the Primordial to change what he Identified as.

Without any idea if it would work or not, Jake had made himself appear as a level 240 Prodigious Demonic Cultist. He had considered adding another tag, like saying he was high-ranking, but had settled on Prodigious instead, as the system already used that word quite a lot for very talented people. He hoped that if these people – or NPCs – could use Identify, then they would find him worth approaching simply due to his tag, while at the same time not expecting him to actually know stuff as he was a prodigy, not some official. It was a gamble, for sure.

Lo and behold, the moment the bartender turned to him, he called Jake “young master,” and within a minute, three Courtesans had taken the seats around him. Jake channeled his inner arrogant and disinterested young master as the two women and one man spoke to him, and he responded with one-word answers.

The attention was a bit annoying, but Jake wanted to make himself known to catch a bigger fish. Thus he sat at the bar for around half an hour while having people buy drinks for him – something he had never tried before. So that was kind of fun, at least. Finally, after this half an hour, a new courtesan came up to him and handed him a small piece of paper while giving a wink.

Jake quickly checked the note and saw it had an address and a name on it. Jake called it an address and a name... but...

The Ninth Mistress would like to meet you, Prodigious Demonic Cultist, at her home, Residency Nine.

Yeah... Minaga had truly outdone himself there. Oh, to make it all better, Residency Nine was located just through the Ninth Gate. The Mistresses all had their own separate rooms with hallways leading into them, and Jake had discussed with the others through their telepathic link why this may be, and they settled on it being to allow some form of combat. As a fog wall still separated all the rooms, information would not instantly spread, and random wayward attacks would never hit this "main" city in the middle.

Without delaying, Jake left the bar, with no one even making an attempt to try and follow him. In fact, he saw through his sphere that the moment he left the inn, they all just went back to making the same motions as before, with the bartender having cleaned the same unused glass a few thousand times by now.

Finding the gate in question was incredibly easy as there were street signs everywhere informing him of the way to the different gates. Did it make sense that there would be street signs specifically pointing toward the homes of Mistresses? No, no it did not.

Reaching the gate, Jake didn't even have to say or do anything as the guard bowed. "We were informed you would come. Please enter."

"Thank you," Jake nodded as the gate opened and let him through, making Jake take a mental note that he then promptly informed his party of.

"If someone else enters a gate to another room, you can sneak through with them, and with the mist, you will be hidden. The random residents here do enter the gates at times," Jake shared.

"Ree," Sylphie informed him.

"Alright, never mind then," Jake said. The hawk had already snuck inside a residence of a Mistress, it seemed, and was currently making friends with the Second Mistress – who had the great name "Two."

Jake had finally met his match when it came to sucking at naming stuff.

The room he entered after a very short hallway was just one large residence, which consisted of a large main building in the middle and four smaller houses off to the side. One of them was a guardhouse, one had other employees, and the last two looked to be guest houses that had Courtesans living there. From a quick Pulse, it appeared this layout was standard for all these rooms.

Shortly after he had entered the room, the same Courtesan that had handed him the note met him. How she had gotten there so fast, considering Jake had headed straight

there and not noticed her on the way, was a mystery. One he didn't bother to question as she escorted him to the main residency where he would meet the Mistress.

Once inside, he went straight for her chambers as the Courtesan waited outside. Walking to the door, it opened by itself, and through it, he could see her obscured form.

[Ninth Mistress – lvi 253]

Jake instantly took notice of the lack of "Undetermined" or "Innocent" after her name, which meant she was a person they were free to kill. If they wanted to kill her, if that would lead to other problems... now that was a whole other issue.

"My name is Nine, a pleasure to meet you, Prodigy," the woman said as a large veil hanging from the ceiling hid her form, only allowing Jake to see an outline while still somehow allowing Identify. Of course, with his sphere, he could see her clearly and noted she was a beastkin of some kind, which did surprise Jake a bit as he had expected all of these Mistresses to be demons considering the race of the Demon Lord. Then again, all the Courtesans were not demons, either.

Jake considered these things as he didn't even notice that several seconds had passed without him answering, so he quickly collected himself and spoke. "I am honored to be invited by the esteemed Ninth Mistress."

"Please, call me Nine," she answered, making Jake want to reach through space and punch Minaga.

"As you wish, Nine" Jake nodded, keeping his cool. "May I know why the Mistress wanted to meet with me?"

Rather than fish for information, have her divulge it of her own volition.

"You are new to this city, correct? From what I was told, you do not belong to any faction yet, and I hoped to recruit you to mine," the Mistress said.

"While I am flattered, I will need to know more about what your faction is. I am currently unaware of the political landscape as I just arrived in the city today," Jake said.

"Very well. I belong to the faction of the Prime Consort, while we are competing with the faction formed by One, the First Mistress, who wants to become the Prime Consort. Our faction has three Mistresses within it, while the First Mistress has four others with her, meaning they have two more Mistresses than us, while we, of course, have the Prime Consort. The one remaining Mistress remains neutral, and we hope to turn her to our side in the upcoming power struggle," the Ninth Mistress explained, once more gladly spreading all the information there was.

"I see. In that case, I would be honored to join you. However, how would my joining your faction help?" Jake asked.

"It is possible a conflict may happen when we next convene, and we will need as many powerful individuals on our side as possible to intimidate the other side. If you assist us in securing that the Prime Consort remains in her position, I am certain she will even allow you an audience with the Demon Lord himself so you can swear your fealty. Only the Prime Consort can open the Demon Lord's castle while it is sealed, after all," she answered, pretty much outlining a way to finish this floor.

The goal was to find the exit after all. Something Jake had technically already done, as it was just past a sealed gate marked the "Demon Lord's Castle," but they naturally had to open this to gain entrance to go through and finish the floor.

"Are there any ways I can assist you and earn the trust of the Prime Consort?" Jake asked. He saw no reason to beat around the bush but just asked directly.

"If you can recruit more Courtesans to our cause, it would be incredibly valuable and strengthen the faction. While the guards currently remain neutral, if you could make them support us, it would also be of massive assistance. Finally, if you can turn any of the Mistresses to our side, it would be most helpful. If not, then see if it is possible to perhaps eliminate some of them, either through killing them or making them lose their positions to Courtesans allied with us," the Ninth Mistress once more answered way too matter-of-factly.

Jake nodded as he decided to take a chance. "I have also heard rumors of the Mistresses guarding Secret Scrolls, but I did not quite understand what they are."

"They are called Secret Scrolls for a reason," the Mistress said dismissively.

Aight, worth a shot.

"I shall not ask more about them, then. It is just that I heard some unsavory individuals were looking for them, so I wanted to warn you to make sure they are kept safe," Jake said.

"Do not worry. They are all safely guarded already."

Hey, he had to at least try if that one worked, right?

"Once more, I thank you for this audience. Do not hesitate to ask anything more of me I can help with, but if not, I will set out," Jake bowed.

"Do well, and you will be rewarded," the Mistress said from behind the veil, clearly happy with Jake and what he had done and said. Walking out of her residency, Jake was given access to two other Mistresses that were also allied with the Prime Consort.

From there, Jake headed to one of the many abandoned houses, where he went inside and took a seat leaning against a wall. For some bloody reason, he felt kind of tense after that meeting, despite feeling pretty relaxed while doing it.

After a quick break, Jake shared what he had learned with the others, with the Sword Saint confirming that the Third Mistress had told him the same five minutes earlier. A Mistress who, it turned out, was allied with the First Mistress.

Sylphie was with the one neutral Mistress, the Second Mistress. From how Sylphie spoke, this Mistress did not like any of the others and, surprisingly enough, seemed outright hostile towards the Demon Lord. The Fallen King had also managed to join the guards and some-fucking-how instantly gotten promoted to a Team Leader with several guards working under him. Through that, he had learned that one of the Secret Scrolls was guarded by the current Guard Captain of this entire city area.

All in all, Jake was the one with the least progress, he felt. Except, his goal had never really been to gather information. It was to get to the Prime Consort as fast as possible. Now, however, he felt like there was another way forward.

"Hey, I got an idea," Jake spoke through their link. "While you all work on finding the Secret Scrolls, maybe I will team up with Sylphie, and we will try to organize a big get-together with the Second Mistress hosting with the excuse that she wants to join a faction. Then once we have all the Mistresses in one room, I can prepare a little special something through the power of alchemy."

"I doubt getting them together is that easy," the Sword Saint answered. "But I do think it would be an idea to work with the Second Mistress. As a sole individual, her position is weaker than everyone else's, so I could see her "winning" leading to the best rewards. Also, she seems more hostile to the others, so maybe she will have some ideas on how you can apply your power of alchemy."

"I guess that is an option," Jake agreed.

"Can I maybe come along too?" Dina asked.

"That would probably be for the best," the old man said. "Try and find out exactly what her stance is and what she wants to accomplish. Based on the pattern, I would expect her to be the odd one out and actually be an enemy of the Demon Lord, and she will offer us an alternative method to conquer this floor outside of partnering with either faction. Perhaps she will even give us access to the option where we simply kill them all."

"Sounds reasonable," Jake agreed. "Dina, let's meet close to the gate, but not actually group up. I think entering separately is best to not get suspicion placed on us, as people already know you are associated with the Sword Saint."

"Alright," Dina said. "I already got an invite from a Courtesan, so I should be able to enter. How about you?"

"I will figure something out."

"In the meantime, I will further integrate myself with the faction belonging to the First Mistress," the Sword Saint said. "I am on my way to meet the Fifth Mistress now, and it may take me a few hours."

"Are you seriously going to... you know?"

"Dependent on how it goes, then yes, we may enjoy a cup of tea together."

"Ah, alright... for a second there, I thought you were actually going to-"

"That was innuendo."

"..."

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Chapter 676: Nevermore: Second Mistress

Jake watched from afar as Dina effortlessly entered the Second Gate – again, brilliant name – and entered the residence of the Second Mistress. He purposefully waited a few minutes before he also made his way there.

Now, if waiting actually helped, Jake didn't know. The "people" in Minaga's Labyrinth were not the smartest, but it was possible some of them could display some level of intelligence when it truly mattered. After all, the Demon Lord seemed like it wasn't a complete moron.

Walking up to the gate, the two guards at the gate raised their hands to stop him.

"Halt, may I know why you wish to enter the residence of the Second Mistress?" he asked.

"I have something of utmost importance I must discuss with her," Jake tried, seeing if that would help.

"Without an invitation, I sadly cannot allow you access," the guard shook his head.

Should have seen that coming, Jake thought. Oh well, I guess I will have to head to a bar and get lucky or maybe sneak in when another visitor comes b-

"Excuse me," the other guard said as he looked at Jake. "Do you know a Courtesan by the name of Sylphie?"

Jake's mouth opened wide for a second before he answered. "Yes?"

"Ah, in that case, you are naturally welcome. We were informed by the Second Mistress that someone matching your description would come by," the second guard said as he opened the gate.

"Thanks," Jake said, still not sure what was going on. Sylphie? A Courtesan? How in the hell did that even...

If something happened to her... we are going full-on murderhobo, Jake told himself as he tried to restrain his bloodlust. Luckily, it didn't look like he had to be worried. The second he went through the gate, a bird flew out of the primary residence in the room and landed on his head as she greeted him.

"Ree!" she said with excitement.

"Oh, you made a friend?" Jake said, a bit surprised.

"Ree," Sylphie explained, making Jake nod. Inside the largest building in the room, he saw Dina sit opposite another woman as they looked to be discussing something. Sylphie had told him about how nice the Second Mistress was, but Jake naturally questioned that assessment if he went by the standards of any other natives of the labyrinth. Nevertheless, he knew he would have to go meet her and walked towards the house with Sylphie proudly standing on his head.

He was fully prepared for another conversation that was just him trying to find the right dialogue lines to get a proper response, which was why he was a bit surprised when he entered the room where Dina and this Second Mistress were talking. She was not behind a veil like the other Mistress but was sitting at a table with Dina and casually looked his way when he entered.

"You must be Jake; Sylphie told me a lot about you," the Second Mistress smiled.

"Greetings, Second Mistress," Jake said, nodding at her. She felt more animated than the other Mistress just from her change in tone as she spoke, and more than that, her level was a lot higher.

[Second Mistress – lvl 268] This update is available on novel•

As far as Jake could tell, she was also a human, but there was one other big difference. She gave off an actual aura of power, something the other Mistress had not, and the Sword Saint had also hinted at the other Mistresses all feeling weak. This Second Mistress did not.

"Please, no need for such formalities," she waved him off. "I heard you were the uncle of Sylphie here? Truly a wonderful niece you have."

"Ree!" Sylphie protested atop his head.

"Oh, you are not his niece?" she asked, looking a bit confused. "I thought he was your uncle?"

"Ree!"

"So, not your uncle... but he is still Uncle?"

"Ree," Sylphie nodded, satisfied.

"I... am not entirely sure I get it, but on the other hand, I don't feel like I should," the Second Mistress chuckled as she looked at Jake again. "Considering Sylphie's power, am I right to assume you are strong too? If Dina is anything to go by... things around here may get very interesting."

Okay... definitely not the usual NPC energy, Jake thought.

"I am not too shabby when it comes to combat, no," Jake answered. "None of us are."

The Second Mistress nodded before looking in thought. "When the Demon Lord returned, he was injured, which is part of the reason why they chose to seal off the castle. Are you people perhaps the cause of those injuries?"

Now Jake was really sure she was not a regular person of this labyrinth.

"What makes you think that?" Jake asked. "We just arrived here in the city recently, and if we had fought the Demon Lord and were truly antagonistic, would it not have been discovered already?"

The Second Mistress sighed. "I would not expect anyone here to ever notice anything. I am uncertain why it is like this, but the majority of those who live here just go through the motions, seemingly with little thought behind it."

Jake raised an eyebrow. She seemed aware something was wrong with all the other people, but clearly not that she was within a dungeon. Which made him curious. "Why do you think this is?"

"Who knows. Perhaps it is the influence of the Demonic Cult, perhaps the odd environment, or it could just be they have all given up on life. Ultimately, their catatonic states only help me achieve my goal."

"And what is your goal?" Jake asked.

The Second Mistress did a double-take with Sylphie, who happily screeched before the woman spoke. "To kill the Demon Lord and put an end to the Demonic Cult once and for all."

Jake nodded as that was the expected answer. "And to do that, you became a member of the Demonic Cult yourself to destroy them from within?"

Smiling, the Second Mistress returned his nod. "You know, I am so used to talking with people who never truly question anything... today has indeed been refreshing. But yes, that is exactly what I did. My initial goal was only to kill the Prime Consort, who was the original summoner of the Demon Lord, but after the demon was freed, he will now have to die too. Along with all the Mistresses, if possible. In fact, I would love to burn this entire place to the ground, but I guess that would be going overboard."

"Say, why do you want them dead that badly?" Jake questioned. She had way more emotion than anyone else Jake had seen besides maybe the Demon Lord and Minaga, and he clearly felt bloodlust bubble up as she spoke.

"I am not a big fan of sharing my personal history... but let's just say that the Demonic Cult took all I had, and now I have dedicated all I am to make sure I take everything from them in return," she said with determination.

Jake nodded, having a pretty good understanding of the situation on floor thirty-four by now.

So, to summarize all Jake had learned so far:

Two factions existed in the Demon Lord's harem. One was ruled by the Prime Consort, who was afraid of being ousted and never really left her residency, while the other was ruled by the First Mistress, the prime candidate to become the new Prime Consort.

Then there was the Second Mistress, who was actually someone that only joined the Demonic Cult to put an end to it because of her tragic backstory. The common determined heroine. Her wish was not only to kill every single other Mistress but also the Prime Consort and Demon Lord. This Second Mistress was definitely the prime candidate for parties like theirs that specialized in combat.

However, these factions and the Second Mistress didn't really have much power besides what they themselves wielded as individuals. They had some allied demonic cultists, but none were truly powerful. No, the most powerful faction was, by far, the

Guards, ruled by a Guard Captain. He was the one who had kept order while the Demon Lord was absent. These guards were, as of this moment, not associated with any faction.

So, two factions, one standalone Mistress and a group of unaffiliated guards.

"If I may... how exactly did you plan on doing this?" Jake asked the Second Mistress. "Don't get me wrong, your level is high, and you are stronger than the other Mistresses based on what I have seen, but are you enough on your own?"

"I am not. While I have confidence against any of the Mistresses, I am uncertain I could defeat the Prime Consort, much less the Guard Captain or the Demon Lord," she shook her head. "The original plan was to get help from the Light's Dawn, but the Demonic Cult managed to strike at them before they could properly gather their strength. Only the Knight of Light's Dawn survived, but I heard he was slain by the Demon Lord recently... but now that you are here, I would love to offer an alliance, as I believe our interests align."

"Hm," Jake said, nodding as he looked deep in thought. Through the telepathic link, he quickly communicated what he had just talked about with the Second Mistress to hear their opinion.

"I say we go with her as it allows us to gain the most experience and end this floor sooner rather than later," the Fallen King commented. *"Not fighting the Guard Captain would be a waste..."*

The Sword Saint took a bit longer to answer but still responded. *"Ask her if killing the Mistresses is necessary to her route for completing this floor."*

"How important is it to kill all the other Mistresses?" Jake asked her.

"Hm... not extremely so, but the main problem is that any of them could potentially try to restart the Demonic Cult. As Mistresses, we are all trained in the art of summoning demons, including Demon Lords. If we can assure they will not do so, they don't necessarily have to die as I have no grudges against them as individuals," the Second Mistress answered.

"As long as we can assure they won't go on a demon-summoning spree, it should be fine," Jake informed the Sword Saint.

"In that case, we should ally with her. But give me time with the other Mistresses before making any big moves. A few days should be enough," the old man answered.

"What exactly are you up to?" Jake asked, really confused about what he was doing.

"Negotiations, and let us just leave it at that," the Sword Saint said. "You four should instead try to focus on obtaining the three Secret Scrolls. One of them is held by the Prime Consort, and a second one is held by the Guard Captain, so they should only be a bit tricky to get. As for the final scroll... none of the Mistresses I have spoken to knew anything."

"Alright," Jake answered. He kind of wanted to ask what the Sword Saint had been doing before he contacted him... but did he really wanna know? Probably not.

"Do you have any more questions?" the Second Mistress asked.

"Would you happen to know anything about something called Secret Scrolls?" Jake asked.

The Second Mistress momentarily seemed taken aback but then sighed. "I guess it is only expected you know of them. Yes, I know about them, and we will need them if we wish to battle the Demon Lord. There are three, and the problem is that while I know the Guard Captain and Prime Consort got one each, then I have no idea about the third."

"Why would we need it to battle the Demon Lord?" Jake questioned. This was the first he had heard of that.

"While I am not certain exactly what these Secret Scrolls say, I do know they are related to the three artifacts of the Demon Lord within his castle. When the Demon Lord was sealed away, he was without three of his most powerful treasures, as these three are so powerful the Demon Lord can only use them under certain circumstances and while within his castle. I suspect these Secret Scrolls hold the method to ensuring the Demon Lord cannot use these treasures... because if not, then I have a difficult time seeing us ever defeating him," the Second Mistress shook her head.

Her answer made Jake reconsider if they even needed or wanted to gather the Secret Scrolls. Assuming she was telling the truth, then did they even want to use these scrolls to weaken the Demon Lord? Probably not... oh well, they could gather them either way for the bonus points. Not like they had to use them.

Jake talked a bit more with the Second Mistress and consulted his party before they decided to let the Sword Saint and Fallen King do their thing while Jake began working on something he had a good feeling would come in handy: a special little poison.

Sure, Jake did have a lot of special poisons, but he wanted to make a variant of his Sleeping Night. Sleeping Night was currently still designed to be injected and not ingested, so he would have to make some minor changes to make sure it would work at full potency. Luckily, he had all the ingredients, and the Second Mistress graciously allowed them to stay in a guest house within her labyrinth room, letting Jake work in peace.

This was how the next four days went by. Sylphie and Dina did go out occasionally, but Jake stayed back and worked on his poison while he was sure the others were hard at work. They had update meetings here and there on how things were doing, with the Fallen King having now met and spoken to the Guard Captain quite a few times and was now some-fucking-how close to getting promoted to vice-captain.

As Jake was sitting and working on his poison on the fourth day, he was contacted by the Sword Saint as the old man gave an update to the group.

"I have made contact with all Mistresses so far besides the Second Mistress, and I believe I should be able to... let's just say, neutralize them all. The only issue is the Prime Consort. My method of neutralization required me to get rather unfriendly with her, and she is aware of my existence by now. There is no way I will ever be allowed near her chambers," the Sword Saint shared.

"The Guard Captain is also aware of you, and we are to keep an eye on you at all times," the Fallen King added.

"Right. So, this means I cannot approach her directly, which may be a problem seeing as I have learned that even if the Prime Consort does not have the third Secret Scroll... she knows where it is," the Sword Saint said.

"We will need to get to the Prime Consort then," Jake said.

"Not we, Jake. You will have to get to the Prime Consort. Didn't you say that was your original plan? To get to her fast."

"Well, sure, but I am still working on the poison," Jake answered.

"I am not saying you should kill her. I am saying you should learn the location of the third Secret Scroll from her while potentially obtaining the scroll she has on hand," the Sword Saint said.

"Alright, alright," Jake relented. *"But how do you see me gaining an audience with her? Based on the Mistress I spoke to, I will have to do some things to assist her first. Can we maybe use one of the Mistresses you talked to and say I have convinced her to join the Prime Consort? Maybe the Second Mistress is up for it..."*

"Jake, you are overthinking this," the old man said in a semi-admonishing tone. *"You have something she already wants, don't you? The Prime Consort cares about power and influence through her faction, and you can offer her something that will give her both."*

"And... what is that?" Jake asked, getting a feeling he really wouldn't like this.

"You know already. Be honest with yourself, Jake, do you really think she will say no to the chance of passing down such a powerful Bloodline?"

Yep, Jake didn't like this.

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

Chapter 677: Nevermore: The Greatest Poison of All: Alcohol

The Sword Saint's absolutely brilliant plan to make Jake try and seduce the Prime Consort through the power of dangling his Bloodline in front of her had just one minor problem: how was he supposed to prove he had one?

Only people with Bloodlines could tell if others had one, and Jake had not encountered anyone with a Bloodline there in the labyrinth, so he really wondered how in the hell the old man expected him to sell the lie.

This was totally not Jake trying to find a way around the plan by arguing that it was unfeasible to begin with and they had to find another way to get to the Prime Consort. Totally not. It was just that the plan was actually really bad and totally impossible to pull off and-

And...

Why am I here? Jake questioned himself as he leaned against the wall inside the small fogged-up hallway leading to the Prime Consort's residence. So, yeah, the old asshole had already planned for this. Sure, the Sword Saint couldn't exactly go around spreading rumors himself, but they had someone in their party whose job was to know about the people entering the city.

The Fallen King had simply informed the Guard Captain that he had discovered Jake had a Bloodline. When asked by the Guard Captain how he had discovered this, the Fallen King just said he had a special ability to detect them, which was tied to his existence as a Unique Lifeform. The Guard Captain had the ability to tell truths from lies, so when he saw that the Fallen King spoke the truth in both instances, he instantly informed the ruler of the city – the Prime Consort.

Technical truths were still truths. The Fallen King had indeed "discovered" Jake had a Bloodline a long time ago, and the Fallen King did also have a special ability tied to him

being a Unique Lifeform that helped him do this... his ability to die and become a mask that Jake then Soulbound.

So, yeah, the Fallen King had been Jake's downfall. He had even spread details about Jake's Bloodline. Just the fact that it amplified his presence and made him immune to other presences was the original plan. But the Unique Lifeform also decided to add that it allowed Jake to sense other presences far better and thus more easily read their intent and thus predict any and all attacks. It wasn't even a lie, either. It was just that this ability to better detect presences was just one part of his overall increased ability to sense... well, everything.

This meant Jake was now stuck between a rock and a hard place. For some bloody reason, the Sword Saint seemed convinced Jake wouldn't need any assistance when it came to the Prime Consort, showing complete and utter confidence in his seduction skills.

Jake had no seduction skills.

He had never even asked someone out. Alas, this was a challenge he had to overcome... his party relied on him to get the job done, and as much as he hated it, Jake was the only one who could do it. Sure, the Fallen King could have gotten an audience given enough time, but they still hoped to get the floor done within a week, so that wasn't an option. Sylphie was known to be aligned with the Second Mistress, and Dina was known to be aligned with the Sword Saint, so... yep, that left Jake.

Just bite the bullet, he told himself as he walked through the fog gate and entered the labyrinth room that belonged to the Prime Consort. This room was far larger than any of those prior and had a dozen or so buildings, with the central building being a large circular structure. Through a pulse, Jake saw that the structure had a vast underground complex beneath it in the shape of a pentagram. Definitely a hidden magic circle.

Also, even if the guard faction was not allied with any of the Mistresses or even the Prime Consort, they still protected them, and there were far more guards present here than in any of the other rooms. There were also a lot of high-ranking cultists around, making Jake more sure than ever that this room was designed for a potential big fight taking place there.

Shortly after entering the room, two male Courtesans walked toward him. Both were at a higher level than the ones on the outside and from the shadows, he felt several people observe him. Demonic cultists, no doubt.

"Welcome to the Prime Residence, my lord," one of the Courtesans said as he bowed. "Her Excellency is awaiting you inside. I would heavily advise not making her wait for more than necessary."

"Thank you, I shall go immediately," Jake answered with a bow, the two Courtesans seemingly satisfied with his answer as Jake walked up the many steps leading to the house of the Prime Consort. Through his sphere, he already saw her within.

While the other Mistresses were distinctively non-demonic, the Prime Consort clearly had demonic aspects to her appearance, such as small horns on her forehead. From a cursory scan, she looked to be half-succubus, though she lacked some distinctive features like the tail. Rather than sitting on a large bed like the Ninth Mistress or casually at a normal table like the Second, the Prime Consort was sitting at a small table close to the ground on some pillows within a large room, likely waiting for his arrival.

Taking a final deep breath to calm himself, Jake entered the building. The moment the door behind him closed, he felt the magical seals set in, and he knew it was only the two of them in the entire structure.

Continuing inside, he finally entered the room where the Prime Consort was waiting and looked at her as she scanned him up and down. He felt the use of Identify on him and responded in kind.

[Prime Consort – lvl 269]

Nothing about her being innocent, Jake noted instantly. He wasn't there to kill her, but it was still good to know.

"Nine did tell me about you shortly after you met... described you as giving off a powerful feeling and as a worthy candidate," the Prime Consort said as she summoned two wine glasses from her spatial storage as well as a bottle. "Come, join me, and let me learn if she was correct or not."

Jake nodded as he walked over and took a seat without saying anything as the bottle levitated up and poured them both a glass.

"A man of short words?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I apologize; I meant no offense," Jake said, trying to be polite. "I am just not usually in a position like this."

"Oh?" she asked. "A C-grade human feeling uncomfortable around the opposite sex? Now, that is something I have not encountered before... or is it perhaps due to the company?"

"I can't deny that," Jake smiled slightly.

"The demonification can be offputting to som-

"Not that..." Jake interrupted her as he scratched the back of his head. "It is just rare I spend time with someone like you... like this... in fact, I don't actually think I ever have before."

Jake felt slightly cringe saying that, but it wasn't a lie. In fact, he had never spent any time with a woman "like this." The Sword Saint had also warned him that the First Mistress had a skill to tell lies from truths, and seeing as the Guard Captain did too, Jake had gone in with the assumption the Prime Consort could too.

Despite Jake feeling like his words were rather cringeworthy, the Prime Consort seemed quite pleased.

"Oh, please. I heard you had met with the Second Mistress and even spent some time within her residence. Several days, in fact... do you mean to tell me you managed to avoid having her dig her fangs into you during all that time?" the Prime Consort asked.

As she asked, Jake felt something impact Shroud. A lie-detection skill. He instantly let it through as he answered.

"The thought never even crossed my mind. I only had one real conversation with her, and I truly have no interest in her. She only allowed me to stay with the hope I would assist her," Jake shook his head.

"Did you agree to assist her?" Prime Consort asked.

"I only agreed to do what I believed would benefit me, and it wouldn't be wrong to say that I simply took advantage of her offer to further my goals," Jake answered decisively.

Once more, the Prime Consort seemed satisfied with his answers, her lie-detecting skill having assured the authenticity of both. The last one had been a pre-prepared line, so he damn well hoped it would work.

"Two is an indecisive girl but talented, and I do have high hopes for her. I also know that, unlike some others, she truly does not covet my position as Prime Consort. That it is contestable is a bit silly, to begin with. In all honesty, then I see no need for this entire setup with Mistresses and me as the Prime Consort anymore... the Demon Lord has no interest in us anyway," the Prime Consort shook her head. "He never truly had. Our titles are more there to indicate that we belong to him and heighten his status, and that is a position we will uphold as long as he desires."

"You truly admire the Demon Lord," Jake said with a smile. While it was certain that the Prime Consort was far more "real" than the common person in Nevermore, she still had an odd proneness to just divulging information.

He wanted to follow this line of dialogue if he could and eventually turn it toward the topic of the Secret Scrolls.

"Naturally. Do you not?" the Prime Consort asked, only a hint of suspicion in her voice. He also felt the lie-detecting skill again.

"To gain an audience with him would be a dream come true," Jake smiled. *Because if I had an audience, I wouldn't have to be here right now.*

"Sadly, that is not feasible right now, but dependent on how things go, we might be able to figure something out later," the Prime Consort said in a suggestive voice as she drank a bit of her wine. Jake did the same to be polite as he prepared himself. The source of this content is *novel*◇

Sense of the Malefic Viper had made him aware of a strong toxin coming from the wine bottle the moment it was summoned. Intended toxins, mind you, as the magical alcohol potency was quite a lot higher than one would usually consume in low-tier C-grade.

Drinking it, Jake actively held back on activating Palate, as him not being at all affected by the alcohol would be damn suspicious. Seeing the bottle and how it had seemingly not lost any content despite her pouring them both a glass, Jake got an idea.

If Jake asked about stuff he shouldn't, it would obviously be suspicious, but if he asked while drunk? Even better if she was also drunk and didn't hold back many secrets. Of course, Jake never actually planned on getting drunk in the first place, just a little tipsy at most. While the wine was strong, Jake had had stronger before with Villy several times. A lot stronger... which, yes, had resulted in the type of toxin Jake best resisted, probably being alcohol.

Alcohol was an interesting kind of toxin that wasn't really a poison. Not truly. It instead fell into the same camp as some herbs that made you hallucinate or maybe feel more clearheaded. These were not actively harmful and didn't deal any damage to the person who consumed them as long as it wasn't done in massive quantities, but they could still be extremely dangerous due to the type of toxin:

Soul poison.

That's right, alcohol was by far the most common soul poison in the multiverse. Granted, it wasn't that deadly, never left permanent damage, and was easily detectable and pretty much impossible to hide. If you wanted to hurt someone, it was shit. However, what it was *really* good at was hiding other toxins mixed into the drink while bypassing most lower-grade detection skills.

Anyway, all of this is to say that Jake was drinking and getting drunk purely for work, and not a single part of him enjoyed the expensive wine. Definitely not.

As they were drinking, they naturally got talking, and after the fifth glass, Jake began to share some vague things about himself while also trying to learn more about the Prime Consort.

"When did you first discover you had a Bloodline?" she asked after a bit more useless small talk, finally changing the subject to discussing it.

"Back when I was still too young to understand what it was, but only knew I was different from everyone else. Something I guess hasn't changed much," Jake shrugged as he answered truthfully.

"Did you not have an Elder or other family member teach you? I believe that is customary among Bloodline Clans," she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Jake shook his head and pointed to himself. "Bloodline Patriarch. No one in my family even knew what a Bloodline was. I didn't even know for quite a while."

"Truly? A Bloodline Patriarch? Those are... rare," she said with an even larger smile as her interest seemed to grow. "My first encounter, in fact. That must have been quite an upheaval for your clan or family."

"Oh, there was an upheaval, alright," Jake nodded, referring to the initiation of the ninety-third universe.

"Being the sole outlier can be... difficult," the Prime Consort sighed. "Did you know I used to be a royal court mage? Not many do. I studied under many mages as people kept telling me how talented I was, yet I never felt that talent myself. You see, the old court only cared about the "approved" concepts. Those were the only ones you could study. Me? Sure, I was talented... but only as a warlock."

"A concept of magic that I assume was off-limits?" Jake questioned as he finished off the wine in front of him.

"Naturally," she said, waving her hand as she filled both their glasses again. "Yet even when I was discovered studying this banned school of magic, the royal family did nothing. They just allowed me to continue my research while keeping an eye on me. In their hypocrisy, they never truly cared as long as whatever I did lead to making them more powerful. They just wanted to use me."

"Woe of the strong," Jake sighed as he raised his glass.

The Prime Consort responded in kind as she also raised her, and they both downed them.

"Even so... how did things end up as they are now?" Jake asked. He felt his face get slightly red as he controlled Palate to keep his head clear. The Prime Consort was still nearly unaffected by the alcohol.

"Oh, the Second Prince was especially interested in my magic, and when he lost his bid for the throne, he came to me. He wasn't happy just getting assigned some faraway

land to rule over, as he knew his chances of ever reaching C-grade would disappear if he was. I was his solution. The desperation of a prince with no magical knowledge and access to the royal coffers did wonders for my research,” the Prime Consort grinned. “But enough about old history... how did you end up joining us? From what I see, you are not a warlock or even a true cultist?”

Jake was a bit taken aback by the rather sharp question. His “fake” identity did not really include much of why he was there, so he had to make something up on the spot. Luckily, appearing slightly drunk made it easier to make up a convincing story. Or...

“Why would I not come here?” Jake smiled. “Where else would I find such pleasant company?”

The Prime Consort just smiled as she made sure to keep herself and Jake’s glass full, and Jake gladly cheered again and again, commenting on how good it was. The Prime Consort clearly had some powerful resistance to the alcohol, and coupled with her higher level, she should be able to handle far more than Jake. If not for Palate, of course.

Soon enough, two hours had passed with Jake learning more and more history while discussing things he himself had done. A lot of it was just metaphors, and while it wasn’t really intentional, the two of them seemed to have in common the woes of not fitting in. As they talked, Jake had more and more situations where he began to feel like maybe the Prime Consort wasn’t that bad. Only for her to add a sentence about how child sacrifices were better in demonic rituals as their souls were “cleaner,” and thus, the chances of the ritual getting damaged by a curse of resentment were lower. So, yeah, definitely still not a good gal.

By now, Jake looked pretty damn drunk if he said so himself and purposefully began to ask more and more “silly” questions. He questioned why the cultists still wore robes when inside, the overabundance of bars for the number of people who lived there, and even made a dumb joke about one of the guards he had seen.

Throughout these two hours, the Prime Consort had slowly shifted her position from sitting opposite Jake, to sitting beside him, to slightly leaning against him every time she poured wine from the bottomless bottle. He acted like he didn’t notice and just seemed more jolly than ever.

Finally, he believed it was time. After taking a large chug of the wine, he made another dumb joke.

“Also, why do you have something called Secret Scrolls? Like, if you call them Secret Scrolls, doesn’t that make people want to know about them just because of the name, making them not really secret?” Jake muttered. “Should call them... eh... Boring Scrolls?”

It took Jake's full Willpower to not die from cringe saying that.

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Chapter 678: Nevermore: Worst Date Ever

"Now, where did you hear of the Secret Scrolls?" the Prime Consort asked with a raised eyebrow. She did not use her lie-detection skill, though.

"Eh... somewhere, I think?" Jake said, a bit slurred. "People are all secretive about them..."

"They are called Secret Scrolls," the Prime Consort giggled.

"Yeah, but, like... what are they? Who even decided they are secret?"

The Prime Consort seemed to consider for a moment and had a moment of sobriety as she asked while using her lie-detection skill. "Let's say the Secret Scrolls were potentially capable of weakening the Demon Lord... would you use them if given the chance? Or allow others to use them?"

"Heh," Jake laughed. "Why would I ever want the Demon Lord to be weaker? The stronger he is, the better! Shit, if these super Secret Scrolls could make the Demon Lord stronger, it would be awesome!"

And those were 100% his genuine thoughts. Something the Prime Consort clearly noticed as she snuggled up to him and whispered in his ear.

"Wanna see one?"

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Really? You know where they are?"

"Oh, course I do, silly... I helped make them," the Prime Consort smiled.

"How can I possibly not look forward to seeing something like that?" Jake smiled.

"If I show you, perhaps you can show me something of yours after?" she said, looking down.

"That could certainly be arranged," Jake smiled.

“In that case, you just wait right here,” the Prime Consort said as she stood up.

Jake smiled after her as she went out of the room. The second she closed the door, Jake’s smile disappeared, and he looked at the wine glass she had left on the table. After not even a moment of hesitation, he activated his stealth skill and the enchantment on his cloak as he touched the wine glass, and his hand began glowing dark green. Touch of the Malefic Viper was on full power as he amplified the level of toxicity – alcohol potency - within the wine. After only a brief second, Jake also began doing the same to his own glass to make sure they at least had the same level of energy within them.

He kept track of the Prime Consort as he did this using his Sphere of Perception and even sent out a few Pulses. The alcohol level within the two glasses quickly increased as he amplified it using Touch. While he had confidence in resisting any effects, he doubted the Prime Consort could as she was already getting tipsy.

Also... yes, the messed up implications of what he was doing weren’t lost on him, but to be fair, she was the one who wanted to get him drunk first. Only a few minutes after she had left, the Prime Consort was returning, having gone to the underground pentagram cellar to fetch the Secret Scroll. When he saw her returning, Jake quickly stopped using his stealth skill and deactivated the cloak as he leaned back and just lay on the floor with a pillow under his head and eyes closed. He had to sell being plenty drunk, after all.

The Prime Consort entered the room soon after and saw him relax. She flashed a slightly sinister smile for a second before quickly returning to her usual demeanor. Seeing that brief smile flashing across her face instantly made Jake aware he wasn’t the one with ulterior motives. And no, he was not talking about only trying to get the other person blackout drunk and into bed. He had a feeling she wanted something else.

“Already asleep?” she asked, walking toward him.

Jake quickly sat back up and momentarily seemed disoriented. “Oh, no, I was just resting my eyes.”

“Sure,” she smiled as she showed off the scrolls in her hands. Or, well, the metal tube with a scroll sealed within. Looking at it, Jake could instantly tell opening the tube wouldn’t be easy. It looked to have some kind of locking mechanism.

“Is that the Boring Scroll?” Jake grinned, trying to act the fool.

“It is indeed,” she answered as she infused some energy into the metal tube as seven magical circles appeared across it. The Prime Consort infused energy into each of them in a set pattern, and they all changed as the end of the tube opened up.

Seems easy enough, Jake thought, seeing how to open it. Perception came in tight once more, allowing him to see everything that was going on with just one glance.

Out of the tube, the Prime Consort took a scroll that looked to be made out of old golden parchment. Jake stared at it for a bit. "Looks boring too..."

"Oh, but it is just the opposite," the Prime Consort said as she sat down beside him. "Do you know what these Secret Scrolls really are?" Check latest chapters at *novel*◇

The lie detection skill was activated once more.

"Not really," Jake said, shrugging.

Seeing him once more be truthful, she gladly explained.

"The Demon Lord was already powerful the moment he was summoned, but he was far from invincible as he still had to grow. We constructed what is now the Demon Lord's castle to nurture the Demon Lord and created artifacts to make him powerful enough to battle the entire kingdom... and it worked," she said proudly as she held up the scroll.

"And this... this is one of the control scrolls for the artifacts. This one controls the Heart of the Demon Lord, an incredibly powerful fire affinity natural treasure that bathes his throne room in flames and allows the Demon Lord to grow far more powerful than he initially was in a short amount of time. After his return, he is once more bathing in the accumulated energy that has gathered during his sealing."

"Wow," Jake said, amazed. It sounded like that artifact would add a domain of sorts that helped the Demon Lord. "What about the four other artifacts?"

"Four?" she giggled. "There are only two more... well, three if we count the Sword of the Demon Lord, but that never had a Secret Scroll. No, the two others are the Armor of the Demon Lord and, finally, the Crown of the Demon Lord. Two artifacts that have also only grown more powerful in his absence."

"Those all sound amazing," Jake kept up the act. "The Demon Lord must be so much more powerful now..."

"Yes... indeed," the Prime Consort said as she had a slight change in expression. "Now... I believe you had something you promised to show me too?"

She leaned on him and pushed him onto the floor. He momentarily panicked, but then he saw she had done it to obscure his vision of the two wine glasses. With a hand behind her back, she summoned a small pill from her spatial storage and put it into Jake's wine glass using telekinesis. Sense of the Malefic Viper went kind of wild feeling that pill... making him aware it was quite the potent poison. A neurotoxin, as far as he could tell.

“Oh, goodness, I almost lost myself there,” she smiled flirtatiously as she looked down at Jake.

Jake smiled in return as she backed off, sitting up again with her. “I wasn’t complaining.”

“We have all day and night,” she winked at him as she picked up his wine glass and handed it to him, the pill entirely dissolved within. Picking up her own glass, she looked him in the eyes.

Lifting the glass, Jake smiled goofily. “Cheers!”

She followed suit as they both downed the wine glasses. Jake saw her wince slightly as she drank it, but she didn’t spit it out or anything.

Jake also didn’t show anything despite feeling a powerful toxin begin spreading through his system. It had merged with the alcohol and was quite a high-level toxin at that. It was clearly made to be hidden, and if someone already had a lot of alcohol in their system, it would bind to that, effectively making it undetectable and more potent than usual. Sadly for her, Jake did not have a lot of alcohol, and even if he did...

Well, it had just entered the body of the Chosen of the Malefic Viper. He quickly analyzed it and had it under control within seconds, but he didn’t dispel it; he just controlled the majority of it, as he allowed some to spread through his system.

As he felt it spread more, he began to purposefully slouch even more as he muttered. “Man, that one hit hard... my arms and legs are tingling.”

It was effectively a paralysis poison he had been fed. One that would work fast and make him completely unable to move while not shutting down his mind and usual bodily functions. It more or less made all voluntary movement impossible.

The Prime Consort smiled. “There is one thing I didn’t quite share before... while these artifacts have strengthened, this empowerment is not active. You see, in the absence of the Demon Lord, a lot of things changed. While we do need a protector... the Demon Lord can no longer be controlled like before. He was sealed, yes, and while it made him weaker, it also gave him time to develop... let’s just call it independence.”

“Wha are yo...” Jake said, his mouth hanging a bit as he allowed the paralysis poison to partly affect him.

“That means he is not quite as... required as before. No, we need a new Demon Lord. A better one,” the Prime Consort said, smiling deeply as she stood up, a bit unsteady on her feet. “You see, my specialty was never just summoning rituals. It was demonification rituals. But to do that, I need a good base. Rejoice, for I shall give you the chance to be reborn more powerful than ever. Do not worry; I shall allow you to retain as much of

what makes you, you as I possibly can. We wouldn't want to risk the improved you not having that Bloodline, now do we?"

"I..." he tried as the poison spread more in his system.

"Shush, do not overexert yourself. This is a good thing," she said, sitting down beside him and laying a hand on his chest. "You shall become the new Demon Lord... the new master of this entire domain. Of course, we will need to get rid of the old Demon Lord for that, but as I said, I made these Secret Scrolls. While the artifacts can indeed help empower the Demon Lord, they can also do just the opposite. The Secret Scrolls do not only contain the method to empower but also a way to weaken, if not outright kill him."

Jake just lay on the floor, unmoving, acting utterly paralyzed. He glared up at her with angry eyes, only making her smile more as she leaned in and kissed his forehead.

"Do not be angry. Once you are reborn, we will have plenty of time together, just you and I."

He didn't stop glaring at her.

The Prime Consort kept smiling before getting off him. After that brief movement, she held her head before shaking it. "That wine was a bit stronger than I thought it would be..."

She tried to stand up once more but briefly lost her footing. The Prime Consort managed to stabilize herself. Having turned her back, Jake now had the opportunity. His hand began to glow dark green as he amplified the alcohol within her body even more than before, as it now counted as "his" poison.

The Prime Consort kept trying to walk but soon wobbled and nearly fell. "Goodness..." she said before giggling.

Trying to stand up, she fell on the floor again. She tried two more times before giving up. Instead, she did a silly roll as she went back to Jake and leaned on him. "Heh... I guess we got time... all day... night... and..."

Jake was almost expecting a notification from killing her with alcohol poisoning, but she had only passed out. Breathing out in relief, Jake stood up and stretched as he contacted the group using his golden mark, not bothering to act paralyzed anymore.

"So... I have one Secret Scroll from the Prime Consort, but I did not get any information out of her regarding the location of the lost one... though I did learn something interesting," Jake shared as he began to tell all the information the Prime Consort had given about the artifacts.

“A way to make the final encounter either easier or harder unlocked from gathering the Secret Scrolls? That does seem to track with prior floors,” the Sword Saint answered. He was polite enough to not ask for any details about how Jake had gotten this information.

“What are the chances you can make the Prime Consort tell you about the location of the final Secret Scroll? Or did you manage to turn her into an enemy?” the Fallen King asked.

Looking at her snuggling up to him on the floor, Jake wasn't quite sure how to answer that. In the end, he just had to share the situation he found himself in.

“Well...”

After he was done explaining, he expected the Sword Saint or the King to make fun of him, but it ended up being Dina, who spoke first.

“That makes no sense... a Demon Lord cannot be born from a single sacrifice, much less will it ever retain the Bloodline or any part of the personality of the sacrificed person. At most, she should be able to do a demonification ritual that will turn you part-demon, but even that would require your enthusiastic consent...” Dina said, poking holes in the entire narrative.

Now, Jake could choose to make fun of Minaga for not knowing how stuff worked, but he imagined there was a better chance the Prime Consort was just wrong or had purposefully lied to him. However, with that being the case, what would have happened if Jake had indeed been paralyzed? He asked their resident expert.

“Well...” Dina muttered. *“You would just die, probably. No, definitely.”*

“So, either she is a misinformed idiot who doesn't know how the ritual actually works, or she is maliciously intending to kill me through a demonic ritual?” Jake summarized it. *“Well, this is officially the worst date I have ever been on.”*

“You got the Secret Scroll from her, and you also learned to unlock the containers they were in. That is an acceptable level of success for a date,” the Fallen King said. *“The scroll possessed by the Guard Captain is also in a similar container, so just give me the go-ahead when it is time to retrieve it. However, we still have to find the final scroll.”*

Jake looked at the scroll that was still in the room and picked it up along with the container. He lifted it up to his nose and took a whiff as he analyzed it. Feeling the energy from the container, he detected a very distinct signature. Activating his tracking, he felt for a similar signature in the Prime Consort's residence but felt nothing.

“Do we have any idea at all where it might be? If I am inside the same room as the container, I am fairly confident I can find it,” Jake shared.

“None of the Mistresses I spoke with have it, so I would guess it is within the main room,” the Sword Saint said.

“Alright,” Jake said. “Say, any idea what I should do with the Prime Consort?”

“Bring her to the residence of the Second Mistress,” the Sword Saint answered. “We are here, and she wants revenge, correct? At the very least, we can allow her to have the kill, which I believe could give us an achievement.”

“Good thinking,” Jake said. Now he just had to figure out how to smuggle her out of the room and back to the Second Mistress. Ultimately, he took off his cloak, put the half-demon lady into it, and swung it over his back in the most cliché kidnapping imaginable.

He thought it would be hard to sneak out, but once more, it came in tight that they had integrated themselves with all of the factions on the floor. The Fallen King diverted nearly all the patrolling guards to another area, and the Sword Saint convinced two Mistresses to go and “visit” the Prime Consort, allowing Jake to quite easily get out and back to the residence of the Second Mistress.

The guards at her residence were in full NPC mode and didn’t even question Jake as they let him in.

Right inside, Jake saw that all the guards had been dismissed. His entire party, save for the Fallen King, stood just inside, along with seven women – all of the Mistresses beside the two who went to the Prime Consort. Upon entering, all eyes landed on him.

“Did he truly?”

“How...”

“Truly a master,” the Second Mistress said as all the other Mistresses were also admiring Jake’s accomplishment as he dumped the unconscious Prime Consort on the ground. He had made sure the level of alcohol in her body had stayed stable as it could by using Touch on his way there.

Jake nodded and wanted to question why all the Mistresses had gathered, but before that, he had just one tiny question as he looked at the Second Mistress. “Say, how come you have a Secret Scroll hidden in a secret cabinet within your house?”

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

Chapter 679: Nevermore: Guard Captain Down

Needless to say, Jake's question made the entire situation quite tense as he looked at the Second Mistress. She was taken aback and stared at Jake for several seconds, clearly not having expected him to find out.

The moment he had entered the residence of the Second Mistress, he had felt the familiar mana signature of the container with the Secret Scroll inside. Considering the Fallen King had made it clear the Guard Captain still had one, it wasn't hard to figure out this was the "missing" scroll.

It took her a moment, but the Second Mistress collected herself and sighed. "Why hide it? Why would I not? Would you have helped bring the Prime Consort to me and assist in slaying the Demon Lord if I didn't have anything to offer?"

"Probably," Jake shrugged.

She seemed taken aback by his answer. "Why?"

"Why not?" Jake asked. Doing that was bound to give a better achievement, so helping her out only made sense in his head. Of course, she didn't know about achievements, so maybe it made sense in her mind to keep it a secret for now.

"Why would the Prime Consort give it to you?" the Sword Saint asked. "From my understanding, you were not allies."

"We are most certainly not. No, she gave it to me because I am not allied with the First Mistress. Or, well, I wasn't allied with her. The Prime Consort said that she hoped it would foster trust... in reality, I believe she knew I had a distaste for the Demon Lord, and she knew I would never hand a scroll that would empower him to anyone."

"I see," the old man nodded, looking to be deep in thought.

The Second Mistress clenched her fists and looked at the Prime Consort. "If you let me kill her... you can have the scroll, and I will even show you how to unlock the containers for when you get the last one from the Guard Captain."

"Now, wait a second here," Jake said as he wanted to understand what was going on with all the Mistresses. He looked at all of them for a second as he questioned them. "Nobody gonna protest someone wanting to kill the Prime Consort?"

"Why would we?" a woman smiled. Jake identified her and saw it was the First Mistress.

[First Mistress – lvl 264]

“She used to be your leader?” Jake questioned.

“That lunatic has needed to go for a long time,” the First Mistress said with disdain, the other Mistresses all nodding. “Also, if it helps hubby, why would we not want that?”

Jake didn’t need to question who “hubby” was as he threw the Sword Saint a glance.

The old man looked at the Prime Consort as he questioned the Second Mistress. “Will killing her like this be wise? Are you certain we do not need her for the Secret Scrolls in any way or see if she knows any other big secrets? Such as what the Secret Scrolls are used for? Jake told us that she said they were created to weaken the Demon Lord in case the Prime Consort lost control of him like you told us before.”

Jake was about to protest that she had also said they could be used to empower him, but he quickly realized what the Sword Saint was doing. He wanted to see if she knew and, if she did know, would share the full truth with them.

“That is one of their uses, yes,” the Second Mistress said. “The other is to empower the Demon Lord’s artifacts. I don’t know why they hold both functions, but the weakening aspect was added later.”

“I see,” the Sword Saint nodded.

Alright, so she does tell some truths, Jake quickly noted.

“Ugh,” he heard a sound from in front of him as the Prime Consort groaned. Jake quickly knelt down and used Touch to give her another rush of alcohol, buying them some time.

“So?” the Second Mistress asked. “Only the Prime Consort, I, and the Guard Captain know how to open the containers with the Secret Scrolls, and as I said, I will teach you how if you give her to me.”

“Well, you three and me,” Jake shrugged, getting looks. “What? She taught me. Not voluntarily, but she opened it right in front of me.”

“Just because you saw her open it once doesn’t mean you can replicate the process,” the Second Mistress protested.

“Pretty sure I can,” Jake said with a high level of confidence.

“So, what are the thoughts of everyone on this?” the Sword Saint asked. “I believe handing the Prime Consort to the Second Mistress will be fine. We don’t need the Prime Consort, and having found the final scroll, we don’t really need to stay here much longer. Fallen King, I would say it was about time you got everything handled on your end and brought back the scroll from the Guard Captain.”

"Sure he will be enough on his own?" Jake questioned. The Guard Captain was supposed to be pretty strong and finding somewhere to kill him...

"Do you question my abilities?" the Fallen King said, offended. *"I am ready at any point. Besides getting rid of the Guard Captain, we only have one more loose end... who was the demon we met when we first entered this floor? The one who knew about the Secret Scrolls and offered to translate them?"*

"I... had completely forgotten about that guy," Jake admitted. The full-on NPC energy that the old demon had displayed made him utterly forgettable, but on second thought, he was set up to matter on this floor...

"That is a good question. I did ask the Mistresses, and no one knew about him," the Sword Saint shared.

"The Second Mistress didn't either... and I think she was telling the truth then," Dina chimed in.

"Ree," Sylphie added. The wind didn't know either.

"Alright, we can go check out that old house while the King handles his business with the Guard Captain then. Are we all happy moving on quickly and just getting this place done with?"

Affirmatives all around.

"Great. Let's go then."

"Very well, we agree. Bring us the Secret Scroll," the Sword Saint said to the Second Mistress.

She hesitated only for a moment before she nodded and went inside her house. Dina had walked over to Jake during this and asked to see Secret Scroll he had gotten from the Prime Consort. The druid read it and nodded.

"Yeah, this is pretty simple. We wouldn't ever need a translator for this," she said.

Which again just made it weird the demon offered to translate.

Soon after, the Second Mistress brought them their Secret Scroll. Jake was allowed to get a shot at opening it but was warned that the scroll inside would be destroyed if he failed three times.

He only needed one attempt.

With two scrolls in the bag, they only needed the Fallen King to get the final one, and then it was on to finally face the Demon Lord. In the meanwhile, they allowed the Second Mistress to drag the still unconscious Prime Consort away, quite a few of the other Mistresses also going along. Probably because the Sword Saint followed.

Jake would go check in on this old demon who originally wanted the Secret Scrolls to see what was up with that, just to wrap up all loose ends. On his way there, he got a notification.

Achievement earned: Allow the Second Mistress to get her revenge on the Prime Consort, fully earning her support. 300 Nevermore Points earned.

Nodding, Jake didn't really feel anything. She had tried to do some fucked up ritual on him, and she had only gotten her just desserts. Now all they needed was for the Fallen King to get done enjoying his time with the Guard Captain.

"You are certain that the reports came from here, vice-captain?" the large demon wearing his full plate armor asked.

"The reports were quite clear," the Fallen King insisted. "The rebels have all met here and prepared to launch an attack on the Third Mistress when she returns. This is a prime opportunity to strike at them while they least expect it."

Floating forward, the Fallen King identified the man he was following.

[Guard Captain – lvl 265]

"Good thinking, keep up the good work," the Guard Captain said as they entered the gate leading into the Third Residence. Walking through the fog, the gate closed behind them as they properly entered the room.

"They are well hidden," the Guard Captain said with suspicion. "And where are all the usual guards and Courtesans?"

The Fallen King did not answer. Instead, his claw began glowing golden as he lunged forward. The Guard Captain was taken by surprise and failed to respond as his back was ripped up, and the demon was launched across the entire empty room, smashing into a wall.

An explosion erupted soon after as the demon tore himself off the wall. The source of this content is novel•fire•net

"How dare you," he yelled from across the room, his voice infused with Willpower. **"To betray the great Demon Lord..."**

The Fallen King saw no more need for words. Instead, he condensed a wave of force and sent it toward the Guard Captain. He responded by taking out a shield and blocking the blow but still found himself blasted back.

One challenge the Fallen King had when fighting with a party was his control. He had never needed to care particularly much about collateral damage, but when fighting with others, things were not as simple. A large-scale blast would hit indiscriminately, so he had to communicate and try and limit the scope of his blows. Having spent so many years not caring, it took time to adapt... and he certainly didn't complain when he got a chance to go all out.

Golden lines appeared all across his body as the Fallen King activated his boosting skill. Power erupted from his body as the Guard Captain seemed taken back.

"You-"

The King took advantage of his surprise as a blast of force hit the man's shield, sending him back into the wall for a third time. Grasping, he pulled on the wall itself as it began to collapse down on the demon, but the armored Guard Captain managed to quickly get free.

Only to be hit once more by a telekinetic blast.

These rooms had a perfect size for the Fallen King. Not too large or too small, meaning he could keep his opponent constantly within his effective range while still not allowing the melee-specialized Guard Captain to get close.

"For your betrayal..." the demon yelled as he landed. "I sentence you to death."

The Guard Captain also went all-out as his body bulked up. He stepped down as he practically teleported across the entire room, appearing nearly right in front of the Fallen King, his sword already mid-swing.

It hit nothing.

He had been just a single meter short and looked confused as a golden claw hit him in the face, sending blood spraying.

I expected more damage, the Fallen King said, assessing that the Guard Captain had barely been damaged despite the direct hit. His body was tough. Tougher than the Demon Lord that they had fought in the hallway. Luckily, his soul was... pathetic. So easily confused and muddled with.

Learning of control from the Nevermore party was not just about controlling his magic. It was also about how much others relied on it. The Fallen King never needed to care much about being overly accurate, and most of the melee attacks he used had at least

an optional long-range aspect. These warriors, like the Guard Captain, needed to be far more accurate with everything they did.

A single meter seemed like a lot, but when they all moved at speeds able to cross hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye, it suddenly became a distance that could make a significant difference. Distorting the reality others perceived through soul magic was difficult, but the Fallen King could slightly nudge it with these low-Perception creatures. To make a single meter look like two was difficult, especially if he didn't want the other person to instantly notice. But to make a kilometer look like nine-hundred and ninety-nine meters? That was doable.

The Guard Captain was the test subject, and the King was pleased as he continued his assault. Golden claws, constructs, and blasts sent him repeatedly flying like a ragdoll as he never quite managed to land a hit. His durability was high, but his attacks were limited, and what hits the Guard Captain did manage to hit were expected blows the barrier perfectly blocked.

Ultimately, it was a slaughter. The mighty Guard Captain, an individual that was by many hailed as the most powerful fighter on the floor, was killed without barely being able to fight back in a long and drawn-out beatdown.

Nearly half an hour later, the Fallen King found himself standing within a large ruin. All the houses were utterly destroyed, and the walls were filled with holes. On the ground before him was the Guard Captain, his armor distorted and broken, his body in even greater ruin.

"The Demon Lord... will avenge me," he muttered.

"Let us hope he will try," the Fallen King said before a golden blast removed the demon's head.

With his death, the Fallen King got a seal to unlock the Guard Captain's Vault. Making his way back to the main office of the guards, the King greeted the guards like usual and went straight for the Guard Captain's office, where he opened the vault, which only had the scroll container in it.

"I am done with my part, making my way to you now," the Fallen King sent toward the rest of the party. While the Guard Captain had been a good test dummy, the King was far from satisfied. Nevermore had been too easy so far, and he hoped the Demon Lord could finally offer a proper challenge.

The old demon was gone when Jake got to the residence they had first entered the floor on. In his stead was a letter informing Jake that he had found a secret entrance into the Demon Lord's castle and would be waiting just inside. In other words, he was a reused character that they would meet again on the next floor.

As for what his deal was... well, Jake would guess he was there for one of two reasons. One was to have a person that could help them if they got “stuck” with anything, such as opening the scroll containers or just reading the scrolls, but the other purpose was quite a bit more interesting:

He was sent there by the Demon Lord to get the scrolls to help empower the artifacts.

That kind of made sense to Jake. If the Demon Lord knew the Prime Consort was not really loyal, Jake could see him send someone, and it also explained how the old demon suddenly found a “secret entrance.” Because that was complete bullshit.

After having confirmed the demon was gone, Jake made his way back to the residence of the Second Mistress and regrouped with everyone. Shortly after, the Fallen King also returned with the final Secret Scroll in hand. Well, it was still in its container, but Jake got that opened in a jiffy. Once he took out the final scroll, they all got a notification.

Bonus Objective Completed: All Secret Scrolls found. 250 Nevermore Points earned.

“Not exactly a lot of points for all three scrolls,” Jake commented. “Especially not considering all the trouble we went through to get them.”

“It is as expected. Their true value lies on the next floor, not on this,” the Sword Saint said.

“True,” Jake nodded. “But still... a lot of trouble.”

On a side note, none of the Mistresses seemed to even notice what they were talking about. It was as if the mention of “points” and “floors” wasn’t even being said. It appeared that no matter how human, they still fell before the mighty NPC concept.

“With all the scrolls gathered... it is time to take down the Demon Lord,” the Second Mistress said. All nine Mistresses were now gathered, and they all seemed in agreement as they stood around the Sword Saint.

“Please allow us to assist you in this final-“

“No,” Jake shut her down right away. “The Demon Lord is ours and ours alone.”

“Please, even with the artifacts sabotaged, it will not be an easy fight. Gubrothas will have grown stronger since you last fought him. You may not win a second time,” the Second Mistress pleaded.

“Still no,” Jake shook his head.

“Are you certain?” the First Mistress asked. Not Jake, mind you. She looked at the Sword Saint. “While I do have confidence you will win, I do not wish to see you hurt.”

“There are some things a man must do, and this is one of them,” the Sword Saint said as he smiled at her. “Do not worry about me.”

Her face turned red as she nodded. “I shall believe in you then.”

“We all will,” the Third Mistress said with a radiant smile as all the Mistresses joined in on encouraging him.

Jake didn’t want to say how the “things a man must do” didn’t make sense with Sylphie and Dina on the team, mainly because he didn’t want to waste any time getting to what mattered.

“Give me the seal to unlock the Demon Lord’s castle,” Jake told the Second Mistress.

She seemed reluctant but still nodded. “I will entrust it all to you, then. Should you fail... we are all doomed.”

The Second Mistress handed Jake the seal the Prime Consort had been carrying that allowed opening the door forward. The second Jake had it in hand, he spoke to the group.

“Now, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched as she flew over and landed on Jake’s shoulder. She waved goodbye to all the Mistresses with her wing as Jake began heading out. The Sword Saint said goodbye to all *his* Mistresses and followed after, with Dina and the Fallen quietly following.

Jake wouldn’t lie... he was glad the floor was over, and his relief when they made it to the giant red gate leading to the Demon Lord’s castle was palpable as they were finally done and could move on to something far more fun.

Fighting a – hopefully – proper boss.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 680: Nevermore: It's Demon Lord Time

Jake and company finally stepped out of the thirty-fourth floor after what to him felt like weeks. In reality, it had not even been a week, but the entire ordeal had been quite mentally taxing.

Once more, they found themselves in the in-between room designed by Minaga, and Jake was more than happy with taking a breather and at least spending a few hours fully recovering. He wasn't the only one, either.

The Fallen King was also tired after killing the Guard Captain. At least, Jake thought that was the reason.

"How could I not be tired after acting like I am beneath a lesser creature for so long? For a rightful King to act subservient to a mere Guard Captain... you cannot even begin to imagine the sacrifices I made," the Fallen King said with disgust.

"Oh woe is you," Jake grumbled. "I had to try and seduce some half-demon lady who wanted to sacrifice me in a demonic ritual."

"You complain as if humans do not tend to enjoy such things. The swordsman does not seem bothered despite doing far more than you," the Fallen King shot back.

"Don't bring him into this," Jake shook his head as he stared at the Sword Saint. "That old geezer is just... let's change the damn topic already."

"I do agree with that assessment. We all did our jobs, and we managed to complete the floor in a satisfactory fashion if I say so myself," the old man in question smiled.

"Yeah..." Dina nodded. "Sylphie and I were the only ones who didn't really contribute much..."

"Ree!" Sylphie complained.

"I see... you also made sacrifices," Jake said in a serious nod as he scratched her feathers.

Sylphie had perhaps sacrificed the most out of them all... she had allowed the Second Mistress to pat her head. Once. In a ruse to get close to the woman.

It had worked... but at what cost?

As they were feeling sorry for themselves, they got the system messages after having completed the floor.

Thirty-fourth floor completed. 340 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-fourth floor without any guards, Courtesans, or other innocent patrons finding out anything is amiss. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-fourth floor while not killing a single Mistress. 200 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-fourth floor while turning all Mistresses into allies. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-fourth floor in less than a week (7 days). 350 Nevermore Points earned.

"That is a lot of achievements. Coupled with the one we got on the floor and the one for completing the bonus objective, this may be the best one yet, points-wise," Jake said with a nod.

"Yet it is not something I would wish to experience once more," the Fallen King voiced his thoughts.

"Oh yeah, fuck that," Jake wholeheartedly agreed. Dina also didn't seem like a fan, with Sylphie also not having enjoyed it. Only the Sword Saint silently muttered how it wasn't that bad.

As they stood there, someone they had not heard from for a while also made his reappearance.

"You know how you sometimes have a concept you thought could be fun, and then decide to expand on it and build something, only to end up with an experience you aren't quite sure about and ultimately kind of regret having made, but hey, you have spent so much time on it, so the sunk-cost-fallacy sets in hard, and you decide to just say 'fuck it' and decide to use it anyway? Yeah, that's the thirty-fourth floor for me. Granted, it isn't downright horrible, but I think I tried a bit too many things... ninety-five percent of which you missed," Minaga said.

"Welcome back," Jake said with a smile. "Amazed you managed to shut up for nearly that entire dungeon floor."

"I apologize. I was too busy trying not to die from embarrassment watching you."

"Ouch... but fair," Jake shrugged. "Anyway, since we are taking a break here... what did we miss?"

"I am not staying to listen to this," the Fallen King said dismissively as he floated out of the lounge and entered one of the bedrooms to meditate.

“What a downer... but super glad you asked! You see, I wanted to make a floor where the socialites had a real shot, and I also decided to make it more fun by adding another concept... plot twists. Like... a lot of plot twists. You see, the Mistresses, Prime Consort, Guard Captain, and pretty much every major character have different paths that you can take them down, and they will even change based on what happens. The Second Mistress could have had several personalities as an example based on what you did. If you managed to find out her real identity – spoiler, she was a princess of the kingdom destroyed by the Demon Lord – she would offer a lot more dialogue. She would even open up a method to turn all the Mistresses and the Demonic Cult to once more be faithful to the kingdom, shunning the Demon Lord. This one would have given a lot of Nevermore Points, and I only feel comfortable sharing it because it would have required you to have worked with the friendlies on prior floors.”

“Say, how many methods would there be to turn the Demon Lord into an ally?” Jake asked.

“None set by me.”

“Really?” Jake questioned, finding it hard to believe.

“See, people sometimes think they would like a story going in a certain direction that actually sucks. The Demon Lord is set up as a boss, not as a potential ally, and there has been way too much build-up for it all to just result in a small conversation and an amicable solution. That would suck for sure.”

“How are you sure it would suck?” This update is available on *novel✕fire✕net*

“Because I say it would, duh,”Minaga said unapologetically. **“I am the expert here, after all.”**

“Fair, fair,” Jake grinned. “I assume you are not going to answer any questions related to the thirty-fifth floor?”

“Nope, that is for you to experience; no spoilers from me! Outside of the spoilers, I do decide to give, of course.”

“How shameless,” Jake chuckled.

“Alright, alright, one freebie. If you plan on doing what I think you plan on doing... I would open the lockbox that the thirty-fourth floor rewarded,” Minaga said in a hinting voice.

“Oh yeah, that is a thing,” Jake was reminded. Even Sylphie seemed to have forgotten, proving they were all a bit off their game after that damn harem floor.

Sylphie did her job and flew over and poked the lockbox on the elevated platform with her talon. It instantly opened and out floated five stone coins. Stone coins with the face of Minaga printed on both sides, a goofy smile on one and a fake horrified look on the other. Jake stared as he used Identify on one of them.

[Minaga's Best Evermore Escape Talisman (Unique)] – This is quite literally the best escape talisman Evermore offers, and I am only giving it out because the people who earned it are pretty darn good at what they do. Just break it, and poof, you go right back to the last rest floor you visited. I know you might be questioning if it is really that simple? Is there really no point penalty? And you go to the rest floor and not city floor? Or any other punishment? Well, question no more, for it is indeed that awesome! Oh, but don't bring it out of Evermore, or I'll take it back. Also, the talisman is single-use, which in retrospect should be pretty obvious considering you need to break the talisman to use it.

Staring at the "description," Jake failed to hold himself back.

"Is this seriously an item?" Jake questioned.

"Oh, do you have any issues understanding what it does?" Minaga questioned, sounding annoyingly genuine.

"No, I am questioning why the hell the description sounds like you are describing the item to me in your usual tone. It doesn't read like an item description," Jake semi-complained.

"Because I made it, including the description? If you understand what it does, why are you complaining?"

"I wouldn't say I am complaining... just questioning..." Jake said a bit defensively.

"Well, let me help you by not hurting your dear sensibilities."

One of the talismans flashed out of existence, only to be replaced by one that was the same size but had nothing printed on it besides a basic-looking magical circle. Jake used Identify again.

[Incredibly Boring Evermore Escape Talisman (Unique)] – An Escape Talisman. Crush = teleport to the latest rest floor. Can't be brought out of Evermore. One use.

Requirement: Jake Thayne

"Is that better? Or do you want me to simplify it even more? I am sure I could find a fluff word to remove somewhere," Minaga said with quite a bit of snark.

Jake looked at the talisman and sighed. "I liked the original version more."

With another flash, the original talisman reappeared. **"See, you never know you'll miss something before it is taken away."**

"Truly wise words," Jake said as he went over and took one of the talismans. All the others followed suit, with the last one left floating there for the Fallen King. He could pick it up when he returned from resting.

If Jake and the others would actually need these talismans, Jake didn't know, but he did know that he wanted the "original" version. Because if they didn't need them, they could at least sell or trade them, while the "special" talisman was effectively Soulbound to Jake. It couldn't even be a nice collectible as it couldn't be brought out.

"I guess you can all imagine why you get these Talismans... let's just say the Demon Lord can be quite a boss if you want him to be! So if you are at risk of dying, just crush the talismans, and you will be brought back to this room right here instantly. A real lifesaver. Ah, but do note you will not be able to reenter the thirty-fifth floor before your party is done in there if you do so, and if they pass the floor, the gate here will be replaced with one leading to the city layer after the thirty-fifth."

Jake listened to Minaga as he considered for a moment. Did he even want this talisman? If he had it, wouldn't the upcoming fight be less exciting if he knew, in the back of his mind, he had an escape at any moment? Maybe he should just-

"Don't even think about it," a voice suddenly said in his head.

Jake turned and saw the Sword Saint looking at him with a judging look.

"Think about what?" Jake responded telepathically. Mind you, this conversation was not through the golden mark but directly between just the two of them.

"Handing off that escape talisman to someone else. I know you are thinking about it. You may not want it because you believe it will cheapen the fight, but discard such selfish thoughts," the Sword Saint said.

"Selfish? Sure, it is selfish, but we are all the owners of our own lives. Besides, I don't plan on dying," Jake answered nonchalantly.

"Nobody expects to die until the moment they do. Have you considered the consequences of your demise? How it will affect Sylphie? Not to mention whatever effects it may have on the Fallen King and his existence or the fate of Earth should you go and die. I cannot tell you how to live your life, but I can tell you that as long as we are in the same party, you will keep that talisman," the Sword Saint said in a stern tone.

“Or what?” Jake said defensively.

“Or we will have to part ways and find separate parties. If you choose to use the talisman or not is up to you, but you are to, at the very least, keep it,” the old man kept insisting.

“What a weird hill to die on. Me keeping it, but not necessarily using it,” Jake scoffed internally.

“You may not agree or understand why, but just humor me in this and keep it,” the Sword Saint didn’t let up.

“Fine...” Jake gave up. While the Sword Saint was willing to die on that hill, Jake saw no reason to. In reality, he wasn’t that upset with keeping the token; he just never liked being told what to do. This token was also a lot different from something like Villy offering to resurrect him if he died or some automatically activating talisman that would save his life.

This one was optional. Jake had to use it himself. An option, if you will. Something that wasn’t different from normal as he always had the possibility of attempting to escape. Right now, he already had his impressive speed and One Step for usual situations, and of course, his Wings of the Malefic Viper – a skill with an option that was pretty much all about escaping a tricky situation.

“Think about how you would feel if Sylphie didn’t have the talisman and you saw her in mortal danger. It would plant an unnecessary seed of worry,” the Sword Saint finished off, clearly just wanting the last word. Jake just threw him a glance, not bothering to keep the discussion going more than necessary.

“So, Minaga... got some more interesting scenarios we missed on that last floor?” Jake asked out loud.

“What a silly question, of course I do! So, wanna hear about how the First Mistress actually has a crush on the Second Mistress, or maybe about how the Guard Captain can be manipulated into pursuing the Prime Consort romantically? That would have created some real hijinks. Wait! How can I forget about how...”

Jake just leaned back and relaxed while enjoying the local non-alcoholic drinks – he had enough alcohol for now – as he waited for everyone to feel ready to move on. Hearing Minaga talk was oddly relaxing, and Jake had a good time just sitting there at the bar.

In the end, they spent around ten hours on this in-between floor. While the majority of the time was used relaxing, they did also take the time to gather towards the end for something they had rarely needed on any of the prior floors: strategizing.

If Minaga was to be believed, then the Demon Lord would be far more difficult than any prior opponent they had faced in the dungeon. Especially considering their plan of purposefully powering him up with all three Secret Scrolls.

On that note... the Secret Scrolls were gone the moment they entered the in-between floor, but Minaga assured them that the items would reappear with them upon entering the thirty-fifth floor.

Either way, their plan was clear. If Jake was correct, and the old demon was, in fact, working for the Demon Lord, then handing off the Secret Scrolls to him would perhaps be an option. Assuming it would work, they still had the actual battle and their plans for that to discuss.

After they finished all their strategizing, they made sure everyone had everything they needed, and Jake even went as far as to craft a new batch of health potions for the group to make sure they had the best Jake could make.

Gathered in front of the gateway, with Sylphie on his shoulder and the party around him, Jake nodded. "Let's go."

"Good luck with the Demon Lord! I hope you all have a great time, and if you don't, then you can only blame yourselves for not knowing what's fun and what's not. Oh yeah, and don't die!"Minaga gave his encouraging parting words moments before their group entered the thirty-fifth floor.

It was Demon Lord time.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 681: Nevermore: Evil Demon Lord Gubrothas

A sudden burst of heat hit Jake as he stepped out of the gateway and appeared on the thirty-fifth floor. One thing was already different about this floor from any of those prior: there was no difficulty selection with Minaga. Instead, they had appeared already within the Demon Lord's castle.

Before anything else, Jake released a Pulse of Perception to get a lay of the land. What he saw was probably the smallest floor they had encountered so far.

The entire floor was just one unrealistically giant castle. It consisted of three different sections of note: the massive central throne room, a large circular hallway surrounding

it, and three towers that each had hallways extending from the large circular hallway. Jake also spotted a certain someone hidden in a room pretty much right next to where they appeared.

As Jake was still looking through the mental map from his Pulse, they got the usual welcome message to the floor.

Welcome to the Thirty-Fifth floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Demon Lord's Castle)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Slay the three Tower Demons (0/3)

Current progress: Tower Demons (0/3). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 23123

Minaga had even bothered to name this floor and didn't just call it part five. Using his mental map, it was easy to spot all three Tower Demons, as each was within their respective towers. Moreover, each Tower Demon seemed to be guarding something, and Jake couldn't help but make the connection between the three Secret Scrolls and the three towers.

Speaking of the secret scrolls.

A small pedestal was right in front of them where they appeared. All three Secret Scrolls were stacked on top of each other, with a letter placed on top of them all.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she shuffled a bit on his shoulder, uncomfortable with the heavy fire affinity in the air.

"Yeah, sure," Jake agreed. Sylphie released a small gust of wind that made the letter fly over to him, and they all looked at Jake as he cleared his voice and read it aloud.

"Dear heroes.

I hope you all have arrived at the Demon Lord's castle safely, and I hope this letter reached you in time. Throughout the years of plotting to take down the Demon Lord, I managed to obtain the schematics of the Demon Lord's castle and memorize them, and I wish to share my findings with you. For now, avoid the central throne room and, instead, head to the three outer towers. You must defeat the three Tower Demons atop each tower and gain access to each Sealstone up there. These Sealstones are attuned

to the artifacts, and you need to read out the incarnation written on each corresponding Secret Scroll. Remember to read the correct phrase to sabotage the artifacts of the Demon Lord. If you read the other one, you may accidentally empower the Demon Lord, making beating Gubrothas nearly impossible.

May you succeed in your quest for righteousness.

- Second Mistress.”

Jake finished reading it, and just as he did, they heard shuffling footsteps and the sound of something impacting the tiled floors. Out of a small hidden room walked the old demon, now with a cane in hand, as he shuffled in their direction.

“Heroes! I could not help but hear you read the letter from the Second Mistress, and I came out as soon as I could. I am glad to see you arrived at the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas’ castle in one piece. You even managed to obtain all three Secret Scrolls! Truly impressive,” the old demon smiled at them.

Things were as expected, and Jake smiled at the old demon. “I found your message at your old residence. Say, how did you manage to find a secret entrance to the castle? Could you not have told us about it?”

“I wanted to, but there was limited time to make use of the opening, and the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas found the flaw in the defenses right after I managed to sneak inside. Also, it may have interfered with your quest to obtain the Secret Scrolls. In the end, we all made it here safely and are united in our goal of ending the menace that is the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas, so there truly is no need to discuss this. Instead, we should focus on the task at hand,” the old demon said.

“I think Jake is right... this demon is clearly not actually here to help us,” Dina said through the golden mark.

If even the sheltered Dina noticed how off the demon was, it was pretty damn obvious. However...

“Indeed we should. You heard the letter from the Second Mistress. What say you? How do you think we should approach this?” Jake asked the demon.

“Sabotaging the artifacts of the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas is naturally imperative to ensuring his defeat. Of course, if you are truly confident in your victory, then you can simply choose to face the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas without weakening him first. However, not using the scrolls would be incredibly risky,” the demon said, looking deep in thought.

“We want to do what will give us the highest chance of bringing the evil Demon Lord to justice,” Jake said, trying to sound as heroic as he could.

"In that case, may I be allowed to offer my assistance as best I can?" the old demon asked.

Here we go, Jake thought.

"Of course, but in what way?" Jake questioned.

The demon looked at them all suspiciously for no damn reason as he spoke. "Could you lend me the Secret Scrolls? I want to ensure their authenticity."

"Oh, no problem," Jake readily agreed but then seemed to back down as he turned to the party. "No complaints, right?"

"He has only helped us so far. No need to be suspicious," the Sword Saint said with a smile.

"My apologies; you can never be too safe," Jake said, bowing slightly to the old demon.

"No need to worry," the demon said as Jake handed him all the scrolls. His eyes were full of greed as the demon showed acting talent on par with the average child actor as he received the scrolls and smiled creepily as he spoke once more.

"Now I just need to do a quick ritual to confirm they are real if that is alright with you all, right? I may need your slight assistance," the old demon asked.

"Sure, sure," Jake nodded as he watched the old demon draw a damn pentagram, nearly identical to the one the Demon Lord had made when he teleported away during their first encounter. His insight into magic circles also instantly let him know it was a teleportation circle of some kind, and Dina also looked to have a hard time holding herself back from commenting on how obvious what the demon was doing was.

Nevertheless, both Dina and Jake poured in a bit of mana as the old demon was not strong enough to do the ritual himself. Then, suddenly, to the surprise of absolutely everyone, the secret scrolls were all teleported away as the old demon began laughing maniacally.

"You fools! You fell for my deceit, and I have now managed to get the Secret Scrolls into the hands of the three Tower Demons! They shall now read the incantations to empower the artifacts, and unless you manage to kill them all and get back the Secret Scrolls to then read the other incantation and sabotage the artifacts of the Demon Lord, you are all doomed! Muhahahaha!"

Jake barely held himself back from facepalming as he tried to act shocked. He didn't succeed.

"Oh nooo," Jake muttered. "What will we do now?"

“You can do nothing but defeat the Tower Demons and reverse the process! Just because you can recover the scrolls and read the incantation to sabotage the artifacts and reverse any empowering doesn’t mean you will be able to accomplish it! Of course, you can also face the Demon Lord in his strongest state possible in an impossible battle that you would only ever be able to overcome if you true talents sitting at the peak of the multiverse! And it isn’t like you have any methods to escape the castle and return to where you came and then reenter the castle and choose to go for the Tower Demons the second time around should you choose to face the Demon Lord at full power!”

“We were truly bamboozled,” Jake kept muttering.

“Of course you were! The designs of the glorious Demon Lord are beyond your comprehension! Now that I have accomplished my goal, the Demon Lord will take over the entire multiverse, and unless you manage to somehow kill the Demon Lord in his empowered state or go and slay the three Tower Demons and recover the Secret Scro-“

“May I kill him already?” the Fallen King practically begged.

“Sure.”

“Go ahead.” Read complete version only at novel✕

“Please do.”

“Ree.”

In the next instant, a blast of force blew off the head of the old demon as he fell over backward, dead. He had barely been C-grade and was honestly so weak it wasn’t even worth mentioning. They stared at the corpse for a while as Jake sighed.

“So...”

“We proceed as planned. Let us face this Demon Lord with all of his power and ignore these Tower Demons,” the Fallen King said. *“Perhaps we can hunt them down for the bonus objective after slaying the Demon Lord for a higher overall reward.”*

“Eh, I don’t think that will be necessary. Video game logic dictates they will join the Demon Lord fight anyway, so we should get the bonus objective done no matter what,” Jake shrugged.

“What do you mean?” the Sword Saint questioned.

Jake chuckled. “Come on. Three mini-bosses, each guarding a method to empower the final boss? What do you think will happen when you ignore them and allow them to fully empower the boss? Of course they will join in on the fight in a second phase of sorts.”

“Hm, do you believe it wise to make assumptions based on Earth’s video game industry?” the old man asked.

“One hundred percent,” Jake said, fully serious.

“Very well,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Alright, final planning time. The general layout of the room is...”

Jake proceeded to explain what he had seen and what they could expect. They already had assumptions, but based on the size of the Demon Lord’s arena, they would adapt. Luckily for them, the throne room was utterly massive. It was a giant hall more than ten kilometers across, with four giant pillars around a hundred meters in diameter surrounding a large throne in the middle. Right above the throne, suspended by large meter-thick chains extending from the four pillars, hung a red crystal pulsing with energy. It was shaped like a heart – the anatomic kind – and Jake had a good idea that it was one of the artifacts mentioned, the Demon Lord’s Heart.

On the throne beneath it naturally sat the Demon Lord.

After their strategizing, the group all got ready. Standing in front of the large gate, Dina summoned her staff and spoke an incantation as they were all surrounded by a green aura. Sylphie also followed suit, and a green gust of wind blew through them, making Jake feel slightly lighter as Sylphie told them the wind was now on their side.

“Let’s go,” Jake smiled as he raised his foot and kicked the giant gate leading into the throne room. It slammed open as the Demon Lord in the distance sat bored on his throne, resting his head on his knuckle.

“At last, you arrive,” the Demon Lord spoke, not bothering to get up. The arm they had severed was naturally fully regrown, and the Demon Lord was clearly in peak condition. Rather than only wearing a loincloth, he now had a full set of black plate armor covering his entire body, with pulsing lava-like lines running through it. The only exposed red skin was his hands and head, as rather than a helm, he wore a crown that looked to be made of black metallic thorns.

“For too long, I was sealed. Trapped with only my own thoughts within a space of nothingness. It put many things into perspective, and I realized that I had been too lenient on those beneath me. Why had they never come to free me? Why had the pathetic woman who dared call herself my Prime Consort merely sat back and waited? Well, I guess I cannot complain too much. She did manage to breathe new life into some old keepsakes,” the Demon Lord said, as momentarily the heart-shaped crystal, sword leaning against the throne, armor, and crown flashed with energy, indicating their empowered state.

The Fallen King had already begun floating to the right as Jake began moving to the left, the Sword Saint walking forward with Dina behind him as Sylphie prepared to take to the air.

“It took you fools to free me...” the Demon Lord sighed as he stood up from his throne. **“I guess I should thank you. So let me give due compensation. Not just for freeing me, but to pay you five back for our last encounter.”**

He reached out and grasped his sword, not even looking at what Jake and the others were doing as he did his monologue.

“Rejoice. My gift to you all is that you will be remembered. Remembered as the heroes who valiantly dared meet me in combat. Now, let it be known!”

The entire throne room seemed to shake as the Demon Lord’s Heart – the giant crystal – began to glow intensely and release a red sheen that nearly set the air ablaze.

“You face Demon Lord Gubrothas. Prove your worth.”

He had barely managed to say this as two explosions sounded out. From one direction, a blast of pink-purple energy soared through the air, surrounding a fully charged Arcane Powershot with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. From the other, a golden beam was released by the Fallen King, tearing up the ground as it passed.

The Demon Lord seemed surprised but still reacted far faster than in their last fight. He chose to block the golden beam with his sword, as he raised a hand and summoned a flaming sigil to try and stop Jake’s Powershot. Neither attempt to block succeeded.

Two large explosions erupted as the attacks arrived at the same time, bathing the Demon Lord in the destructive energies of Jake’s arcane affinity and the powerful force magic of the Fallen King. With a roar, the Demon King released a massive shockwave of fire from his body, revealing a body now filled with marks and burns, with the hand he used to block Jake’s blow thoroughly torn up, bone showing. He looked to be about to talk again as the real attack arrived.

There was no sound as a green line cut through the throne room. The Demon Lord stood with both hands out to his side and had been far from prepared to respond as a green wing cut halfway through his neck, the head only staying on because he managed to slightly lean as it arrived...

Only for an old man to teleport right up to him and swing his blade for the uncut side of the Demon Lord’s neck. The demon’s eyes opened wide as the Rainblade prepared to decapitate him, his own attempt to dodge Sylphie making him lean into the Sword Saint’s strike. At the very last moment, he roared as another blast of flame was released, but a dense green barrier covered the Sword Saint’s body as Dina stood with her staff raised right behind him.

The demon's attempt had failed as the attack landed, and the large head of the Demon Lord was sent flying in a spray of rain and blood.

It flew a few meters into the air as the Sword Saint was forced to block as the Demon Lord's headless body swung his weapon. The blast of fire hit the old man, but Dina's barrier still managed to block it, only forcing him to retreat back ten meters.

A red tentacle of pure red energy shot up from the severed neck of the Demon Lord and dragged it back in place, the Demon Lord's Heart thrumming with energy above as it seemed to dim slightly.

The Demon Lord's unfocused eyes refocused as his head was back on, and the rest of his body also rapidly healed.

"Crystal above is feeding him energy," Jake established.

"You..." the Demon Lord said in an angry tone.

Jake, readying another arrow, smiled. On the one hand, it would have been funny to instantly kill the big boss with their opening strike, but on the other...

He did want to see what the big evil Demon Lord Gubrothas could do.

At the very least, they had taught the fucker to stop monologing like an idiot and pay attention to his opponents charging up attacks.

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

- Chapter 682: Nevermore: A Broken-Hearted Demon Lord

Chapter 682: Nevermore: A Broken-Hearted Demon Lord

It was a good attempt, but ultimately they failed to finish the fight immediately. They had hoped to at least leave a debilitating injury even if they failed the kill, but even that had failed. Not that they had completely wasted their time.

Even if the Demon Lord was still standing, reattaching a head and healing his body was not cheap. The crystal above had lost noteworthy power from their opening attack, and that was honestly good enough as it had given them some good info.

From their brief exchange, it was also clear the Demon Lord was stronger and faster than during their last encounter. He was now fully recovered, not to mention his new armor that their opening attack had not managed to damage in any meaningful way. They had gone for the neck with the expectation that the armor would not be easily overcome.

However, even if the boss had grown... Jake was fully confident they could handle anything the boss could throw at them.

One also had to remember that they had also grown a few levels since the last fight, primarily due to the thirty-third floor and the gauntlet of demons.

Anyway. If the first strike fails, try and try again.

Golden shockwaves rumbled from one side of the large throne room as the Fallen King let loose, releasing a barrage of interlaced blows. The Demon Lord scoffed and made a wide swing using both hands, releasing a crescent inferno, burning away the Unique Lifeform's attack... but also leaving him open from behind. An arrow struck the demon right in his mid-section, exploding upon the armor, slightly throwing off his balance.

Sylphie descended from above as a whirlwind fell upon him, cutting away like a meat grinder. Annoyed, the Demon Lord stomped, making fire erupt from the ground all around him, but the wind refused to let up.

Right as the flames from the stomp subsided, an old man dove through the hurricane, the wind simply passing harmlessly over his body. He aimed for the leg of the boss, who tried to kick him in response, but the foot was thoroughly stuck as a semi-burnt vine slithered up from the broken floor and held him down.

The sword struck true, cutting across the armor, leaving a thin slit but failing to fully penetrate.

"Armor slightly above the predicted level of durability," the Sword Saint communicated through the golden mark.

Retreating, the old man got out of range from the follow-up strike from the demon as they both went out of the green whirlwind. Sylphie materialized with the boss out of her attack, not wanting to waste more energy than necessary as she kept herself safe.

The Sword Saint prepared to attack again as the Fallen King flew closer to join him. Sylphie also prepared to dive down from above as Jake aimed elsewhere. Rather than target the Demon Lord, he went for the giant floating crystal above the boss' head, wings springing from his back as he approached it.

While the four others kept the Demon Lord busy, Jake would address the giant artifact. This was one of the strategies they had discussed already, and Jake quickly closed in on the Demon Lord's Heart. The heat it gave off was intense, but Jake coated himself in scales and managed to get right up to it. As expected, then a barrier sprung up the moment he did, but Jake had come prepared.

Summoning his Blackpoint Blade, he stabbed forward. The special void-attuned blade impacted the barrier and, with a solid push, pierced through, allowing Jake to embed his arm. As it entered the barrier, he had to grit his teeth from the sheer heat sealed within. The scales began to slowly turn red, and his flesh burned, but he managed to dismiss his katar, and with his arm pushed in all the way to his shoulder, he laid his hands on the actual Heart.

His hand began turning red, but luckily his legendary gloves empowered with Scales allowed him to hold on as he activated Touch of the Malefic Viper. He deployed the tried and tested strategy of just corrupting the living hell out of any energy source a boss used. It had worked against the Great White Stag, and he believed it would work here.

Below, the Demon Lord was pressed by the four people attacking, but he instantly noticed when Jake used Touch, confirming corrupting the Heart was a good idea. The demon's head whipped up as he allowed the Sword Saint to hit him, but he only roared as he jumped.

Or at least he tried to.

He had barely left the ground as a blast of force sent him flying off-course, missing Jake. Mid-air, the demon still released a wave of flames towards Jake, but a wall of roots speared up from the ground, blocking the fire completely.

Before the boss could even land, a green gust swept him up and sent him flying down toward the far end of the room. The King followed up, with the Sword Saint also joining in as crescent water blades, green wind blasts, and waves of force kept the demon at bay as Dina assured nothing the Demon Lord tried would reach Jake.

A heavy thumping noise came from the Demon Lord's Heart as it resisted Jake's infusion of energy, and he felt himself be connected to it and the vast amounts of fire affinity energy sealed within. As the Prime Consort said, the energy had accumulated for a long time. Even if the Demon Lord had absorbed some of it to heal himself – both to recover after being sealed and deal with the wounds their party had just given him – there was still so much left.

The heat intensified as the Heart tried to fight him off, but it was a losing battle. Touch of the Malefic Viper slowly took hold as wisps of dark green energy slithered into the artifact, and small veins of dark green began pulsing around Jake's hand as they began to mar the Heart's surface.

In the distance, the Demon Lord tried what it could, but the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint were going all out, having even partially activated their boosting skills to ensure the Demon Lord couldn't do anything. They had not fully activated their boosting skills yet, but they were running. Due to the Demon Lord focusing more on trying to get to Jake, they managed to land several worthwhile blows, but the Heart was still able to deliver energy despite Jake corrupting it.

Jake also knew he couldn't stop, or the corruption would be burned away. Purified by the flames. What energy the Demon Lord got was already purified, as only parts of the Heart had been corrupted so far. Given enough time, the corruption would reach a threshold where it could spread on its own, and when that happened, nothing the Demon Lord could do would be able to reverse the process. Even now, Jake could feel the connection between the Demon Lord and Heart waver. Yeah, Jake would only need a good minute mo-

“You wish to destroy the Heart!?” the Demon Lord roared as he released a large blast of fire, making everyone retreat for a moment. **“Then I shall grant you your wish. I no longer need it.”**

The demon raised its hand in the direction of the Heart and grasped. Jake's danger sense went into overdrive as he tore his arm away from the Demon Lord's Heart and pushed off the barrier to launch himself backward right as it shattered.

For a moment, the entire world turned red. Jake was the first to get hit by the inferno as he crossed his arms in front of him and conjured a stable arcane barrier. It melted near-instantly, and Jake was prepared to take the hit as he suddenly felt as if a light breeze had hit him from behind. A green glow surrounded him, followed by an odd orange sigil flashing from his body. As it did, he instantly felt the effects of the fire lessen significantly.

“Used Greater Firebane Talisman,” Dina spoke through the link. Yep, Jake had definitely forgotten they even had that reward from the thirty-first floor, but an hour of increased fire resistance was more than welcome.

Jake refocused and adjusted to the changed color palette of the throne room as everything was burning. Dina stood, giving off an intense aura as she held the flames at bay around Jake, the Sword Saint, and herself, while Sylphie and the Fallen King attacked the Demon Lord again, seemingly not caring much about the fire. The Fallen King, due to his barrier, and Sylphie, as she had also activated her overpowered defensive skill: Green Shield. He was pretty sure that wasn't the actual name, but that is what she called it.

“One artifact down,” Jake sent encouragingly through the mark.

“The Demon Lord powered up after its destruction,” the Fallen King responded. *“Likely due to the more favorable environment.”*

This was all within expectations based on what the “people” they had met on the prior floors said. And while they did not have a direct counter to the overwhelming fire affinity domain, they did have one way to alleviate it.

The Sword Saint raised his sword towards the sky. What looked like clouds began to condense, unbothered by the flames. Rain began to fall as the drops evaporated long before they reached the ground, but rather than make the entire throne room into one big steam chamber, it was all absorbed back into the cloud as a new cycle began.

Jake took out his bow and winced as he held it. His right hand and entire arm were burnt to a crisp, flesh and bone showing at places, making it painful and difficult to hold the bow properly. Still, he soldiered through the pain and nocked an arrow to help Sylphie and the Fallen King.

Unblemished Arrows also worked wonders allowing his arrow to not be destroyed by the environment, and the pain in his arm proved short-lived. Dina pointed her staff at Jake and fired a green bolt of lightning at it, and the spot where it hit new flesh instantly began to grow as his arm regenerated in real-time from the infusion of life energy.

His arrows found purchase as the Demon Lord failed to dodge as he was preoccupied with the Fallen King, allowing the stable arrow to pierce the demon’s cheek. He winced and unleashed his anger on the Fallen King, swinging faster than before and launching the Unique Lifeform backward.

Now only Sylphie was in melee with the Demon Lord. The Sword Saint had to focus on keeping the cycle of rainfall going, and if Dina stopped protecting them from the exploded Heart, they would all be in trouble. While the rain didn’t look to do much at first glance, Jake felt the environmental fire mana rapidly weaken in intensity and the temperature drop. The Heart had finite energy, and even if the Demon Lord had unleashed it all at once, it would still run out of power if they kept this up. Get full chapters from **novel~**

The Demon Lord knew this and switched his target to the Sword Saint. With the Fallen King out of the way, Sylphie didn’t stand a chance at stopping the large boss. With a wide swing, a massive wave of fire was sent out toward the Sword Saint. Dina conjured a green barrier, but it failed to block, and in the end, the Sword Saint had to jump back while releasing his own Rainblade slash into the flames to avoid getting injured.

Instantly, the raincloud began to shrink, making the Sword Saint raise his katana again to try and keep it going. Jake used One Step to try and cross the hall quickly, but the range was severely limited due to the fire domain, so he wasn’t able to assist as the Demon Lord closed in on the old man.

In the end, the Sword Saint had to abandon what he was doing as the Demon Lord jumped while smashing his sword down toward the old man. Shifting his stance, the Sword Saint met the edge of the massive burning sword with his own and somehow

managed to slightly divert its path, making it slam down beside the Sword Saint instead of right on top of him.

The blast from the impact still sent the old man reeling back, his robe burning. Above, the raincloud soon dispersed as the Demon Lord gave chase towards the Sword Saint. He managed to dodge and parry a few blows by diverting their paths, but the difference in sheer power was too big.

With an upwards slash, the Sword Saint was sent airborne, and a follow-up slash sent him tumbling, flying through the air with the upper portion of his robe burned off, seared flesh showing beneath. Luckily, Jake managed to get close before the Demon Lord could continue to attack further.

Jake released a Descending Dark Arcane Fang as he stabbed the demon, but the boss shifted his stance, making the katar hit armor, which it just skirted across, leaving a shallow cut. With a grin, the boss attempted to grab Jake, but he vaulted over the hand as he stabbed it once with his other weapon.

Annoyed, the Demon Lord focused on Jake, buying time for Dina to assist the Sword Saint and Sylphie and the Fallen King to stabilize. Sylphie had flown far up in the air and started their backup plan if the Sword Saint failed to address the heat.

A large whirlwind appeared towards the ceiling as a hurricane was born. The heat was rapidly being dragged in, lessening the pressure on everyone and ever-so-slightly weakening the Demon Lord himself. Jake kept staying close to the boss as the Fallen King summoned two golden hammers, which he promptly slammed into the side of the Demon Lord.

Cutting attacks seemed to have little effect due to the armor... but blunt force still did a good job as the boss slid across the floor from the impact, tearing up half-melted stone tiles in his path as a slight trickle of blood ran down his lip.

Up above, Sylphie had created a potent whirlwind that sucked in all of the flames spread out across the room, and as the Demon Lord stood up, he stared at the hawk for a moment.

“So be it, have it your way,” the Demon Lord said, standing tall as his aura subtly changed.

The crown of metallic thorns – another of the artifacts - began to light up as the Demon Lord spoke once more.

“You fight valiantly... but you seem to have forgotten. I am a Demon Lord, not a mere brute,” he said, spreading out his arms. As he did this, three large pentagrams appeared in the throne room, spread out towards the edges.

In the center of each circle, a demon more than four meters tall appeared. All three had slender bodies and were armored from top to bottom, not showing a single inch of flesh anywhere. Each also held a staff with a burning brazier at its end and a shield in the other hand. The three of them did not have any legs but simply floated slightly off the ground.

Jake threw one of the three a glance, already knowing what he was looking at.

[Tower Demon – lvl 260]

Each summoning circle flashed again as the Tower Demons raised their staffs, as four more demons appeared around them.

[Tower Guardian – lvl 250]

Each of these also gave off quite potent auras. They wore various pieces of equipment, making it clear that these three Tower Demons had essentially appeared with full parties.

Suddenly the fight had turned from Jake and company winning by teaming up to being thoroughly outnumbered. What is more... the Demon Lord broke one of the usual video game rules:

He didn't enter a passive state while the party was dealing with the adds.

Fortunately, they had somewhat planned for this.

“Now, the time of your doom approaches,” the Demon Lord said as he raised his sword toward the sky. He was prepared to swing down and release a blast toward the Sword Saint and Dina as Jake appeared before him once more.

“Oh no, you don't,” Jake grinned, kicking the arm of the demon, throwing off his aim.

His party spread out as Dina and the Sword Saint headed for one Tower Demon, the King another, and a green whirlwind the third.

That left Jake standing alone before the Demon Lord, who looked at him and scoffed. **“You mean to face me alone, pathetic human?”**

Jake grinned as he took a stance and infused his voice with Willpower, and activated Pride of the Malefic Viper to mentally attack the boss.

“I should ask you the same... you mean to face me alone, pathetic demon?”

For a moment, the Demon Lord just stared, making Jake wonder if his taunt had failed. Then, it was as if the large demon's eyes were set ablaze as he roared and attacked, his entire body erupting in flames of anger.

Never mind... taunt succesful.

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Chapter 683: Nevermore: Big Wind Meet Go Big Bang

Dealing with adds – short for additional or enemies that one had to fight alongside the boss - in any kind of encounter was always a bit annoying. In most cases, the boss would enter some charge-up phase during the fight with the adds, and Jake had kind of expected this to be the case during their planning. This turned out not to be the case, with Jake having the sneaking suspicion it was due to them allowing the artifacts to be empowered.

Yeah, that seemed like something Minaga would do. If they were sabotaged, the Demon Lord would be unable to summon anything. If they did nothing, the boss would channel the spell or something to summon the Tower Demons, immobilizing himself for a while, and if they empowered him, they would have to face the boss and his minions all at the same time.

Alas, it was not entirely unexpected, so they had planned on taking advantage of one of their party's unique traits: individual excellence. Each of them could fight exceptionally well on their own, which is why they spread up with one person heading for a Tower Demon each. Dina would rotate and assist all three of them, but seeing as the Sword Saint was the most injured, she started out by helping him. If any person managed to kill their Tower Demon, they would then help the others.

It was a good plan with just one problem: the Demon Lord himself.

If he was also in full fighting condition, it would be a nightmare battling him alongside a Tower Demon, much less a Tower Demon with its four Guardians.

That is where Jake came in.

As shown with the Sword Saint earlier, no one could fight the Demon Lord alone and keep him preoccupied. No one but Jake. If there was one thing he was good at, beyond anyone else there, it was dealing with a foe far more powerful than himself. He didn't

need to win... just buy time while keeping the Demon Lord focused on him as the four others killed the Tower Demons.

That is why he went straight to taunting. While repeatedly proving himself a threat and dealing damage was one way to keep the Demon Lord on his ass, constant insults and attempted "attacks" using Pride also did wonders. In fact, it maybe worked a bit too well.

"HOW DARE YOU!?" the Demon Lord roared as he slammed his sword into the ground, exploding the area around him. Jake had already stepped down and teleported out of range, but the demon was relentless.

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"How dare you ask if I dare!?" Jake yelled in response.

Several swift swings aimed to decapitate Jake as he dodged in between them, never allowing himself to be caught in any combo. His boosting skill was already active at the offensive 50%, as that also increased Agility, his most important stat at the moment.

"You!" the boss groaned as several magic circles appeared around him, the crown glowing as magic manifested. The casting had only taken a brief moment, and several flamethrowers were released in Jake's direction in concert with the demon's charge.

"Yes, you!"

Jake met the boss in his charge. A quick barrier of stable arcane mana was enough to slightly divert some flames, opening a path for Jake to dodge. As he slid under the legs of his opponent, he managed to wrap a string of arcane mana around it that he swiftly pulled on.

The demon was only slightly yanked before cutting the mana rope, but the action alone clearly annoyed him. Seemingly keeping his cool – as much as a Demon Lord on fire could – he shifted his stance slightly.

"For your insolence... death."

Jake's danger sense reacted as he barely managed to avoid the stab going straight for him. Still mid-dodge, the angle of the blade shifted, the direction changing in an attempt to bisect him. Using his katars, he managed to block and redirect the momentum to launch himself back. Yet just as he thought he was safe, the boss pointed a finger in his direction.

Crossing his katars in front of his chest, he blocked as a small red beam was fired out. It had no physical impact as it hit his katars, but Jake instantly felt both weapons heat up to a ridiculous degree, burning his palms even through the gloves.

Focusing, he had Eternal Hunger react as it was momentarily bathed in a shadowy aura; the heat instantly consumed, and just in time, too, as he dodged another beam, followed by a wide swing from the Demon Lord.

Not as easy as I thought, but...

"I am still waiting over here," Jake said as he bent his back to dodge, looking like he was going for the world record in limbo. **"When is that death coming?"**

He didn't get a response as the boss kept up its rapid attacks. They were a lot faster than before, the demon no longer going for massive damage but just catching out Jake. It was waiting for him to make a mistake or take him by surprise with an otherwise unseen move.

Sadly for the dear demon, it had chosen the worst opponent imaginable. Granted, the Demon Lord was a lot more powerful than Jake, and in a one versus one, he would have to fight far differently and take significant risks, but if all he had to do was buy time, this was easy enough. If things did get a bit too hairy, he still had Eternal Shadow too.

No, for now, he was just happy with building up Hunting Momentum. His one annoyance was that none of the poison he had infused into the Demon Lord had managed to stick. The internal fire energy had simply burned it away too quickly.

As the fight went on, Jake even began to land a few minor counterattacks. Not with the intent to do damage, mind you. He just wanted to keep the Demon Lord mad at him. The taunts also did wonders.

"I think my death is late? Still can't find it. I guess the deliverer is just incompetent..."

The angry demon roared in response, as Jake just grinned. He didn't have time to look at what was happening elsewhere in the throne room, but he believed that his party was doing their jobs just fine.

Sylphie didn't like Horny Red Guy, and she definitely didn't like Horny Red Guy's house. Sylphie was smart, so she, of course, knew that no one needed their house to be that hot and she also knew how rude it was to make it super hot when inviting friends. Even if Sylphie & Friends were not really guests, she still thought it was super rude to anyone who did just come to visit.

At least she had managed to help make the house less hot, even if it had made Horny Red Guy super mad. But that was okay because Horny Red Guy was one of the baddies, and making baddies mad was good.

She was a bit worried about Uncle when he wanted to touch the big red glowy thing, especially when it began burning him, but she had to follow the plan. Sylphie was the

best at following plans, after all. Plans were good; Slashy Saint said that many times. Slashy Saint was also pretty smart – not as smart as Sylphie – but probably a bit smarter than Uncle. Uncle wasn't very smart, after all.

He hadn't even used his Smelly Pot to defeat the baddies yet.

Then again, saving your secret weapon was kind of smart. Sylphie saved her own, but that was mainly because using her secret move made her very tired, and she didn't want to nap right now. Not before she was done following the brilliant plan made up by Sylphie & Friends to kill the Tower Guy. Tower Guy wasn't actually a tower, but Flower Lady also didn't look like a tree despite smelling of one, so Sylphie knew sometimes things weren't as they appeared.

Tower Guy was still super tower-like, though, as he didn't care much about Sylphie's wind. Sylphie also had to fight the Tower Guy with four other baddies, so she knew she had to be careful. She tried her way as she ensured the baddies couldn't go anywhere to help the Horny Red Guy who was fighting Uncle. It also helped make her invisible when the big tornado was there, so it was definitely smart to use.

The Tower Guy was not nice. He used his fire stick to shoot stuff at Sylphie, and all of the other baddies also tried to stop her from flying around. They were not super fast like her, but they slowly began to ruin her wind, which was rude. In fact, Sylphie had deduced that all these red guys were rude.

Sylphie tried a bunch of stuff, but the Tower Guy was too tower-like and made all of Sylphie's attacks not as good as Sylphie would have liked. The other baddies also worked together, and one of them even healed her attacks, which was even more rude than the ones ruining her wind. She thought really hard, and without using her super secret skill, she decided to still use one she didn't like that much because it was super-duper hard to use. But at least the Tower Guy stood still, so maybe it would work. That was one of the good things about towers.

Flying even faster than before, Sylphie began to make herself more windy. At the same time, she also summoned another wind that was even more windy than her usual winds. She wanted these winds to be as windy as they possibly could. It got so windy that the baddies decided to try and stop Sylphie, not knowing that was dumb. They were definitely not as smart as Uncle or the other members of Sylphie & Friends, as they all knew that when Sylphie made herself into a super wind while making another super wind, they had to go away.

The wind got faster and faster, tiring Sylphie out a bit, but she had to do it for her kinda super skill to work. Then, the wind – not her own super winds, the big wind that was everywhere – told her that her two winds were windy enough. That was good; that meant Sylphie could do the Big Bang.

Sylphie focused super hard as she flew away from the baddies while also pushing away the other super wind. Then, she made herself and the super wind turn around. Sylphie didn't like the skill because it was so hard to use, but Big Wind Meet Go Big Bang was good. The real name was super boring, though.

[Sylphian Storm Convergence (Legendary)]

The Sword Saint struggled a bit with the pain as he stayed on the defensive as Dina healed him up. It was difficult to accept, but he was the least durable member of their party, and the matchup of fire affinity and his own water was a bit of a double-edged sword. While his rain-based attacks were incredibly effective, he was also very susceptible to fire-based attacks, which is how he got into his current predicament of needing quite a lot of healing. The Demon Lord was simply too powerful for him to face alone due to the large sweeping attacks and their area of effect.

Fighting the Tower Demon and the four demons alongside it was a reprieve, especially considering he had Dina help him. As he was healed and began to feel better, Miyamoto went on the offensive, targeting down the fire healer in the group of summoned demons. Dina assisted him by restricting two Guardians, allowing him to land several blows before he had to disengage due to the Tower Demon. The demon in question was capable of summoning fire beasts of some sort and, using its brazier staff, released barrages of fireballs constantly.

Nevertheless, after he pushed his boosting skill a bit further, they firmly had the upper hand. As the sole group of two, they were meant to quickly finish the Tower Demon to go and assist the others. Miyamoto was especially worried about Jake, who had to face the Demon Lord on his lonesome.

Using Rainblade on full power, he cut an arm off one of the demons as he turned and pointed his sword at the healer. Droplets appeared in a line as he used his Erosion Stab. Time slightly warped as he lunged, and even through a barrier, the head of the demon was pierced. Before any of the other demons could assist, he pivoted and beheaded the first of the demons. He was about to get struck from behind as vines shot up and pushed away two demons while simultaneously blocking a blast of fire from the Tower Demon.

Just as he was about to move in and strike another demon, a powerful gust of wind swept through the entire throne room, buffeted and warped by the large pillars.

Miyamoto couldn't help but throw what was happening a glance. Despite the pillars, he had a clear line of sight. What he saw looked like two giant swirling waves flying around the demons, the swirling winds looking like they were trapped within a larger tornado. One of them gave off the aura of Sylphie herself, and the other was controlled by her, flying opposite – almost mirrored – to her own movements.

Then, she changed direction. The entire tornado expanded as these two waves went their opposite directions before Sylphie promptly turned in the air and began flying directly back toward the demons trapped in the middle of it all. The other massive wave-like gust of wind once more mirrored her movements.

Like two oceans meeting, the winds clashed. For a moment, it felt as if all of the air in the entire chamber had been sucked out, and even the brazier of the Tower Demon before the Sword Saint was momentarily extinguished.

Then, just as the air had all gathered, it exploded outwards in a flash of green lightning that forced all of them to put up defenses. At least the Sword Saint momentarily thought he had to until he remembered her words. The lightning actively avoided any of Sylphie's party members, as they, according to her, were "wind friends," so her wind wouldn't hurt them. That apparently also extended to this green lightning.

Sylphie's attack had momentarily made them all stop in their movements, and the Sword Saint threw one more glance to see the aftermath. What he saw was a giant crack formed across the entire back wall, floor, and even ceiling right where the two massive waves of wind had clashed... two demons, now cut in four, laying alongside the fissure, both cut in two from head to groin as they had stood right where the clash took place.

Even the Tower Demon had lost an arm as it had failed to move away in time. Miyamoto had barely taken in the sight when the green wind descended on the Tower Demon once more. Despite having just landed a massive blow, she instantly resumed her attack.

Shaking his head, the Sword Saint flashed a smirk.

A bit embarrassing to see myself outdone by such a young one... and I even have help, he thought to himself. Taking a deep breath, he shifted his stance slightly as his boosting skill fully activated, and the rain descended from above, defying the fiery environment.

The demon screamed as the Fallen King crushed it against the wall as he tore the legs off another with a Golden Claw. Finally, he had broken the formation of the annoying demons, but before he could finish off his target, the Tower Demon lunged forward, swinging its staff.

Contrary to the others, this Tower Demon happily engaged in melee. Not that the Fallen King found this unfortunate, as he gladly proved his defenses were superior as he summoned a rectangular golden barrier to block as he pushed on it, the golden energy still connected to him.

Annoyingly, it allowed the demon to get some distance, even without its legs. Spreading his aura, the Fallen King faintly put pressure on them all as he directly attacked their souls. He felt their relative fragility and gladly took advantage.

Turning his attention back to the demon embedded in the wall, the King showed no mercy. A charged beam fired towards his stuck opponent, blasting a hole in the wall as the entire torso of the demon was blown to smithereens. Just as he prepared to attack again, the wind swept past.

The Fallen King felt the Sylphian's power as it proved its dominance over the demons. An acceptable display of power by the party member he had been the most skeptical about, but her rapid growth and power had won him over. Though perhaps it was to be expected. She was a creation of the little hunter, after all. Considering the power of the Cosmic Worm and the True Royal...

How could his firstborn possibly be weak?

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Chapter 684: Nevermore: Third Phase

Jake ignored all the happenings around him for the most part, though it was a bit distracting with the flashing golden lights, giant raincloud, and what sounded like a category-five tornado. The Demon Lord also clearly noticed his summoned help was being pressured and was several times about to go help one of the Tower Demons, forcing Jake to pull the big guy's attention back on him.

"You dare try and run away!?" Jake yelled as the Demon Lord took a single step in the direction of the Sword Saint. Enraged, the boss attacked, but he still seemed a bit distracted by all the other fights. Jake easily dodged the blow, but the boss only did a lazy follow-up as Jake felt himself lose his opponent's attention.

Perhaps I was a bit too relaxed offensively, Jake surmised.

If that was the case...

Charging forward, Jake took advantage of the Demon Lord being partly distracted. With full power, he thrust both katars into the chest of the Demon Lord, sending the demon skirting back from the impact. His blow did little, and yet he charged in again as the annoyed boss tried to swipe him away. Jake grinned as the hand approached as he made his move.

Jake jumped straight up with Eternal Hunger aimed at the Demon Lord's one eye. At the same time, another version of himself simply took a step forward and placed a hand glowing dark green on the armored chest of the demon. As expected, his opponent went for the version of Jake aiming for its head, the Jake below even obscured from vision by his jumping clone.

At the very last moment, the jumping version stabbed toward the hand trying to grab him, as the Demon Lord happily took that trade. Two katars penetrated flesh in exchange for grabbing the annoying human that had pestered and insulted him? Why would he not go for that?

"I got yo-"

The moment the boss closed his hand, Jake turned into black mist. Confused, the Demon Lord tried to figure out what was going on, as it was only then he seemed to notice the other Jake standing with a hand on his armor.

It took the Demon Lord a moment to act as he just stared at Jake, looking back up at him with a grin on his face.

"Blind as a bat," Jake said, not even bothering to infuse his voice with Willpower. He didn't need Pride to make this taunt work.

The demon's expression warped as he roared, Jake already jumping back as he landed and teleported even further away. Right as he landed, the Demon Lord charged, swinging his blade widely, making Jake once more go fully on the defensive.

"Actually, that was rude. Bats aren't even blind," Jake muttered as he dodged a large swing, closing in and briefly touching the same spot as before as Touch activated once more.

In an attempt to crush him, the Demon Lord summoned a giant seal of fire above himself and brought it all down, exploding an area nearly fifty meters in diameter. Jake had already teleported away, and the moment the flames subsided, he stepped down once more and teleported into melee, dodged under a punch, and once more gave the boss a poke with Touch.

"Yeah, you are worse than a bat. Wait, do you even know what bats are? Probably not. You don't strike me as the clever sort," Jake kept talking as he dodged attack after attack.

"Silence, you pathetic vermin!" the Demon Lord roared as he quite literally breathed fire.

"Wow, yeah, that is nearly correct; some do classify bats as vermin. Some also call them flying rats. Or mice. Not sure. Either way, good job; I am proud of you," Jake said in a mocking tone.

"I said silence!" the boss said, slamming his sword into the floor, sending tiles and fire flying everywhere. Jake had already jumped and protected himself with an arcane barrier as he prepared himself for the next blow.

"Silence? Nah, I don't think so. Unless you want to start by listening to me first?" Jake grinned. The Demon Lord stabbed toward Jake, but he once more used Eternal Shadow to split himself as his two versions dodged to either side of the wide blade.

The demon looked momentarily confused at seeing him split in two and failed to respond as Jake landed his next blow. This one was purely mental in nature.

"Could you-" the real Jake said as he kicked the Demon Lord in the face for no real damage.

"-be nice-" his Eternal Shadow followed up as he kicked the other chin.

Angry, the boss went for the real Jake, and as he tried to grab him, Jake used the Demon Lord's own chin as a stepping stone to activate One Step.

"-and stop-" Jake said just as he teleported away.

The Eternal Shadow didn't have time to finish as the Demon Lord summoned a magic circle and blasted the clone way, leaving only the real Jake. Rather than attack again, Jake just stood there and stared at the Demon Lord as the boss seemed to be waiting for something. After nearly two full seconds, the boss groaned.

"What did you dare attempt to ask me?"

"Oh, not telling you now when you so rudely interrupted," Jake said, acting extremely offended. "Calling yourself a Demon Lord and having the manners of a common... wait, what is the name of a really low-tier demon vermin? Actually, never mind, let's just use that."

"Use what?"

Jake smiled. "Your new name. Rather than call yourself Demon Lord... I shall henceforth refer to you as **Demon Vermin.**"

The Demon Lord – or Demon Vermin - flinched, but the taunting seemed to no longer be as effective as he didn't attack in a rage anymore. Jake also understood why. At the other side of the room, the final Tower Guardian was about to be torn apart as the

Sword Saint and Dina proved themselves the slowest at killing their assigned enemies. With Sylphie and the Fallen King joining, the cleanup was swift, and the boss knew it.

He knew he would soon face their full party again.

They seemed to have entered a lull as Jake took the chance to properly catch his breath and allow what minor burns he had suffered to fully heal. He was lucky that his Hunting Momentum gave him some leeway to take minor damage because completely avoiding everything had been impossible.

From behind Jake, his party all approached. They looked a bit worse for wear but were otherwise still fine. He did see they had all used their boosting skills to some extent, which put them on a timer.

"Everyone is good?" Jake asked through the golden mark.

"Acceptable, but mana has been dropping fast," the King answered.

"Better than ten minutes ago," the Sword Saint said, now at least healed.

"Fine," Dina answered shortly.

"Ree," Sylphie explained, making Jake know that she was also a bit low on resources but otherwise fine.

"The three towers have fallen... my castle is in shambles," the Demon Lord said, having once more entered his scripted boss-dialogue portion of the encounter. He turned his gaze towards the party as Jake knew they were about to enter the third phase of this boss fight. **"You have ruined everything. As such... I shall ruin you in return."**

"Go!" Jake said, his danger sense warning him. He pulled out his bow, and the four others all attacked instantly as the Demon Lord's armor began shining and expanding, covering his entire body as he raised his sword high.

"Behold..."

The sword began to shine bright red as it seemed to resonate with the entire hall. The four massive pillars around the throne room then suddenly began to shake as spiderweb cracks appeared all over them, each pulsing with energy.

"Ruination."

Four pillars exploded as each released an inferno upon their destruction. The ceiling began crumbling, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was about to happen.

"The fucker is bringing down the entire castle," Jake cursed.

"No," Dina said with a resolute voice. *"We will end it here."*

Jake felt her determination and grinned. *"Then let's fucking go. No holding back."*

Nobody knew what the next phase of this fight was supposed to be, and they didn't see any need to. All of their boosting skills activated at full power, Jake gladly pushing his Arcane Awakening to the maximum 60%. They all powered up significantly, but one more than the others.

Dina's body erupted with power as her aura rapidly spiked. Bobo, her living armor, grew to cover even more parts of her body and changed shape to resemble a dress filled with glowing green rune scripts. The small outgrowths on her head rapidly grew into large wooden antlers. Even her vine hair grew in length as more and more flowers bloomed upon it. She even grew a few centimeters as she transformed.

Lifting her staff, she slammed it into the ground.

"Nature, heed my call."

A green fissure spread from the impact of the staff as the entire floor erupted. Thousands of vines speared up from nothingness. The collapsing pillars were suddenly reinforced as a network of vines invaded them, stitching together the collapsing stone. These vines were teeming with pure life, capable of fighting off the heat.

As fast as the collapse of the castle had begun, Dina had stopped it dead in its tracks. The Demon Lord stared with confusion at the transformed Dina as she pointed her staff at the boss, his eyes barely visible through the helmet that now covered his head.

A massive trunk erupted from the ground and smashed into the demon, sending him flying as he smashed into the wall at the far end of the hall. Before he had time to extract himself, the entire wall behind him exploded as hundreds of thick vines wrapped themselves around him, aiming to crush his body.

Fortunately – at least in Jake's eyes – the Demon Lord would not fall that easily. An orange glow came from within the mass of vines as a large cut was made, burning a path. Out of this path walked the Demon Lord, fully covered in his black armor and holding his large sword. The crown had seemingly merged with the armor, and Jake felt the boss was stronger than ever.

What is more, the fire affinity mana in the air had rapidly decreased. But it was not gone. Instead, the Demon Lord had absorbed it through his body and into his sword. It appeared that even within collapsing the castle, the boss had still powered up fully.

However, even if he had gotten stronger, their group had also used their own boosting skills. Jake observed the boss walking towards them as he observed the armor closely. He smiled as his suspicions were affirmed, and he relayed his plan.

They were on board.

No more holding back now.

"Your pathetic attempt to-"

He didn't manage to get further as a giant golden hammer descended from above, smashing him into the ground and forcing him down on his knee. A tornado descended from above right after, increasing the pressure further as Jake released a Powershot aimed straight for the chest of the Demon Lord. The arrow exploded on impact, leaving a mark a bit bigger than usual. That was the last confirmation Jake needed.

The Sword Saint stormed forward too, and in a single instant, he released a dozen of minor slashes all across the armor, leaving small knicks here and there. Their attack had done little damage as the Demon Lord smashed his fist into the ground, momentarily summoning a giant formation all around him as the crown shone bright red.

A fiery explosion erupted, but the combination of a green wind and pure nature affinity mana heavily weakened the blow, allowing the Fallen King and Sword Saint to not even bother retreating as both attacked. Jake coated several arrows with his blood – to use a specific type of poison in mind he didn't have a good version of – and began to let loose arrow after arrow, aiming at the same spot on the Demon Lord's armor every time.

Seeing his first attack had failed primarily due to Dina, the boss quickly directed his anger toward her. She seemed ready for his charge, and so was the King, which is why they were taken by surprise when the Demon Lord didn't go after her physically. Instead, he pointed his sword her way as it shot forward, piercing straight for her chest.

Dina hastily erected a barrier of roots as Bobo also reacted and formed a shield of green life-filled wood. The sword pierced both barriers before exploding, sending a burning Dina flying through the air. For a moment, Jake was worried, but with a green flash, the fire was all extinguished, and her slightly burned form emerged.

The thrown sword from the demon wasn't just idle after it exploded. Rather than return, it seemed to take on a life of its own, flying straight toward Jake as the boss controlled it somehow. Without his sword, the Demon Lord had lost his most potent offensive measure, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. With both fists raised, he began punching, showing the skill of a talented pugilist as he pressured both the Sword Saint and Fallen King.

He also began to use even more fire magic, even if it was clear this was not his forte. Jake kept going with his ranged attacks, and the Demon Lord ignored him for the most

part, as none of his arrows managed to do any worthwhile damage. At least not in the eyes of the boss.

The improved full-body armor truly made the Demon Lord into a living fortress, with their attacks doing limited damage. The only good thing was that blunt damage still proved effective, making the Fallen King their primary damage dealer as he pummelled the demon over and over again with giant golden hammers. The Sword Saint went for precise cuts around the joints of the armor, but even that proved nearly impossible. Slashing damage simply wasn't cutting it.

Even the Fallen King had issues getting through, and Jake had to try and get potshots off in between dodging the flying flaming sword that had an annoying tendency to explode whenever it got close to him. Luckily, Dina rejoined and began to help assist Jake and the others, though it proved difficult for her to handle the sword. That is where Sylphie came in. She had difficulty doing much to the Demon Lord, but the flying sword? That she could handle, as she began to throw it around the room with massive gusts of wind, pretty much nullifying it. Even when the Demon Lord wanted to recall it, Sylphie kept it away, primarily by using the large pillars to hide it behind.

Even so, as the battle dragged on, their party didn't do a significant amount of noticeable damage to the Demon Lord. In fact, he seemed to slowly be getting the upper hand. Their resources were dwindling faster than his health pool, their boosting skills couldn't be sustained forever, and the Sword Saint even had to drink a health potion after getting hit by the boss and having his one arm get pretty fucked up.

Not that it was a problem... because they had a strategy. Minutes passed as a status quo was established, with them all primarily defending as Jake kept just shooting his seemingly useless arrows. Sylphie and Dina focused solely on making sure no one was injured further, with Dina nullifying the demon's magic, with Sylphie handling the flying sword.

This kept going a bit longer, but soon enough, Jake got a gut feeling, and his skill also confirmed it. *It's enough now.* The rightful source is **novel**·fire·net

It was time to finish this.

Without hesitation, he spoke through the golden mark.

"Now."

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Chapter 685: Nevermore: Evil Demon Sword Gubrothas

“Now.”

Instantly, their entire party shifted their movements. The Sword Saint retreated back as Sylphie summoned a tornado that completely sealed the movements of the sword. At the same time, roots appeared from below and slithered up the legs of the boss as the Fallen King threw out two chains, catching both arms of the Demon Lord. In an instant, the boss had its movement entirely sealed. They all knew he could break out within a second... but they wouldn't give him a second.

Jake dismissed his bow as he used One Step and appeared right in front of the boss, both katars already out. Eternal Hunger stabbed forward against the otherwise impenetrable armor, but the expected did not happen. He felt the surprise of the Demon Lord as the katar managed to penetrate the armor by several centimeters. It was only now that the boss noticed what Jake had been doing. The spot he had used Touch of the Malefic Viper on during their one-versus-one had turned into an even darker shade than anywhere else, and his repeated poisoned arrow had only made it worse. Jake had used a type of poison he hadn't really ever used before:

Corrosive poison.

Ever-so-slowly, Jake had made that spot of the armor brittle and weak. Weak enough for his weapons to penetrate through. For a brief moment, Jake made eye contact with the Demon Lord as he flashed a smile and punched with the other hand with the Blackpoint Blade, pouring in all of his Hunting Momentum. The katar shot forward with his full power as a huge section of armor shattered, the blade penetrating all the way to the handle.

Not done yet.

The enchantment of the Blackpoint Blade activated as an explosion resounded within the armor, sending blood and metal flying, Jake having just opened a bucket-sized hole in the Demon Lord's chest and sending cracks forming all across the armor. What's more... Jake was just the armor-breaker.

Pulling his katar out of the demon's body, Jake ducked as an old man materialized right behind him, a hand on the handle of his sword, ready to draw. His entire aura began to change as a pressure descended upon the half-ruined throne room, one that even gave Jake pause and reminded him of the duel he had with the Sword Saint way back in the Treasure Hunt.

And like back then, the old man also began to change. His features softened, his hair grew, and his muscles got toned as his entire body was revitalized. In an instant, the Sword Saint had gone from an old man to someone in his prime, and in that same instant, he drew his blade.

“Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut.”

Jake felt the flash pass over him as the entire world seemed to freeze for a moment. There was no big explosion but simply a slash that left wayward raindrops in its wake. The second the swing was over, the Sword Saint rapidly aged, returning to normal.

In the distance, a loud crack was heard. Two of the massive pillars in front of them began to fall apart once more as a fine line had been cut straight through them, and just as Jake heard the crack, he was hit by a shower of blood from the Demon Lord.

Then, he saw the top part of the torso begin to slowly slide to one side. With the armor of the Demon Lord broken and his movements still sealed, the boss had been utterly incapable of defending himself, resulting in him being bisected right above his stomach. Even the arms had a deep cut into the armor, though even the Transcendent skill had failed to fully cut through, truly showing how utterly ridiculous the armor was.

However, even as the fight seemed over, Jake did not let his guard down. None of them did. Because they still hadn't gotten any notification.

The shining red flames in the Demon Lord's eyes had been extinguished, but Jake still felt power radiate from his body.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched, using the golden mark as Jake's eyes opened wide. Luckily for them, they had all spent enough time with her to know what her warning meant as they, in concert, retreated from the “corpse” of the Demon Lord.

From afar, the sword of the Demon Lord pierced through one of the pillars as it shot straight for the boss. It slammed down onto the corpse, releasing a massive explosion. Fire bathed the entire room as Dina put up a defensive barrier, with Jake staring through the flames to see what was happening.

He saw the sword stab straight into the armor as it began melting and getting absorbed by the sword. The metal crown also began to shine brightly as it floated up and merged with the handle. Within less than a second, the entire armor was reduced to nothing, and the only thing left was the Demon Lord's body which swiftly turned to an odd red energy that was promptly dragged into the handle, where a red gem appeared, looking eerily like an eye. Coupled with the already absorbed energy from the broken Heart of the Demon Lord, every single artifact had now combined.

More than that, the merged sword now gave off the aura of the Demon Lord. However, it was far weaker, and Jake instantly knew what was about to happen as arcane mana began to gather in his hands.

“I lost... but I shall return! Reborn stronger than ever!” the voice of the Demon Lord echoed from the sword as a magic circle appeared around it.

“Not gonna happen,” Jake yelled, his voice infused with the Willpower and Pride of the Malefic Viper as he unleashed the arcane mana to disrupt the teleportation.

He was not the only one, either.

A green wind also swept through the circle from Sylphie, a crescent wave of water was sent out by the Sword Saint, and an odd golden beam was released by the Fallen King, that one aimed at the sword itself. Dina had been the one who was most prepared as she pointed her staff, and a large green magical circle seemed to superimpose itself upon the Demon Lord's.

“NO!” the boss screamed as the teleportation circle was utterly broken apart. The sword was also slightly destabilized, but it seemed that even if teleportation was not an option, the Demon Lord refused to surrender. Shooting upwards, the sword tried to escape, but this was when Dina's move to not allow the castle to collapse came in handy.

While the sword could get through the ceiling at some point, it couldn't just strike through. Dina also made it even harder as she sent forth an army of vines trying to snatch up the merged artifact, with Sylphie easily catching up with her high speed.

With her there, the wind became the enemy of the Demon Lord. A tornado was summoned that began to drag the blade downwards, and when the Fallen King also joined, he summoned more large chains of golden force. As the sword struggled, the Fallen King restricted it with chains using one hand and created a barrier all around it with the other. The Demon Lord within the sword seemed to realize escape was not possible right away, but they all knew the demon was looking for a chance to escape, likely even gathering energy within the blade for an attempt.

Floating down to the ground with the sealed-in sword, the Demon Lord could still speak.

“You may be able to keep me trapped for now... but so what? I will return once more. With my soul sealed within the sword, the moment my body has regenerated through my innate power as a Demon Lord, your lives shall be mine and the final resistance to my rule slaughtered. And there is nothing you can do,” the boss said.

“Are you so sure about that?” Jake asked while walking forward with Eternal Hunger in his hand.

As he walked, he began to slowly change the shape of the weapon. Changing the shape of the mythical weapon wasn't practical mid-combat due to how long it took and how the weapon required a period to stabilize, but with the sealed Demon Lord, that wasn't an issue. He allowed it to turn all smudgy, looking almost like a black ferrofluid that stuck to his arm.

“I do not fear your pathetic threats. Release me, and I shall swear that our next encounter will truly be our last,” the Demon Lord semi-threatened, semi-promised.

“No... no, I don't think we will,” Jake smiled as he looked at the Fallen King. The Unique Lifeform nodded with recognition.

While the Demon Lord transforming into a sword was not part of the plan, they did make a strategy for what would happen when the Demon Lord” died.” They knew some energy would remain, and they had even expected the demon would try and resurrect again in some way by safekeeping parts of its soul somehow.

Too bad for the Demon Lord; it faced two monsters. One wielding a weapon capable of absorbing all kinds of energies. Eternal Hunger would consume any energy it could, the curse never able to be truly sated. Considering it also consumed the souls of those killed, it was the perfect weapon to truly kill a Demon Lord.

When a Demon Lord died, its Truesoul would disperse, leaving behind just energy and a shattered soul embedded within that energy. Based on what Dina said, The unique Demon Lord energy was something no one truly knew how to control or manipulate. All they knew was that given enough time, a new Demon Lord would spawn somewhere in the relative vicinity of where one died. Sometimes it was as far away as on the other side of a planet, and other times it would be right where the original died. With this knowledge, it was only natural Demon Lords such as the boss had found some ways to influence their resurrection, and the Demon Lord entering the sword right before he truly died was clearly one such method.

Jake theorized Gubrothas would flee somewhere else before using some special method unique to him to reforge his body. A good plan that had only failed to take into account that the party he faced had a Unique Lifeform specialized in soul magic and Jake wielding his mythical weapon that loved eating souls and energy.

The Fallen King laid his claw on the blade on the sword as Dina assisted with keeping it sealed in his stead. Golden light erupted as a shockwave of soul magic went through the sword as the voice of the Demon Lord echoed.

“You... you dare try to extinguish my soul!? You will fail, and as your power wanes, I shall escape.”

He was probably right on that one. The Demon Lord was quite hard to fully get rid of. Breaking the sword wasn't an option either, as with the demon inside, it was still a

bound weapon and a powerful artifact, making Jake's Alchemical Flame useless as that only worked on passive objects. The Fallen King truly would lose the battle of attrition as the Demon Lord could consume energy to fight off the Unique Lifeform till the King had to stop due to overusing his boosting skill.

That is where Jake came in. Kneeling down, Jake placed his hand on the gem of the sword as Eternal Hunger slowly took shape, almost using the Demon Lord's sword as a mold. Dark energy began to emanate from the mythical weapon as the metal formed a hand, grasping around the Demon Lord gem.

Jake took a deep breath and closed his eyes. This was not something he had tried before... but he knew he could do it. He did not even hear when the Demon Lord taunted him as he truly connected himself to Eternal Hunger. Resonated himself with it.

In his mind's eye, the curse manifested. At first, it was an undefined mass of pure curse energy, but it soon gathered and took shape as his Eternal Shadow manifested. In the real world, his entire body momentarily gave off curse energy as his figure was superimposed with the Eternal Shadow.

“Go,” he spoke to himself. His other self. The Eternal Shadow slightly shifted before it turned into black energy that drilled into the blade through Eternal Hunger.

“I told you, tha- WHAT IS-”

In an instant, the entire sword turned black and began to emanate dark smoke as the red light in the gem faded. Cracks formed all over the merged artifact, and all Jake heard was the echoing screams of the Demon Lord within his mind as the entire sword shattered, broken pieces of metal devoid of energy falling to the ground.

Kill message: *You have slain [Demon Lord – lvl 270] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level*

***** DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 217 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

***** DING! Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 218 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

***** DING! Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 214 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

With a slight nudge, Eternal Hunger began to once more warp into a katar as Jake stood up. Everyone looked at him, especially the Fallen King giving off an incredulous vibe.

“You did not need my assistance,” the Unique Lifeform spoke.

"Thought I would," Jake smirked, looking at the mythical weapon slowly warping and reforming in his hand.

"That weapon of yours is a disaster waiting to happen. I felt the pure gluttony emanating from it. An unstoppable desire that can never be satisfied," the Fallen King said.

"It's a Sin weapon, isn't it?" Dina asked, getting a nod from Jake. "My grandfather spoke of them. They are rare and powerful but often avoided due to their tendency to negatively influence the wielder. But... I have never heard of one taking on a human shape like that. Another trait they tend to have is also how uncontrollable they are, so how did you manage to direct it into the Demon Lord's sword, much less have it take that shape?"

Jake didn't feel like sharing his entire story about his other self – sim-Jake – who had become one with the weapon, so he just smiled. "Its instinct is to hunt, and I offered a feast."

Dina frowned. "That does not explain the shape..."

"Let's just say we have a close connection."

"It was also too efficient... almost like it had a mind of its own. No, not quite a mind... but close?" Dina muttered.

"Let's leave it at that," the Sword Saint said as he smiled. He looked at the broken pieces of metal on the ground and patted Jake on the shoulder. "Good job."

Jake smiled. "You too."

He had to admit, things had gone far more smoothly than he could have ever predicted. The original plan had been for the Fallen King and Dina to gather all the energy of the Demon Lord right after he died before it had time to spread. The King would shatter the Demon Lord's soul, with Jake potentially helping with Gaze. Using Eternal Hunger, Jake would then slowly absorb all the energy, along with the soul fragments.

What had instead happened was Jake connecting Eternal Hunger with the sword the Demon Lord had sealed himself within. He had pushed in the curse energy through the mythical weapon, which had manifested as his Eternal Shadow. The Eternal Shadow had then effectively entered the "space" the Demon Lord resided in within the sword, slain him, and devoured every single speck of energy in the merged artifact.

All within a second.

Jake knew what set his Sin curse apart from any others. Usually, a Sin curse was just one singular desire. All Eternal Hunger had been about was eating. But Jake's curse had warped. Sim-Jake had introduced another element:

Instinct.

Proper instinct. Jake's own instinct. It was merged with him, after all. This meant that contrary to what the textbooks said about Sin curses, Jake's version would follow his own will.

In some ways, sealing himself within an item had been the worst thing the Demon Lord could do against Eternal Hunger. It allowed the curse to face him directly – a curse holding energy far above what a C-grade could possibly face.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked as she had also flown down and landed on top of Jake's head.

"Yeah, I think that is a good idea," Jake smiled.

Looking at their party, they all looked worse for wear. Jake also knew that the instant they released all their boosting skills, they would all be tired as fuck. Also, they had something important to do:

Celebrate.

And Jake knew just the place as he released a Pulse of Perception and saw a formerly hidden gateway had been revealed.

"Drinks are on me when we get to the lounge," Jake smiled. Fresh chapters posted on *novel•fire•net*

"I thought they were provided freely?" the Sword Saint asked, looking genuinely confused.

"Exactly," Jake grinned.

Soon after, they all made their way to the gateway that led to the in-between room. It was time to see their rewards for this floor and relax before heading onto Minaga's city floor.

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Chapter 686: Nevermore: A Healthy Team Dynamic

The thirty-fifth floor had been the first one to truly push their party. It had also been the most fun, in Jake's opinion.

After they all entered the in-between room, the boosting skills were deactivated one by one as Jake tossed himself in one of the lounge chairs. The others also sat down, with the King even stopping his usual levitation to sit on a large chair. They would all need a good while to fully recover, and they had already agreed to stay in the room until they were all back in peak condition. Even if the next floor was a city floor, this place was just safer.

Jake closed his eyes and relaxed a bit as he waited for the system message to appear. It didn't take that long before he saw the notifications, but when he saw them, he couldn't help but frown.

Only two?

How was that possible? Jake instantly checked them and saw that the first one was the expected basic one.

Thirty-fifth floor completed. 350 Nevermore Points earned.

Some-fucking-how, they had only managed to get a single achievement, and he felt kind of pissed before he even read it.

Achievement earned: Kill the fully empowered Demon Lord Gubrothas along with all three Tower Demons within five hours without any party members dying. 5000 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, Jake was totally fine with just getting one achievement after reading the one they had gotten. It seemed like the system or Minaga or whatever managing these achievements had just decided to throw them all together into one massive achievement.

5000 Nevermore Points was more than they had earned on any prior floor by a significant margin and were a more than twenty-percent increase in overall points just from that one achievement.

"A good windfall," the Sword Saint smiled, having also read the achievement.

"Satisfactory indeed," the Fallen King agreed.

"Ree!" Sylphie also screeched gladly. Being the smart bird she was, she knew big numbers were good.

"I wonder how this will affect later floors?" Dina questioned out loud. "Clearly, the Demon Lord was set up to appear on one of the later five floors for one final fight."

“Good question,” Jake said. “Man, if only there was someone who really loved telling us about the great story he has been spinning up. Someone who has been surprisingly silent for a while now, not having a single comment during the entire boss fight.”

“Hey, I just didn’t wanna distract you from the big fight with the Demon Lord. Imagine if a comment of mine made you lose your focus, and it ended in your death? That would be silly, wouldn’t it? Can you imagine the number of complaints I would get if that actually happened? Definitely not worth the hassle,” Minaga reappeared. Well, he did not really reappear. Jake knew he had been watching all along as he usually did.

“Why do I get the feeling that has happened before?” Jake mused with a smirk.

“No comment. Anyway, thoughts on the big boss fight?”

“Pretty good,” Jake admitted. The Demon Lord had been strong and not as “gimmicky” as Jake had feared. “You needed to be good in many different areas to win, but I have a really hard time seeing barely any parties beating it. The Tower Demons being summoned with full parties is pretty brutal, especially if you have a more classic setup. I guess the healer and tank can handle the boss, but the three damage dealers having to handle a Tower Demon each is a tall order. Not to mention the final phase where the Demon Lord felt near-invincible with his armor on full power. I can see him outlasting many groups simply due to how damn durable he was. Especially if they don’t have any good methods to address the Demon Lord’s Heart.”

“The end part, too,” Dina chimed in. “Without knowledge of rituals or soul magic, killing the Demon Lord and not allowing him to escape seems impossible. Maybe you could seal him due to his weakened state, but...”

“It wasn’t meant to be easy or even beatable by any parties that could consider themselves in any way average. That is also why you got the escape talismans as rewards for floor thirty-four. You only get those if you unlock the possibility to face the Demon Lord with empowered artifacts, so you get the chance to reset and try again without empowering the artifacts. Something a lot of parties have done, mind you. Overestimating your own abilities is quite a normal thing for young C-grade geniuses, and I do recognize that the difficulty spike was quite severe,” Minaga explained. **“Not to mention the difficulty of fully killing the Demon Lord after he merges with the sword. The most common method is a big formation that drains the energy of the artifact over time, but that isn’t very effective or fast. My sample size is also pretty pathetic... but hey, I would say you guys – courtesy of an overpowered mythical weapon – probably set the kill time record from sword stage to death.”**

“So, to summarize, we are just damn awesome?” Jake grinned.

“Duh. Not to toot your horns, but you all are a top-of-the-line party. If you were not, there is no way you would have beaten this,” Minaga acknowledged.

Jake just smiled as he leaned back a bit further and relaxed.

“How about the impact on later floors? It sounds like killing the Demon Lord outright is not entirely out of expectations,” the Sword Saint asked as he took a seat at the bar and grabbed a bottle.

“If you hadn’t killed the Demon Lord here, who is to say what it would mean for the later floors? What I can say is that it is a requirement to perform the most rewarding achievement available within my labyrinth later on. It will be the most rewarding by quite a margin, too. Let’s just say that the five thousand from the Demon Lord is far from the highest a single achievement can give,” Minaga answered.

“Man, and here I had hoped that it would at least throw you off your game a little,” Jake smiled.

“Because you kill a boss that is designed to be killable? No, what throws me off my game is people using Bloodlines or Transcendence skills to screw up everything and ruin all my hard work. Not that I dislike these two by default. The swordsman’s use of his Transcendence skill in the boss fight is how I expect them to be used. What you do is just willfully ruining my labyrinths,” Minaga said, clearly still salty about Jake ruining the exploration on prior floors. Jake also felt something else...

“So what you are telling me that the labyrinth will make a return on floor thirty-six, ripe for my exploitation?” Jake grinned.

“I did not tell you that, no. And if that is the case, you will find out yourself when you arrive. Even if it was a labyrinth again – which I am totally not saying it will be – that doesn’t mean it is as easily exploited as the ones before.”

“You have said that several times before, and yet we always end up with you complaining about how I broke something of yours again,” Jake shot back.

“Time will tell.”

“Indeed it will,” Jake nodded with a smile.

“Now... want some nice lore bits as you relax? Facing the Demon Lord didn’t just have to be done by your party, you know... if you did things differently, you could have brought many helpful allies along,” Minaga teased.

“In a bit,” Jake said as he saw looked at the pedestal with loot.

“Oh, fair, get the rewards first. But... lore time afterward?”

“Sure,” Jake shrugged.

“Great. Enjoy your loot; it should be useful.”

Jake sure hoped it would be. Rather than just have Sylphie fly over and unlock the boxes, they all went together. There was not just one box but three this time around. Two of them were small, with one large box. The large one was even bigger than a mini-fridge, and Jake kind of wanted to open it first, but with permission from the others, he started with one of the smaller boxes.

He opened it and instantly felt the odd energy spread throughout the room. It was familiar, and they all recognized it as slightly familiar to the Demon Lord’s signature. Which made sense considering the item that floated up. It was a small fist-sized version of the large artifact Jake had corrupted, though Jake wasn’t sure it was the same kind of item after using Identify.

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

“No fire affinity mentioned?” Jake questioned. He didn’t feel the slightest tinge of fire energy either.

“Not all Demon Lords have the fire affinity, though it is the most common,” Dina explained. “And to find a Crystalized Heart... I heard that some talented ritualists can transform a Demon Lord into one. They are incredibly valuable artifacts to all demons and warlocks.”

“Let us give it to the hunter, then I am sure we will see him birth some primeval Demon Lord within a few centuries,” the Fallen King said. Jake was about to protest as the Sword Saint looked at Dina.

“Can Demon Lords be female?”

“Yeah,” Dina nodded.

“Then I guess that is a possibility,” the old man nodded.

“Ree?”

“No!” Jake protested as he looked at the green bird. “You are not getting a new little sister, I am not taking that damn heart, and I am definitely not going to make some Demon Lord.”

The Sword Saint smiled teasingly at him. “Then who else wants it?”

Nobody said anything. The Fallen King was disinterested, Sylphie said it looked gross, it did not fit Dina’s Path, and the Sword Saint had nothing to use it for. In the end, Jake did end up grumbling as he tentatively took the damn thing.

“If all else fails, you can give it to your succubus mistress; I am sure she will appreciate it,” the Sword Saint tried to comfort him.

“I don’t have any mistresses...” Jake muttered.

“Sure you don’t,” the old man smiled and chuckled.

“Let’s just open another damn box,” Jake grumbled as he went straight for the larger of the two remaining lockboxes. It was quickly opened and out came a metal box without a lid. This time, Jake did feel the expected wave of fire affinity energy after opening a box. Looking at what was inside, he saw a dozen black metal ingots.

[Obsidian Hellfire Ingot (Legendary)] – An Obsidian Hellfire Ingot. This metal is incredibly hot to the touch and has a supreme mana conductivity towards any fire affinity mana. Its innate properties also grant this metal high natural resilience to all types of attacks. Limited alchemical uses.

Jake would classify this as another dud. None of them were blacksmiths, and Jake couldn’t really come up with anything to use these ingots for. Not that it was a bad reward... this was the kind of metal the armor of the Demon Lord was made with. Potentially the sword too.

“Anyone want this?” he asked.

Silence all around for a moment before Dina spoke up a bit shyly. “I... I can maybe use them?”

“Oh?” Jake said, surprised.

“I... have a plant that can maybe absorb them, but not sure,” she said, clearly uncomfortable asking for it. Probably because this was one of the first actually valuable items they had found.

“Take it then,” Jake shrugged. He already knew the three others didn’t care.

“Alright,” Dina relented, storing away all the ingots. Jake did know that their way of distributing loot was different from the norm. Dina knew it too, as she had apparently been taught how loot distribution usually worked before going to Nevermore, and was a bit surprised when Jake and the others went and broke the conventions she had learned.

It was considered pretty standard that crafting materials would be sold if no one needed them badly, or the materials were so rare they were impossible to get your hands on under normal circumstances. Any profit would then be split. Even if someone got the materials, it was usually expected they would compensate the others, either by paying a fair market price or giving up something else. Their laissez-faire approach to loot distribution, where they just gave it out semi-randomly if someone wanted it, not really caring about “fairness,” had thus come as a bit of a surprise to Dina.

They did still follow some norms. Such as the norm to give loot to the people who truly needed anything, as that would help everyone clear more floors. Case-in-point? The reward from the final lockbox.

[Supreme Firebane Ring (Legendary)] – A ring crafted for an incredibly talented knight that was slain by the Demon Lord before he was able to reach his prime. Passively grants the user resistance to all fire-based attacks. This effect can be further amplified by infusing mana into the ring, also extending it to affect all their energy. Enchantments: +600 Toughness, +600 Vitality, +500 Willpower. Supreme Firebane.

Requirements: lvl 230+ in any humanoid race.

A certain old man in their party could surely use this item. Something Jake and everyone else knew as he grinned.

“Hey, old man, you should just take this. You kind of lost your cool during the fight with the Demon Lord, so hopefully, this can help you chill if we meet more fire affinity opponents,” Jake said teasingly.

“Indeed... much of your offensive prowess seemed to evaporate before the flames of the Demon Lord,” the Fallen King even chimed in, Jake feeling oddly proud of the Unique Lifeform for his joke.

“In the heat, you just couldn’t cut it,” Jake piled on. “I hoped you would have rained on the Demon Lord’s parade a bit more.”

Dina looked confused for a second before smiling.

“Ah! I understand now!” she said before thinking deeply for a moment. Looking full of inspiration, she grinned at the Sword Saint. “They are giving you heat for your performance.”

“Good one, but I think we should lay off flaming him for now,” Jake grinned, damn proud of his party. Only Sylphie didn’t join in, but she had a good reason not to. She was busy trying to open a bottle with some kind of juice at the bar counter, sad there was no snack for her among the lockboxes.

“I do not even fully understand the last one... but I guess I do feel the burn,” the Sword Saint chuckled, taking it in strides. They didn’t even need to argue as he picked up the ring. Sadly, he couldn’t use it yet due to the high level requirement, but he should reach level 230 soon enough.

“What a healthy team dynamic. Now that you are all done bullying the old swordsman like you bullied that poor Demon Lord with your constant insults, wanna hear some lore about why the Demon Lord got so offended by these insults?” Minaga asked.

“I didn’t bully him; I just deployed a tactic taught to me by a master to keep the attention of the boss on me by speaking constantly,” Jake smiled. “I call it the Minaga stratagem.”

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“That is just hurtful... anyway, to the lore. Remember that Old Royal Mage? Yeah, he could have helped you during this encounter if you had...”

Jake relaxed as he listened to the Unique Lifeform happily explain a bunch of scenarios, some of them so silly Jake doubted if they were real – such as one where a party member became the Prime Consort and would be able to sneak in and land a sneak attack – but knowing Minaga, it was probably real.

The others also just recovered, with everyone staying in the lounge. Even the Fallen King chose to not leave for one of the rooms, tolerating Minaga. The Sword Saint was busy infusing energy into the self-repair enchantment of his robe that had been burnt, and Dina once more tended to her hidden garden.

Time slowly passed as they all rapidly approached being back in prime condition. Soon, it was time to check out the city floor, though they didn’t really plan on doing that much there. They did have some things to check, such as how many of the solo dungeons there now were. Of course, there was one thing they wanted to know more than anything...

Had they finally claimed that top spot on the Leaderboards?

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

Chapter 687: Nevermore: Minaga's City Floor

Jake and company had visited many city floors before and knew what to expect. Except, this was not a normal city floor. This one was made by Minaga, and the Unique Lifeform had already warned them this place would be special. A special floor made by a special guy.

Upon their immediate arrival, Jake did not see what was so different. At first glance, it looked just like a usual city. As long as you ignored the fact that Jake spotted at least a dozen statues of Minaga just from where they entered, and the general architecture reminded him a bit of that mage area he had visited to buy his current bracers.

As usual, the system messages also appeared, inviting them to the floor.

You have arrived on Minaga's City Floor of Nevermore.

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

Nothing really seemed off... but then he saw the next part.

Due to the nature of Minaga's City Floor, you cannot proceed to floor thirty-six immediately. In order to proceed, you must pay the toll at the city gates. Minaga's City Floor uses the currency known as Minaga Coins. Minaga Coins can be earned by selling items through brokers in the many stores spread throughout the city. Normal Credits can be used to pay for other goods through the stores or between non-residents of the floor. Minaga Coins cannot be traded between dungeoneers. All party members must pay their own toll.

The toll to enter the next floor is determined based on your level upon entering this floor the first time.

"Hm, this is quite the curveball," the Sword Saint muttered as he read the description.

"Yeah..." Dina nodded.

"This is definitely something," Jake commented. "But what exactly is the point of this? It wants us to sell items to some stores? And we can only buy stuff using Credits... is this some kind of money sink created to battle Credit inflation by forcing us to spend money on getting a currency that is useless to us outside of paying some toll?"

“I find the lack of trade-ability of these coins a severe oversight. What exactly is one meant to sell? I can see the hunter sell his potions, and perhaps the Dryad sell her herbs and such, but why would the Sylphian or I have any goods these brokers are willing to buy?” the Fallen King complained.

Jake was about to propose maybe someone could just leave Nevermore and bring a bunch of valuable stuff to sell... but then he saw the next message.

Main objective: Pay the toll to move onto the thirty-sixth floor.

Bonus objectives: Do not leave Nevermore before paying the toll.

Current progress: Pay the Toll. Do not leave Nevermore.

Note: This floor has no hidden objectives, achievements, or events.

Current Nevermore Points: 28473

Reading it, Jake saw the bonus objective. They were not allowed to leave this place, so even if one wanted to get help from outside, it wouldn't work. Jake thought for a second before sighing.

“Worst comes to worst; I am sure we can scrounge stuff together. I quite frankly have a shitload of valuable stuff hidden away from the ceremony,” Jake shook his head.

“Hm, I guess that is an option,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Won't work,” a voice spoke from ahead of them as a figure teleported in from outside of Jake's Sphere of Perception. Instantly, he was put on guard as Jake felt the aura of the person in front of them, and he used Identify, going for a full scan.

[Human – lvl 349 – Minor Blessing of Alcradia]

He was at the peak of C-grade... nearly B-grade. Jake knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if it came down to a fight, he would not stand a chance. Luckily, a fight was not even on the table. They were on a city floor, and the guy showed no hostility.

“What do you mean it won't work?” Jake asked. “And who are you? Sorry, but I do find it a bit suspicious when a random person just teleports right in front of me after listening in on my conversations.”

“Apologies,” the man said as he bowed. “I am but a mere worker from a subsidiary of the Golden Road Emporium, and I serve the merchant god Alcradia. As for why it won't work... anything that the brokers here buy must be from Nevermore.”

"Huh," Jake nodded. "And why did you feel the need to teleport over to volunteer this information?"

"My job here is to keep track of individuals of note entering the floor, and I teleported over because I was informed of a change on the central Leaderboards. Seeing as your party had just appeared, I put two and two together," the man said, bowing once more. "Congratulations on taking the point lead."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched.

"I agree with her," Jake said. "Spoilers aren't nice. We wanted to go and see that ourselves."

"I apolo-"

"Rather than apologies, divulge the real reason you are here," Jake shook his head. "Actually, let me guess. Seeing as everything you can trade for Minaga Coins has to be from Nevermore, you are here to buy some valuable items we have that can be exchanged."

The merchant smiled. "I will not deny that. The Demon Lord on the highest difficulty offers quite the rewards if a party such as yours beats it."

"Not interested, but thanks for the info," Jake shrugged as he motioned for them to keep moving.

"Wait, are you sure you don't want a guide?" the peak C-grade asked, still acting nice. "There are still some things to learn. If any of you are crafters, you can-"

"I assume everything made on this floor counts as 'from Nevermore' even if the creation uses materials from the outside," Jake interrupted him. "Still not interested, and worst comes to worst, we can just ask Minaga."

The merchant flashed a small smile as he shook his head. "While that may have been true on prior floors, here, that is not possible. The dungeon master does not appear here or speak, as it is a city floor. He does not have a copy here dedicated to your party, after all. It is only in extremely rare cases he has made his appearance."

"This guy gets it; I am not some guy just at your beck and call, appearing whenever you want me to," Minaga agreed wholeheartedly as he stood with his arms crossed beside the merchant.

"I never expect you to," Jake agreed.

The merchant had frozen in place as the blue dungeon master appeared. He slowly turned his head as if to confirm the Unique Lifeform was truly there before he rapidly bowed.

“This one greets the-“

“Bye,” Minaga waved his hand as the guy was teleported away.

“He was just about to reveal your godly title,” Jake said, pointing at where the guy had disappeared.

“Nah, I don’t think he was,” Minaga disagreed.

“He totally was.”

“I don’t see why you would think that,” Minaga remained steadfast.

“Your attempt at gaslighting will not work,” Jake argued.

“I would never and have never gaslighted anyone, and I find the accusation highly inflammatory,” Minaga said with a sad expression before his mood took a one-eighty, and he grinned as he turned to the Sword Saint. “Ah, sorry about the fire-related expression. You have already gotten roasted enough for one day.”

The Sword Saint just raised an eyebrow before sighing.

“Fine, I have been successfully fooled,” Jake relented. “Now, could you tell me why you decided to make this floor the way you did and got any tips?”

“Alright, alright. You see, I don’t like when people just fly through every single floor – you know, like you do – and that includes the city floors. I wanted this one to at least take some time and give people a good reason to spend longer here than on other city floors. So I introduced the Minaga Coin and the toll, but the coins can also be used for other things than just the toll. Though, I am not going to lie... none of these things matter to your party. I would advise you five to just quickly gather the toll and get out of here,” Minaga explained before sighing. “I can’t believe I am actually advising you not to engage with my creation...”

“Oh, the horror,” Jake smirked. “How would we go about collecting coins, and was my assessment about crafting goods correct?”

“Yep, spot-on,” Minaga nodded. “Lots of merchants around here who want to buy and sell too using normal Credit. Ah, but one warning, even if I told you to rush through, you will probably still spend a bit of time here to get enough to pay the toll. While you do have some stuff to sell from prior floors, none of it gives a lot outside of those ingots from the Demon Lord.”

“Huh,” Jake said before thinking. “If crafted stuff can be traded for coins, can’t we just spend a shitload of Credits, buy a lot of crafted stuff from others, and sell that for coins to move on instantly? You know, steamroll the place with wealth?”

“I may or may not have put a cap on how many coins you can earn monthly from non-self-obtained items...” Minaga said with a cheeky smile.

“So...” Jake said, as he sighed. He had a feeling there really was no easy way around it.

“Yep, you gotta do stuff yourself to get coins! Get that cauldron out and get cooking!” Minaga laughed.

“How about us?” the Fallen King entered the conversation as he referred to himself and Sylphie. *“How are we supposed to earn any coins? We are monsters, not crafters.”*

“You can do jobs that are non-combat that earn tokens you can exchange for coins. You can also fight in the arena once a day, something I feel like you both would enjoy. The arena is time-limited and will repeatedly send new things out to kill to rack up more points for a better token that you can then exchange for coins. No experience points, though. This is a city floor, after all,” Minaga explained.

“You are awfully forthcoming with information?” Jake questioned. Usually, Minaga liked to be all secretive, but here he just shared stuff willy-nilly.

“Because the impact of what I tell you is negligible. No matter how fast or slow you pass this floor, you get no points for doing it. Only the bonus objective gives any bonus points,” Minaga shrugged. “Me helping you while giving some basic advice will have a minimal effect. Plus, I teleported away the guy who would have said something similar, so in some ways, you can argue I am just setting things right.”

“Wait... this entire floor gives no points?” Jake questioned.

“No, of course not. It is a city floor,” Minaga said, waving him off.

“Then... you are legitimately just doing this to waste everyone’s time...” Jake sighed.

“I told you, it is for a better overall experience and allow you all to socialize a bit,” Minaga grinned. “Now, from your point of view, it may seem like a waste of time, which I can totally respect and promptly not care about as I force you to play my game.”

Jake sighed again. The worst part was he couldn’t even get on any ideas that would help him cheese this floor. Minaga seemed to have thought of most things with the limit on things you could sell that you hadn’t made or obtained yourself.

"Anyway, nice to chat with you all. I'm gonna head off and do dungeon master stuff," Minaga smiled.

"Not even gonna let your title slip before you leave?" Jake teased.

"Alright, alright... as a final treat," Minaga sighed. "While I am mainly known by you C-grades for creating floors in Nevermore, I go by another name in the wider universe. One echoed throughout existence, as even the most powerful of gods shudder at the mention of my name."

He's gonna make another damn joke, Jake had already concluded.

"In the wider world, I am not simply called Minaga... but the Magnificent Minaga!"

"That was bad, and you should feel bad," Jake said with a deadpan expression, the rest of his party slowly nodding.

"Killjoy," the Unique Lifeform said, acting offended for a moment before he flashed a slightly more serious smile. "But I didn't totally lie. They do shudder at the mention of my name."

With those words, Minaga teleported away, leaving the party there to take in his words. He probably thought he was dramatic, but Jake just chuckled. "For some reason, gods shuddering from us mentioning having to potentially deal with Minaga doesn't surprise me in the slightest." Newest update provided by *novel•fire•net*

"Rude," a voice echoed in their heads, completely ruining any dramatics he may have had going on.

Jake smiled as he turned to the party. "Let's go check the Leaderboard and stuff anyway?"

"We should. Trusting the words of a stranger seems unwise," the Sword Saint agreed.

With no one protesting, they went to check out the large Leaderboards in the middle of the city. As they walked, Jake did take notice of one thing different about this floor... outside of the city floor between floors five and six, this was the most populated one. The average levels of those here were quite high, too, with many above level 300.

These were essentially the "boosters" of people from the new universe. They carried them through floor after floor to help them level up, but also for these high-level individuals to explore the later floors on their own. Having a five-man party was optimal, but with a good level advantage, four-man parties also did just fine. "True" parties like Jake's were still incredibly rare, based on all Jake saw.

Reaching the Leaderboards, their group did confirm that the peak C-grade had been telling the truth before. They did indeed hold the Point Record.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-35): 7582

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-35): 28473

“Sitting at the peak right now does not mean we can relax or slow down. Only that we have to further strengthen our lead and assure our victory,” the Fallen King said.

“Naturally,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“We’re just getting started,” Jake agreed with a smile.

After they confirmed how great their party was, they went to check out the gate to know how high of a toll they had to pay. There was only one gate leading to the next floor, and in front of it was a toll booth and a barrier. Jake went over and placed his hand on the booth as a system notification popped up.

You must pay 214,000 Minaga Coins (current Minaga Coins: 0) to proceed to the next floor.

Without any reference to know how easy or hard earning two-hundred thousand Minaga Coins was, Jake didn’t know hard it would be. After the others in his party also checked, they concluded the cost was equivalent to your race level times a thousand. That meant Sylphie had to pay the highest toll, which for some reason, made her happy.

“I guess there’s nothing to do but just get to it and figure out the best way for us all to earn our own toll amount,” Jake shrugged as the group briefly began to telepathically discuss what to do. They decided to find a home base first – there were plenty of hotels around – and then make a good plan. Even if the city floor was meant to be a relaxing place, they had no intentions of taking any breaks.

While It was good to be at the top, that didn’t mean they could in any way be satisfied. They had made it there before many of the other top parties and had a lot of competition on their heels. Who knows, maybe they would even meet some of them on this floor if it turned out to take a while to earn those coins.

Something Jake had a strong gut feeling it would... especially after he asked a random guy close to the toll booth.

“How long it usually takes? No idea about the average, but I think the current record is about fourteen months? Or was it fifteen?”

Yeah, they were definitely gonna run into other parties... which did make Jake wonder. How were all his friends doing? Both those in and outside of Nevermore.

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

Chapter 688: Nevermore: The Runemaiden

The level 255 Demon Warden – one of the bosses on the thirty-third floor of Minaga's Labyrinth on Archmage difficulty – dodged as the blast of pure kinetic energy flew past him. He quickly got his footing as the woman followed up, diving in close.

Several deadly strikes flew out as she relentlessly attacked. The Demon Warden summoned barriers as he retaliated, manifesting a spear of crystal he thrust down toward his opponent. Rather than dodge, the woman followed through with her attack, punching the demon in the chest right as she herself was speared in her shoulder.

At least, that is what the Demon Warden had expected to happen.

The crystalline weapon shattered upon impact with the woman, tearing up her leather armor but failing to penetrate her skin, leaving only slight marks. In return, he was punched square in the chest, launching him backward.

With confusion, he attacked again, his crystalline magic failing every time to truly damage his opponent and his attacks as a pugilist failing even more disastrously. It was as if her body was made of metal, with none of his physical attacks working. The Demon Warden thus switched up his strategy and began to use fire magic.

However, even that proved ineffective. The second the magic hit her, runes lit up on her body, weakening the flames. Growing more and more desperate, the Demon Warden kept trying different things. He knew his comrades were struggling elsewhere in the prison camp, but no matter what he did, nothing worked.

The only good thing for the Demon Warden was the low offensive prowess of the woman, but that didn't help when he failed to do any meaningful damage either. In the end, the battle turned into a long slugfest. One the Demon Warden would never win. Soon, four individuals appeared nearby, simply watching the fight.

Ultimately, the outcome was determined when the Demon Warden fell after what felt like the ten-thousandth hit, his entire body broken from the repeated pummeling and his health points utterly depleted. The rightful source is `novel~fire~net`

"Well fought, Carmen," the young druid said as he flew over. He was a weird one because even if he tried to talk like an old man at times, he only looked to be in his twenties.

"Finally learned to use my damn name, huh?" she scoffed. "Also, no... that wasn't well-fought, but a drawn-out pummeling. Fighting without using big finishers seriously sucks."

"I truly meant no offense with my comment or failing to use your name as you have asked of me. Customs were simply too ingrained in my being, Runemai- I mean, Carmen," the druid said apologetically.

"She was taking the piss. At least with the name part, Carmen does suck at actually killing anything," a bare-chested large man said as he walked over, his chest not actually visible due to how much blood had drenched him. This was Carmen's favorite guy in the party. He was a berserker that used two massive swords. A pure brawler. He also wasn't as uptight as many of the others and the leader of their party – Warlord Davion.

"Well fuck you too," Carmen scoffed.

He just laughed as he took a seat and looked at the pummeled Demon Warden and back at Carmen. "That mini-boss couldn't manage to overcome your defenses either?"

"No," Carmen shook her head.

"Well, fuck me indeed. Damn Runemaids... then again, I guess you are a special case," he shook his head.

The last two members of the party were a shaman and a seer, which made up the casters of their group. It had to be mentioned that even if druids were usually casters, their druid sure as hell wasn't. While he liked to act all refined, his primary mode of combat was turning into a large scaled tiger with wings that could breathe lightning. So at least he could fight properly.

Overall, she didn't have that many complaints about her party, and they were overall pretty okay people. Though if you had asked her just a few months before entering Nevermore, she would have said there was no fucking way she would enter with Valhal.

Carmen had been less than satisfied with the faction for a long time. The political bullshit pissed her off to no end, and she had even been told not to associate with pretty much anyone on Earth outside of those who belonged to Valhal. She had not attended all the meetings Jake had held with all the other factions, been unable to go to that big ceremony of his, and honestly hated belonging to the faction she had chosen to be a part of. It wasn't like she could just leave, either. Not without fucking herself over majorly, as the Path she walked required her to remain.

In the end, Carmen had reached a breaking point. The status quo had to change, or she would go crazy, and she only saw two choices: either abandon Valhal and her entire Path or make Valhal tell her what the fuck was going on. With this in mind, she had

reached out to Gudrun and laid out her thoughts. After some deliberation, Carmen was offered a deal.

If she wanted to “be in the know,” she had to prove herself worthy.

From the very beginning, when she signed up with Valhal, she had been walking the Path of a Runemaiden. Runemaidens were quite a peculiar thing, as it was considered both a title and a Path.

Only in C-grade could one become a true Runemaiden, but even those who walked the Path of one were called a Runemaiden in lower grades out of respect. To walk the Path of a Runemaiden was to willingly risk your life to survive the Runemaiden Ascension Ritual. The process through which the Runemaidens were created. A ritual that would either give birth to a True Runemaiden... or death. Well, and a lot of Bone Metal.

Bone Metal was a special material that wasn't even metal, which made the name pretty damn dumb in Carmen's mind. It was only really used by Valhal as they were the only ones who knew the method of crafting it. As the name indicated, the “metal” was created from bones. The usual way this special quasi-metal was made was through the bodies of the fallen - a final way of honoring them by turning their very bones into weapons, so they could continue to battle even in the afterlife. These weapons tended to always be of high quality and were better the stronger the dead person was.

However... this led to a question. What if the process of creating Bone Metal was applied to someone who still lived? There would be two results. One was that the person would die, their flesh would melt away, and only the metalized bones would remain. The second outcome was a success. The bones would successfully be turned into Bone Metal, and the entire body would be reforged. Their skin would become as hard as armor, their muscles and flesh making the body more closely match that of a defense-focused beast rather than a humanoid.

All it would cost was any and all ability to ever do magic. Something Carmen was fine with because fuck magic.

Carmen had strengthened her body throughout the grades to prepare for this ritual, such as the process she went through to strengthen her fists. She had even focused primarily on Toughness and Vitality, especially towards the end of D-grade. It had made her slightly weaker in combat, but it was all to build a foundation. Her D-grade evolution had been the final primer.

In reality, Carmen did not have a high risk of dying if she wanted to become a true Runemaiden. If she was satisfied with just barely becoming one, that is, for not all Runemaidens were born equally.

The materials required to birth a true Runemaiden were numerous and rare, and Valhal remained secretive about what they were, but the most vital ingredient was well-known in the multiverse:

Blood.

Blood of a greater being.

The deal Carmen had struck was to successfully become a Runemaiden of one of the gods of Valhal by using their blood in the ritual. Gudrun had advised her about what god they could use... but Carmen already knew who she would pick. Usually, one would avoid the blood of gods during the Ascension Ritual due to the overwhelming Records of the god, but it did happen semi-frequently. Which begged the question... which god's blood should she ask for?

Well, the answer was pretty obvious.

Carmen knew the kind of people that surrounded her. The old swordsman was an utter monster and a Transcendent. Jake was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper and had a Bloodline. She had even felt Sylphie, the cute bird she had met during the Treasure Hunt, surpass her while they hung out together after splitting from Jake as she grew into her own. If she wanted to have even the slightest chance of wanting to keep up with all of these supreme geniuses, she had to take a risk. Carmen didn't think she was a supreme genius like the rest... but she was too stubborn to not at least try to keep up.

Hence why she had chosen Valdemar's blood for the ritual.

Something she was instantly forbidden from. The risk of the Runemaiden Ritual was directly proportional to how powerful the blood of the greater being was. That meant getting blood from Valdemar would carry a risk higher than anyone else... so high that the success rate was too low for Valhal to use his blood anymore. It simply wasn't worth the risk. The last forty-thousand rituals using his blood had failed, and that was when they had stopped.

Carmen didn't care; she insisted on using his blood anyway. Ultimately, Gudrun surrendered before Carmen's stubbornness and agreed on one condition... Carmen had to make Valdemar himself approve of her and donate his blood.

When Carmen reached level 199, she was thus teleported from Earth and left the ninety-third universe - straight to the headquarters of Valhal itself. She had appeared in the Grand Hall of Valhal. Stood before the gods of Valhal... and found them less intimidating than she probably should have.

Something that had amused one of them more than anything... because while she didn't find most of the gods intimidating, the feeling was vastly different when she met her blood donor in the flesh. This was not an instance of her getting teleported by the

system or talking to a projection. He was truly there, and for the first time, Carmen felt like she stood before the definition of overwhelming power.

Carmen had only been able to grin. Something that also made Valdemar smile. Her knees had buckled, her entire body covered in sweat, but she had managed to stand before him, something he clearly liked. Their eyes had met once before he grinned and spoke.

“You’re willing to use my blood and risk everything to gain a small advantage over those just using the blood of another warrior?”

A stupid question, in Carmen’s opinion. “I’m not a bloody coward.”

“You’re reckless in your pursuit to get stronger,” Valdemar smiled.

“Weren’t you?” Carmen shot back before even thinking.

Silence took over the room. Nobody said anything, not even Gudrun. Several seconds passed as the strongest human in the multiverse stared down at her. Then, Valdemar broke into a belly laugh.

“Lass has the guts. Let her do as she wants,” Valdemar said in a cheerful tone as he looked at her. “But you have to take an oath before I allow it.”

Carmen knew there was always more to this kind of thing, and fighting through the pressure of the man’s stare, she spoke: “What oath?”

Valdemar smiled even more than before. “That we’ll share a mug of mead after the ritual. So either succeed or die a liar.”

It took her a moment to understand what he meant, as Carmen couldn’t help but chuckle. “Better have some good fucking mead ready.”

“Brewed it myself, so it bloody better be,” Valdemar laughed in response.

From there, Carmen began her preparations for the ritual. First, she had to “cleanse” her body, which required her to spend over a week in large medicinal baths while performing certain training motions in between.

After the cleaning, she had to strengthen her body as much as she could. This was not by increasing her stats or even her innate resistance but by learning how to better use her innate energy and move it in certain patterns to help her properly understand her own body. This ended up not taking that long – not even three days – as Carmen was already bloody good at it. Once that was done, it was time for the real thing.

The ritual itself was... less than pleasant. A large magical circle was created, and Carmen spent more than fifty hours getting the many runes tattooed all over her body. The process was painful, but it was nothing compared to what happened next.

This was not a ritual that simply changed her body but also her soul. Her entire Soulshape would be reforged, her entire being reborn... and she had to do it all herself. This was not a simple process of holding on and just gritting your teeth through the pain. You had to keep your soul from disintegrating as it was repeatedly shattered, all the while controlling the energy invading your body. Carmen did not think herself some genius of energy control... but she did know her own body. Moreover, she was stubborn. She also had to admit that she once more owed Jake... because one of the primary reasons this ritual was so difficult was that one had to endure the pressure of the greater being's Records all throughout. Something Jake had primed Carmen to be capable of.

Carmen knew that when she entered the ritual circle, no one present expected her to step out of it alive – besides maybe Valdemar. They tried to hide their scornful faces, their comments of how Carmen was overestimating herself and delusional, and how she was just courting death due to her own stupidity. Carmen was honestly thankful to these people, as they had made her even more resolute to succeed, just to tell them to go fuck themselves once she was done.

Needless to say, Carmen succeeded even if the ritual itself was an absolute fucking nightmare. She felt like her body was ripped apart over and over again, and she experienced worse pain than she could even imagine. There was a constant feeling of not truly knowing who you were, and everything was compounded by the Records of Valdemar seeking to overcome her own and turn her into a statue. A damn good statue for sure, but Carmen had no intentions of that fate.

The final part of the ritual was the evolution itself. Rather than the usual evolution window, Carmen was asked at the very end of the ritual if she wished to evolve her race and class – both at the same time due to the peculiar nature of the ritual - something she had naturally agreed with.

After eleven days of suffering through that absolutely hellish ritual, the first Runemaiden of Valdemar in over half an era, and the only one currently living was born. Not because the other one died of age, mind you.

Just that one was no longer called a Runemaiden after ascending to godhood.

And Carmen had no intentions of breaking that streak of one.

Carmen smiled a bit to herself as she remembered the first sight that met her after the ritual. She remembered opening her eyes and seeing a glass full of mead right in front of her as Valdemar stood off to the side, staring down at her. She especially smiled, remembering her first words to him.

“Why are you creeping on a naked girl?”

And his response.

“You’re a girl no longer, Runemaiden,” he laughed as he turned away. “But yeah, you should probably put something on...”

After that, Carmen had gotten drunk on the best damn alcohol she had ever had in her life. The mead not only been damn tasty but also helped her body somehow properly adapt better to its changes. In the end, she had walked away not just with good taste in her mouth but a Divine Blessing from Valdemar – which was a bit silly as Carmen felt like she was repeatedly changing titles these days. Though she had a good feeling she would keep this one for a while... it could change again based on Valdemar’s parting words.

“Keep that obsession of yours, lass. Who knows, I may call on you when I need a new Chosen if you are interested, but you aren’t quite ready yet. Prove my blood wasn’t wasted on you, aight?”

Still smiling, Carmen stopped reminiscing about the past and returned to the present, standing there on the thirty-third floor of Nevermore. She felt good knowing she was not there just because of pity or because Valhal wanted to keep her happy because of Jake – because she now also knew that things were indeed complicated with all of that Yip of Yore shit.

No, she was there because she was one of the strongest C-grades of her generation, and she would gladly punch anyone in the face who told her otherwise.

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Chapter 689: Nevermore: Light, Death, Void

“Tyranny has run rampant for too long. For how long will you live in fear? For how long will you live under a system of oppression, where you are treated like nothing but objects by a creature that cares not for any of you? Are you willing to face us, risking your lives for someone who hides away within his castle, unwilling to help you? Will you die for someone that would not even shed a drop of blood for you?” his voice echoed throughout the large room, the many cultists and demons wary but listening.

“I am not asking any of you to lay down your lives for me... all I ask of you is to not take up arms. Allow our passage, and help us only with your prayers and well wishes. We

have come to carry out justice, and you are not yet guilty of anything but being oppressed. Stand behind us, and I swear that the Demon Lord will face righteous judgment and his tyrannical reign end.”

Jacob stood atop a golden floating platform summoned by the light mage in his party. Bertrand stood beside him, ready to react should anyone make a move. To his other side, the Knight of Light’s Dawn stood with a smile on his face, the Old Royal Mage also with them. In fact, they had an entire group from the ambiguous “kingdom” these semi-sapient creatures called their homeland.

“He speaks the truth,” one of the people with them said. A woman wearing a cultist robe. One formerly known as the Prime Summoner. “I, too, was fooled, and now I can only try to pay recompense for once more releasing the evil Demon Lord Gubrothas. These heroes have given me a chance to, and I implore you all to join hands with us to create a better future.”

Jacob amplified her words using his own skills as he saw doubt mar the faces of all those below. A few Mistresses had even appeared, though the Prime Consort was yet to be seen. Not that he was worried... he could feel from the crowd the situation was under control. If not, they still had the option to fight – a scenario in which they would always win.

Minaga’s Labyrinth, as this part of Nevermore was called, had truly been a mixed experience for Jacob. On the one hand, it had allowed him to make use of his skills as an Augur and negotiate and create allies, but on the other, it had completely screwed over his abilities as an Augur when it came to navigating the labyrinth itself.

On all of the prior floors, Jacob had easily divined the best way to proceed. This had allowed them to fly through the floors at a record pace, and their party had racked up more points than they expected – even setting a new point Record as they passed the city floor between twenty and twenty-one.

When they had arrived in the labyrinth and were done getting briefed and picking the Archmage difficulty, he began his divination once more. Minaga had looked at Jacob funny during the entire briefing, and Jacob did feel like something was slightly wrong as he divined what way they should go. He had still chosen to believe it... a big mistake in retrospect.

Rather than lead him to the rooms with keys, all his divination had done was lead them straight into traps over and over again until finally, they reached a dead-end, where a giant mural of Minaga laughing revealed itself. The Unique Lifeform naturally adding an audio track to the mural himself.

From there, High Justicar Elevian – the co-leader of their party alongside Jacob – decided that perhaps they should shelve the divination for now. This proved effective, as they stopped relying on purely magical means and shifted to some far more manual ones. Scouts were sent out, light

magic was shot in different directions to measure distances, and when they found their first group of natives from the labyrinth, they made use of them. They were pretty easy to convince, and Jacob quickly realized they were almost pre-programmed to want to assist him, making his job far easier than he would have expected.

It was certainly easier than what he had been doing before entering Nevermore.

Jacob had never truly left Earth before the invasion of Ell'Hakan. He had briefly been teleported away for events or brief training stints. However, as he left this time, he was tasked with a simple job... go out into the multiverse and see it for yourself. The A-grade Grand Master was assigned as his protector during this time, but Jacob was still allowed to go where he wished... so he followed his Path as an Augur and sought out those he could help.

He visited planets untouched by any factions. Places where D-grades were viewed as demi-gods that could dominate entire kingdoms. Worlds so bereft of Records that a C-grade ever appearing was impossible unless a miracle occurred, such as a random Bloodline being born or an individual with talent allowing the person to elevate themselves above their fates managed to rise.

There were worlds where the humanoid races were barely surviving as beasts dominated. Worlds where war raged, incompetent leaders willing to kill anyone with talent out of fear that they would be surpassed.

Jacob had many doubts about the Holy Church; a brief stint of exploration wouldn't change that. However... he had long suspected it, but now he knew for sure that the multiverse was far from a kind place to the weak. The lost would falter in the dark endlessly if they did not have any guidance – if they did not have the Records of greater factions lifting them up.

A high tide raises all ships, and the Holy Church was the greatest tide of them all. Yet Jacob was determined not to allow himself to be swept up in it. He would be a lighthouse on solid ground, guiding the ships that would find themselves lost. And, at least for now, he would guide them towards the Church.

Because even if the Holy Church were not the best... for the weak, was there truly a better choice?

"I swear on the Blightfather, my skill said it was this way! It is as if it isn't working as intended, but... no, I can do this!" Maltrax, the beastkin undead, said as she manipulated some odd ash before sniffing it.

"Told ya we were walking in circles" Casper shrugged unbothered.

"I... it may be that way? Yeah, it definitely is that way!" Maltrax insisted.

"If by "it" you mean more traps, then yes, it is that way," he sighed.

They had been on the thirty-first floor of Nevermore for nearly twelve hours already and had spent all that time getting fucking nowhere. At first, they had used the ghost summoned from the banshee in their party, but that quickly proved ineffective as they got disoriented and lost their way within the fog. Some of them even ended up fading as they failed to find their way back to the banshee.

After that, Maltrax, the beastkin, took charge and used her tracking. She was filled with confidence initially, but after leading them through over a hundred traps – that Casper forewarned them all of – she seemed to be at her breaking point. Casper did come with input here and there, but she was too stubborn, so he didn't bother arguing.

Azal finally glanced at Casper as he also sighed. "You're certain you can actually find the way?"

"Pretty certain, yep," Casper nodded. He placed a hand on the wall and closed his eyes briefly before quickly opening them again. "Gotta head back from where we came; we have been walking in the exact opposite direction of any keys for the last two hours."

"I... he is lying!" Maltrax said, frustrated.

Casper didn't even bother arguing as Azal nodded and motioned for them to follow him. Three hours and a lot of complaining from Maltrax later, they stood in front of the second room they had encountered on this floor. The first one did not have a key.

"He... he just got lucky... there probably isn't even a key here..."

There was a key there.

Finally, Maltrax had to surrender and agree the dungeon engineer was indeed correct. Casper had to admit that things were far easier than he had expected. In fact, he would say his knowledge of dungeons was more valuable on this floor than the thirtieth, which made him wonder...

"Hey, Minaga?"

He got a few glances from his party members. They had discussed and agreed on engaging with the dungeon master as little as possible, but Casper felt like it was worth asking.

"What's up? Or down. I guess it depends on your perspective."

"I don't mean to accuse you of anything... but did you make your labyrinth incredibly favorable for people with dungeon-related skills?"

More glances at him, one of them quite stern, very clearly telling him not to piss off the Unique Lifeform. Casper still felt like it was fine, though.

“Are you saying that I am purposefully making the dungeon easier for other aspiring dungeon masters?”Minaga said in an angry voice. **“Are you insinuating that I would be so biased just because we both make dungeons!?”**

“Yes?” Casper answered with a deadpan face.

“Good, because you would be absolutely correct!” Minaga said in a gleeful voice. **“Man, you know how rare proper dungeon masters are these days? They all tend to suck or only pick up dungeon engineering in the later grades. True, it is difficult to do much while still weak... but that only makes those who succeed young more admirable! It is only natural that as a Progenitor Dungeon Master, I think you are a pretty swell guy.”**

“Dungeon engineers are actually that rare?” Casper asked with some genuine confusion. “Why? It’s awesome.”

“That’s what I always say! The problem is that you have to study a lot to learn proper dungeon engineering, and higher stats just makes studying easier. Dungeon engineers also have the problem that they are pretty limited in what they can do when not in dungeons, and nurturing one is pretty damn expensive. If you have a talented engineer, why not just convince him to be a formation master instead, as the required competencies overlap? At least that is what all those damn fools think, not realizing being a dungeon master is the greatest.”

“Their loss, I guess,” Casper shrugged.

“True that.”

Casper felt a bit better after talking to Minaga, and the rest of his party members also looked at him differently, their wariness replaced with relief and recognition. Azal even spoke through their telepathic link.

“For this labyrinth, you should take the lead. Good call on getting the Unique Lifeform on our side.”

Yeah, that hadn’t really been a plan. It was more him just being curious. But if he had permission...

“Say, you mentioned other groups when you talked earlier... would you happen to know if others from my home planet also did your labyrinth?”

“A few, yeah.”

“How about the Chosen of the Malefic Viper?” Casper asked curiously. Jake had to have come through already with their head start, right?

“Casper, rather than answer that, let me ask you something: do you respect my work and the work of all dungeon engineers who try and create proper labyrinths?”

“I would say so? Labyrinths are a pretty standard design form of dungeons, and this one is greatly designed and far more complex than I can even imagine. So, yeah, I do respect it and dungeon engineers in general,” Casper answered, unsure why Minaga had even asked that.

“Well...” Minaga said, his voice full of exasperation. **“Let’s just say some people can’t appreciate good craftsmanship.”**

Nevermore City had calmed down for a while after the influx of pinnacle geniuses that seemed to arrive one after another petered out. All of the major factions had sent in their bids for the peak of the Leaderboards, and all hoped to claim the spot. The longer one waited, the harder it was after all.

One just had to hold the record for a single second to get the associated reward. Of course, one also had to pass a certain threshold of minimum points to even get the reward in the first place, but all of these top parties would reach that threshold. That meant they were truly competing with one another, and any record set by a group would result in it being harder to set a new one. As expected of a Leaderboard.

However, one day, more than two weeks after everyone believed all the top parties had already entered, a new one appeared. To see the Dao Sect send a group vying for the top spot had already been a massive surprise to most information brokers, but it faded in comparison to this group. Because this group was not a faction... it was five individuals who all had one thing in common - one thing making them all uniquely outstanding simply due to that shared trait.

One was a more than three-meter tall, muscular, hunched-over cyclops-looking creature with an entirely black eye. Pitch-black chains hung from its body, rattling as it walked, yet these chains did not hit the ground but simply phased through it like they didn’t truly exist. Its skin was entirely gray, and many would likely confuse it for an undead creature, except it didn’t give off any death affinity energy. In fact, it barely gave off any energy, period. Even its aura was barely detectable, but those who could feel it were instantly put on edge.

A second creature was simply a tattered cloak floating through the air, the hood an endless pit of nothingness. There were no limbs to speak of, and the entire ghost-like creature – that was distinctly not undead - looked like it barely existed in the physical plane. Save for a few moments where an arm seemed to glimpse into existence floating

beside it, holding a staff of some kind, it displayed no moments as it floated through the air together with the cyclops and the three other people in his auspicious party.

The third was at least recognizable as a known race of the multiverse. Or at least she had been one at some point. She looked like an elf of some kind, but not one anyone could quite place. Her skin was entirely white, to an almost frightening level, with black lines running through her in a pattern that acted like a mental attack whenever one laid eyes on it. Luckily she wore a robe covering her body, but a few weaker D-grades did puke simply upon seeing her hand briefly. She had no hair but had a head covered in odd silky threads that extended toward the sky while dancing in an eerie pattern. Most of her face was obscured as she wore a blindfold over her eyes, and her pale lips made her look almost like a walking frozen corpse. Ultimately, the only real reason people guessed she had once been an elf was her ears. As with the two prior, she could not be properly Identified. Something the next creature could not be either.

Fourth was a humanoid-looking creature, but not one anyone could quite place. Partly because the head – the only thing visible – seemed to be in a constant flux of change. The head was far larger than any regular creature and had four faces on it, one looking in each direction. All of these faces shifted at every second, from female to male, elf to human, and sometimes even non-humanoid-looking races. The rest of the body was covered in a black robe, but one could faintly see the rustling of more than two arms beneath, and for a brief second, a long metallic limb showed from beneath the robe.

These four all gave off the presence of otherworldly creatures, and all could not be correctly Identified. Like none of them truly belonged in the world, which partly made sense due to what they all had in common:

They were all touched and blessed by Void Gods. They were beings corrupted by the void. Creatures that had stared too deep into something mortals should stay far away from and they had found themselves forever changed from the experience. Yet they had survived, proving they were extraordinary just for that feat alone. It was common knowledge that those who delved into the powers of the void would be forever warped... yet...

Somehow the fifth member of this party was the one that stood out the most. Walking in the center of all these monstrous-looking creatures was a completely ordinary-looking human – something he could even be Identified as. He wore glasses as he seemed to be reading something from the object he was holding, and his carefree demeanor made it clear he was entirely unbothered by the creatures surrounding him. His eyes – the thing that usually was the most obvious sign of corruption – were normal, and he did not seem to hide anything under his clothes. Clothes that also did not fit the theme of black robes, as he had on pants with far too many pockets for someone with a spatial storage, along with a coat and apron and work boots. The only extraordinary piece of equipment he seemed to wear was his glasses. The source of this content is [novel●fire●net](#)

His normal appearance almost made him the most eerie of the group. Especially as he walked in the middle, indicating he was either the leader or the most prominent member of the party. Or maybe it had no meaning, as these were creatures of the void... and trying to understand the void was the Path of the mad.

This group entered Nevermore without making any stops, uncaring about the many observers. Yet none dared approach them, fearing they could antagonize one of them.

Void Gods had no factions. They had no headquarters, no domains, no areas they controlled, or even buildings they owned. It was simply impossible for them to. Yet none questioned their power, for the Void Gods were known and feared. Every single Void God was a being at the pinnacle – a creature that not even Primordials would dare call themselves superior to.

Those touched by the void were few and far between, and seeing five gathered in one spot was already extraordinary... much less for it to be five individuals all blessed by Void Gods. This meant they had likely interacted with the void by laying eyes on their Patrons without averting their gazes. A truly foolish endeavor, where one could only expect madness or death to follow. Yet these people had managed to retain their egos.

One thing was for sure... the top factions had just gotten themselves another party to compete with. This party being “late” was no comfort to them either because if there was one type of magic that could break a scenario and allow a party to advance fast, it was magic with its Origin in the void.

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Chapter 690: Nevermore: For the Family

Teleportation was no doubt the preferred method of long-distance travel in the multiverse. It did have some problems, like requiring a teleportation circle at both the target location and where you teleported from, making it less than ideal as an exploratory tool. One needed to know where one wanted to go in order to teleport somewhere, after all.

If one did not use a magic circle, teleportation became significantly more dangerous, costly, and overall less effective. However, there were instances where one did not want teleportation circles placed in an area.

First of all, many important places were protected by magical barriers. These barriers also protected some teleportation, and while it was possible to allow a “backdoor” of

sorts in the barrier, this was, needless to say, a major security flaw. A powerful space mage could often “hack” themselves into a teleportation network and, if there was a backdoor of any kind, exploit that to teleport straight into an area that should otherwise be protected.

That was why most factions only established these teleportation networks inside of the barriers. This was a good method for singular planets or even solar systems, but it became heavily flawed if one wanted to connect two distant planets. A single barrier capable of encompassing two different planets in their own solar systems would rarely be worth it.

Due to this, many Waypoints had been established throughout the different universes. These were planets not protected within any borders, filled with teleportation circles allowing one to travel all across an entire universe within weeks if one jumped repeatedly.

The problem ultimately arose when one had to travel from a Waypoint to within a closed teleportation network. Because there were some closed teleportation networks, with numerous solar systems – sometimes even galaxies - all protected by one powerful defense system. These were the large areas controlled by major factions, and often each faction would only have a handful at most in each universe.

However, even among these closed systems, some places stood out: the heartlands of each faction. Primordial-1 and a huge area surrounding it was recognized as the heartlands of the Holy Church, and it was an area no god not part of the Holy Church could easily enter – not even other Primordials or those with equivalent strength.

Another well known was the Risen and the place known as the Ghostlands. The Altmar Empire had its Capital Cluster, as they called it, with most peak factions having something similar. But, there were two heartlands more protected than any others in the entire multiverse. Which was stronger, no one knew, but all knew it was a tie between these two:

The Automata Legion and the Endless Empire.

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These two factions stood at the apex when it came to defending their heartlands. This was for obvious reasons, as both had members they could absolutely not risk dying, and the entire way their societies and Paths worked just lent themselves to making sure they had incredibly safe home bases.

But... one could naturally not just teleport into these heartlands. One had to travel the final distance from the Waypoint to within the barrier themselves, and for security reasons, these Waypoints were always a good distance from the heartlands. Getting that last distance was usually not a problem... but that was only if no one interfered. Because if anyone did, things could get rough.

This was the exact challenge Vesperia found herself facing. She had appeared on the final Waypoint Planet before they would have to manually travel the rest of the way, but barely a second after she had appeared there... the world turned white. A barrier encased her as dozens of figures teleported all around, making sure she was safe as the entire planet below her exploded.

Vesperia barely saw them. A massive floating mothership and armies of Automata gods all descended upon her, ready to strike the moment she appeared on this Waypoint Planet. The only good thing was that there had been eleven total Waypoint Planets to pick between, meaning the Automata Legion had to be at all of them.

Meanwhile, the Endless Empire only had to show up at one.

The entire cosmos was set ablaze as the Automata Legion attacked. Vesperia was shielded within a pod as four True Royals took flight and escorted her toward the planet, teleportation not possible due to the interference of the Automata Legion. In the distance, she saw endless flashes of light as war raged. It was lucky that the Waypoint Planets around the Endless Empire were all artificially created and far separated from any others... for if not, then entire galaxies could have been snuffed out of existence that day. Vesperia had known this could happen but was powerless to do anything. All she could do was trust her sisters.

Ultimately, Vesperia entered meditation, knowing that the best she could do was remain calm. She faded out all the disturbances all around her as time passed. Approximately seven hours later, she felt herself be teleported, and she opened her eyes to see herself surrounded by divine beings. Her sisters – the other True Royals - among them.

It was only later she came to learn the details of the battle. More than six thousand gods of the Automata Legion had been slain, though they all knew it had little consequence besides the material cost of their bodies, as one never truly killed an Automata god just by destroying its vessel. No, the true victory lay in successfully escorting Vesperia safely into the heartlands of the Endless Empire. That they had already managed to destroy the mothership was a boon, but the Endless Empire did lose a Godqueen in return. An acceptable loss in their eyes.

The Automata Legion had known their chances of success were low, but they had tried anyway. The Endless Empire had shown up with nearly all True Royals. Being so close to their heartlands, they would gladly show up in force, which had resulted in the Endless Empire coming out on top big time, even if one did not include Vesperia in the equation.

In the end, it had been a relatively low-risk, high-reward strike from the Automata Legion.

Safely back in her homeland, Vesperia felt relief and a powerful sense of belonging. She was greeted by all of her sisters, their happiness obvious at finally seeing her return.

home, even if she did sense some faint hesitation from some of them. They celebrated for a while as they waited for more arrivals to come. Something they did after only a week.

Gods of the Vespernat Lineage had all felt the moment a True Royal had appeared. Once the news spread that she had safely returned to the Endless Empire, these powerful Hive Queens did not hesitate. Gods of all ranks, including Godqueens, entered the heartlands of the Endless Empire to greet the True Royal and swear their loyalty. There was no hesitation in their actions, no second-guessing. It was in their nature to recognize Vesperia, even if she was only C-grade.

After that, Vesperia still had one more important thing to do before her true work began.

Vesperia was escorted by the Odonstrom Hive Queen down into the deepest parts of the Great Planet known as Primordial-8. Some also called it the Great Hive Planet, but its official designation was still Primordial-8, following the same naming convention as every other Great Planet in the first universe.

“Are you certain you find yourself ready?” the Odonstrom True Royal asked.

“Yes, there is no cause for concern,” she answered without hesitation. “I already feel the call and their desire.”

“Very well, I shall not question you then, sister,” the Odonstrom Hive Queen smiled, looking relieved.

“I still detect hints of doubt in your demeanor, sister. From some of the others, too. How come?” Vesperia questioned the far older god.

“It is hopefully of little concern, but it is perhaps still pertinent to bring up. Even with your assurances, there is still some doubt about you due to the matters of your birth. Your circumstances are unique, and some fear that you may not truly hold the same allegiances as the Vesperia of old,” the Odonstrom True Royal sighed. “I know this doubt should be dispelled-“

“I don’t think it should,” Vesperia cut her off. “I am not entirely the same as other True Royals or the old Vesperia. But what changes I have experienced are not negative or even ones I find a need to hide. My allegiances also still lie with my Sire along with the Empire; I believe I have made this quite clear. Is this an issue for the council? Or do you not believe it proper I receive the Lineage Treasures?”

The other True Royal sighed. “Perhaps... perhaps not. But even if there is some doubt, there is no doubt about your identity as a True Royal, and thus you can naturally claim your birthright.”

“Thank you,” Vesperia nodded as they continued without exchanging words. They were heading to the innermost armory of the Endless Empire, where the treasures of her Lineage resided. Items that only the True Royals of the corresponding Lineage could make use of. In her case, Vesperia already knew what awaited her:

The Vespernat Royal Diadem and the Vespernat Hive Core.

The diadem would increase the effectiveness of all her abilities by a non-insignificant amount, especially when it came to leading her hive and controlling her subjects. It was also a massive, near-inexhaustible energy source and a treasure granted directly by the system in the first era. The Vespernat Hive Core was a powerful treasure she could absorb that would expand her inner world significantly while also making the energy within far more potent. The diadem had been a treasure used by the original Vesperia, while the Hive Core had come from the body of the dead Vesperia. These two would not make her much more powerful as a warrior but assist her tremendously in rebuilding the Vespernat Lineage.

As a monster, Vesperia could not use normal equipment, but these treasures still worked for her. Throughout the eras, they had also both been nurtured by the Endless Empire. This had not only been done out of faint hope a Vespernat True Royal would appear either. As long as they kept the Records of the Vespernat Lineage alive, there was hope that a new True Royal would be born through a miracle. It did prove to have done nothing, as the miracle had been her Sire, Jake, even if some of the other True Royals remained skeptical.

Vesperia knew what many of them hoped for.

They hoped that with time, Vesperia would “come to her senses” and disregard where she came from. That she would truly embrace her fate as a member of the Endless Empire – and only the Endless Empire. She also knew why.

The Endless Empire was not allied with any Primordials, as they did not believe any of them could be trusted. The twelve Primordials had been the first gods, and they had an... odd relationship with one another. They often fought and opposed one another, but never had there been a deadly conflict between them. Even when Sanguine and the vampires arose, and several Primordials came for the first vampire, the Malefic Viper did not interfere despite his close relationship with Sanguine. He stayed out of it and saw Sanguine fall, not fighting his fellow Primordials.

Vesperia knew that Jake was not the one they had a problem with. It was the being behind him. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, after all, and did anyone truly believe he was indeed making his own decisions solely? That the Malefic One was not the one pulling the strings?

No, none believed such a preposterous thing to be possible. Vesperia also knew trying to convince them otherwise would be useless, and she didn’t want to try even if she

thought she could. She did recognize she was biased on the matter, and her opinion thus held less sway, so she would hold her truth to herself.

Because no matter what people thought... Vesperia had felt the Records of her Sire. Felt his will and that which dwells within. Perhaps the Malefic One could manipulate her Sire, even fool him into doing things against his own interest... but she did not believe even a Primordial could ever control him.

Some monsters could simply never be tamed.

"We have arrived," the Odonstrom Hive Queen said.

The two of them found themselves standing before a large crystal structure with items suspended within. The diadem and the Hive Core. Vesperia felt them both pulsing with power, and the other True Royal looked at her with worry.

"They have been empowered through the ages... neither is to be taken lightly. The Vespernat Diadem especially. The energy had been overwhelming to even the S-grade Vesperia back in the first era, and alas, you still only find yourself in C-grade."

"I shall be fine, of that, I assure you," Vesperia nodded as she walked forward. The two artifacts reacted to her mere presence, and with a thought, the crystals that not even weaker gods could scratch willingly shattered. The full auras of the artifacts were released as they flew toward Vesperia.

She opened her arms and welcomed them both. The diadem landed on her head, and the Hive Core melted into her chest as she felt the massive influx of energy. She felt the overwhelming power course through her body, and Records impacted her soul as she stood with her eyes closed.

Vesperia had to endure the Records... but one had to remember. She had been connected to a presence that surpassed any other she had ever felt, and compared to that, all else just paled. There was still a lot of energy to tame, but she only took four hours before she opened her eyes once more, the golden jewels on the diadem lighting up and her inner world expanding.

"That... you truly surpassed my expectations, sister. I believed it would have taken you far longer... even if you are far from making full use of both treasures, the mere fact you successfully bound them is cause for celebration," the Odomstrom Hive Queen said with genuine happiness.

"We talked earlier about how the circumstances of my birth may impact me negatively... but did the council ever consider that it was just the opposite?" Vesperia questioned her fellow True Royal while deep in thought.

“What do you mean?” her sister asked, Vesperia’s next words simply too foreign for her to consider.

“That my Sire’s involvement in my birth is naught but a boon,” Vesperia smiled.

She did know her words could be viewed as potentially blasphemous, as how could the Origin of a True Royal possibly be improved? Vesperia also knew that these words were not ones her Sire hoped she would speak.

For it would no doubt only fan the flames of desire the Endless Empire held to have him join the Grand Hive proper and discard his involvement with any Primordials.

A thought Vesperia did have to admit she found appealing, no matter how impossible she knew it was.

For just as some monsters could never be tamed, some became restless if anyone attempted to tie them down.

She did not believe a restless Sire would do the Endless Empire any good.

“Well, that went terribly,” Caleb sighed as he leaned against the broken wall of the castle, his armor entirely burnt away, leaving him nearly naked. He luckily had an extra pair of trousers, for if not, he would indeed have been.

“We were careless,” Matteo – his second-in-command – agreed.

“Yeah,” Caleb nodded. “Good job on keeping the damn Demon Lord still while we dealt with the two Tower Demons.”

Matteo smiled lightly but did not say anything. In the fight, Matteo had managed to trap the Demon Lord in a labyrinth of auditory illusions through his piano play and use of dark magic for over two minutes while the rest of the party killed the Tower Demons, which was why Caleb said he had done a damn good job.

The problem was that they had not done a good job overall. They had decided to go for only empowering two of the artifacts using the Secret Scrolls and moved to kill one of the Tower Demons while deactivating the Heart of the Demon Lord. However, even if they did that, the situation had turned south.

“I am glad we didn’t bring Nadia,” Matteo muttered.

“Yeah,” Caleb said as he stared from afar at where the Demon Lord had teleported away after they failed to stop him. Nearby he saw his two remaining party members walking over... and the ashes of the one who hadn’t made it, still scattering as the wind swept by, the entire castle having exploded after the Tower Demons died.

Caleb and Matteo were the only ones from the Court of Shadows in the party, as, quite frankly, full parties with only their members tended to suck. The three others had consisted of two of Jake's potential party members from the ceremony and one outside recruit poached by the Court.

The one who died had been one of the people wanting to join Jake. She had been a caster and was not fast enough when the Demon Lord powered up. The sword had been sent flying towards her while she was distracted, resulting in her body getting pierced through and her entire form destroyed in mere seconds. As a wood mage, she had been weak to fire from the beginning, and in the end, they had failed to protect her.

"Judge," the princess from the Altmar Empire – their healer - spoke as she walked over with the final member, a large beastkin warrior with a shield and a mace. Their tank.

The princess looked unsure as Caleb shook his head. "I shall inform her family. Are you willing to stay with the party even after this?"

It took the elf a few seconds as she nodded. "Ilieasia made a mistake, failing to even use her escape talisman... let us just hope we get a good replacement."

A cold response but one Caleb had expected. He knew the princess was, in part, there to stay close to him to get to Jake, and Caleb could live with that. Finding a healer like the Altmar princess for their party would be incredibly difficult under normal circumstances, so he welcomed making use of his big brothers... fame? Notoriety?

He wasn't sure, and it ultimately didn't matter. Caleb was in Nevermore to get stronger to keep his family safe, and he would not hesitate if making a harsh decision could help him and his own in the long term.

"Let us hope so, indeed," Caleb sighed as he looked onward. "Now, let's move on and recruit a replacement on the city floor. If not, I will send a request to the Court."

Caleb also hoped they could relax a bit on the city floor. Who knows, maybe they would even meet some friends?

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

Chapter 691: Nevermore: Work Ethic

"Good, now adjust the energy output... slowly... good, now do not forge- ah, you remembered, good. Alright... watch the outer circle, do not let the resonance fade. You

need to maintain the equilibrium until a perfect balance is struck. Keep it up now... good, good... and the final part... perfect!" Grand Elder Duskleaf said in a proud voice as he inspected the magical formation.

Meira was covered in sweat and felt exhausted, yet proud, as she looked at her creation.

The large formation stretched out in front of her, lighting up with intense mana from the nine catalysts acting as batteries. In the center of it, energy gathered, and a small hole had already been pre-dug.

"Now for the seed to be planted," Duskleaf said happily as Meira smiled and took out the tree seed from a lockbox she had left off to the side. It was a silverish seed, and she was excited to see it grow. Meira used mana to levitate it into the air and guided it into the hole. She proceeded to fill the hole with some special soil from afar, her Teacher standing encouragingly beside her. She then took out a watering can and took flight to get above the formation, and watered the entire thing. The formation responded to the magical water and pulsed with power as it fully activated and began feeding the seed energy.

"It's done," she smiled. She heard the sound of a notification as she gained a level, making her even more excited. One step closer to C-grade.

"Indeed it is," Duskleaf nodded proudly. "The Silverpine Astral Tree should be able to reach at least ancient rarity with this formation, so it is something to be proud of."

Meira smiled a bit and shook her head. "I am sure Teacher could do far better when he was my level."

"Master used to slap me in the back of my head for failing to produce a single epic rarity plant while in D-grade," the old god chuckled.

"That's..." Meira said, fidgeting with her hands. She knew that her Teacher repeatedly said he wasn't that good at lower grades, but... she had a hard time seeing it. Because today, no one would dispute he was one of the premier alchemists in the entire multiverse. How could he possibly have struggled to produce products at epic rarity?

Seeing her doubt, Teacher shook his head.

"I told you already, talent is a bonus, not a requirement, and that is only in cases where the talent does not become a handicap. The most important thing in the multiverse is work ethic. Nothing else matters if you do not have a good work ethic," Duskleaf said. It was something Meira had heard many times before. She understood it from a logical perspective, but it was still hard to imagine. Could one really become a god just by working hard?

Everyone around her growing up had worked hard in the mines, day in and day out. They had toiled away endlessly to survive... but she did know why that didn't count. One still had to challenge themselves. Something her Teacher could help her do.

"But you still need to know what to work on," he continued, elaborating on her own thoughts. "If you decided to just replicate formation at or below your skill level over and over again, you will get nowhere. No, you need to constantly improve and challenge yourself. Without Master, I would have never even made it to C-grade. He was the one who guided me, gave me challenges, and whenever he felt I was stagnating, he gave me a push in the right direction. A guiding hand that made sure I would always face new challenges and be forced to improve. And I knew that he would have abandoned me without a second thought if I fell into complacency, for he did that with so many others who studied under him."

"I understand, Teacher," Meira said with a nod. She did not know if Grand Elder Duskleaf would also abandon her if he believed she was stagnating, and she did not intend to find out.

With Lord Thayne's true identity as the Chosen of the Malefic One revealed to all, Teacher had finally taken her as an official disciple and even given her a Divine Blessing. He had gone so far as to allude to him not having a Chosen himself and hinted at her potentially getting her Blessing upgraded if she proved herself worthy. Meira couldn't even think about becoming a Chosen as she was already overwhelmed by her current Blessing and elevated status.

No, no, she had something far less impactful she wanted to accomplish

Because... Meira had found her own goal. One separate from Lord Thayne and even her Teacher.

She wanted to free her clan.

Meira knew that to do this, she would have to borrow the status of her Teacher, but she also wanted to go there with her head held high. The most powerful people in the clan were C-grades, and she wanted to go there at C-grade too.

Her mother and siblings were still at the old clan based on what Izil had told her, and while some would call it an infantile dream, Meira really wanted to be the one to go and "save" them. She wanted to bring them to the Order or perhaps even claim the entire clan as her own to protect it. Something she likely could do right now... but she did not want to go before C-grade.

Meira wanted C-grade to be her "turning point," so to say. Even if she was no longer a slave, her profession and class both bore marks of her being one. Both made it clear she was still a servant. If all went well... then none of her evolutions would even hint at it.

She wanted to show up before her family proud of who she had become and not just her status as the student of the Grand Elder.

It was a small goal in the grand scheme of things... but it was perhaps the first goal she had set entirely for herself.

Her first goal of many, hopefully.

Sandy was sleepy, so Sandy slept a lot.

Sandy was sleepy because they had eaten too much and had a stomach ache.

Sandy had not moved from within the Order of the Malefic Viper since the ceremony.

Sandy would begin to feel better after a few days, only to eat again and get another stomach ache.

Sandy was caught in a cruel loop of consumption due to all the evil people having given Sandy too much stuff to eat during the ceremony.

Sandy was totally okay with the current situation they found themselves in.

So... having a regular day job kind of sucked before the system. At least most people seemed to think so. Not Jake, though. In fact, he had very much liked having one.

It had given him some kind of structure to his life. Wake up, shower, go to work, do the work, go to the gym, drive home, and relax until he had to sleep to get up for work the next day. This constant flow of everyday life had helped keep Jake together during the nightmarish years before the system.

He still recalled those days as... bad. It was only now, after a few years had passed, that Jake could truly understand how much life had sucked for him back then. How boring and meaningless the entire world had felt. Work had, ironically enough, allowed him to have something to focus on and get through the days until, finally, the initiation arrived, and color returned to his world.

One thing had stayed, though. Jake still liked to work on stuff, which was probably part of the reason he was good at alchemy. He still needed to always try and keep himself busy, and sitting still just never really worked for him. Jake would begin to feel restless if he did nothing for too long, so even when he was on "holiday" and visited his parents and Caleb, he still did some alchemy and helped train Caleb's shadow assassins here and there.

Minaga's City Floor gave him some flashbacks to those calmer periods of his life, both before and after the integration. Life was incredibly simple here on the city floor, and the

days blended together as the months passed. Jake just did alchemy day in and day out. Every “break” he took was going to one of the arenas and getting some points there.

Speaking of the arenas, as Minaga had said, then one could fight there once a day versus monsters. One could also fight other people, but it didn’t reward anything. If one could bet Minaga Coins in duels, that would have been a far too easy exploit.

Anyway, the daily arena challenge was quite simple. One would enter and be teleported into the middle of the arena, where a timer of one hour would begin. Monsters would then enter the arena, and as long as you killed all that were alive, more would come. This meant that someone more powerful would manage to kill far more monsters than anyone else. It also had to be mentioned that the arena was for individuals only.

After the hour was up, you would be rewarded with Minaga Coins based on the monsters you killed. Overall, Jake only saw this arena as some good exercise, and it helped him practice finishing foes faster. Sylphie and the Fallen King naturally went to this arena every day, and it had become their primary source of income. Both of them also sold stuff from within Nevermore to get more coins, as they were the slowest when it came to accumulating them.

As the Fallen King had complained, then it did seem harder for monsters to obtain coins compared to those with professions. The two of them could still do other stuff besides the arena, but it gave little compared to just crafting. There were different facilities in the city that one could work for by assisting natives with all sorts of tasks. The Fallen King had found one that asked for help with soul-related rituals that gave decent coins, while Sylphie helped craft natural treasures using her weird green wind. Jake had no idea how all that worked, but he let them do their thing to earn coins as best they could.

Dina was a bit of an odd one out in their party. She did not have a profession, only her Dryad race and Druid class, but that did not make her any less of a crafter. It was only on this floor that Jake learned Dina had an amazing technique to make what was effectively genetically modified plants. She would communicate with herbs to accomplish this, and through this, she created many different plants that Jake had never seen or heard of before.

Even if she used plants she already had before entering Nevermore, she could then sell these crossbreeds. However, Jake and she quickly discovered that if they used materials they had gathered inside Nevermore in crafting, the Brokers would buy their products for even more.

Speaking of the Brokers... Jake had no idea why they bought stuff for what they did. These Brokers were all cloak-wearing humanoid creatures that dwelled within many near-identical shops spread throughout the city. These Brokers could be spoken to and negotiated with, and Jake did see some people get away with more Minaga Coins than he would expect by virtue of good negotiation, so merchants did seem to have one advantage.

It had to be mentioned that skills did not really work that well, though. Illusion magic or any kind of mental magic was also not an option, as these Brokers had one tiny little detail about them that made it unfeasible for a C-grade to influence them:

They were all A-grades.

Why were they all A-grades? Well, it was likely to avoid people manipulating them with skills... so Jake guessed it made sense. Luckily for Jake, he never planned on manipulating them; he just sold his alchemical creations. Someone who could still kind of “manipulate” them was the final member of Jake’s party... because the old man had taken the coin lead by quite a margin through selling paintings. It turned out that creations with purely subjective values, such as works of art, were far easier to bullshit a high price for.

Jake was not jealous. Totally not. That the old man was only seven thousand coins off seemed totally fair. That Jake, who had also worked his butt off, was still thirty thousand short was not at all something to complain about.

Current Minaga Coins: 184,190/214,000

From the time they had entered Minaga’s City Floor till now, about thirteen months had passed, so they weren’t gonna break that record that was mentioned to them, that is for sure. This meant they had spent well over two years within Nevermore so far, with nearly half the time spent on this city floor. Jake would lie if he said he wouldn’t have preferred to do without... but the time was not entirely wasted.

Because it turned out that just grinding out alchemy products every day was quite good when it came to raking in levels.

****’DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 211 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

...

****’DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 224 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

****’DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 215 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

...

****’DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 221 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

Over this period, Jake had gained 14 Profession levels, which, if he had to say so himself, was pretty damn decent. The others had also grown over this time, and honestly, this floor did give Jake and the Sword Saint a good excuse to work on their professions while Dina leveled up her race quite a few times.

He had seen the levels slow down the more time passed, and he knew he would soon not get much more experience from just crafting, but that was honestly fine. Once he had enough Minaga Coins for his own toll, Jake had a date with a certain puzzle box he had received during his Chosen-reveal ceremony.

Overall, he would say things were going well.

However... one thing had left a sour taste in Jake's mouth. Ell'Hakan had appeared on the Minaga City Floor four and a half months after Jake and his party made it there – so they were well ahead despite entering at nearly the same time - and the current Leaderboard had not been updated, meaning Jake was ahead of him on points too. That had been sweet, but that taste of sweetness only made what happened next leave a far sourer taste.

The record to pass the Minaga City Floor had been broken.

Ell'Hakan had appeared on the floor and did not seek out Jake. He did not seek out anyone. Based on reports, he had simply listened to the rules explained by someone on the floor allied with him, nodded, and brought his entire party to one of the Brokers.

An hour after entering the Broker's store, he had left it, and he and his entire party had headed straight for the toll booth. They all paid their toll and moved onto the thirty-sixth floor right then and there, leaving before barely anyone knew they were there. Not even Jake heard they had arrived before after-the-fact.

Seventy-nine minutes. That was how long it had taken Ell'Hakan to pass the city floor.

Jake had cursed how the hell that was possible, only for Minaga to pop in, full of schadenfreude.

"Would you look at that, a dirty cheater complaining about another dirty cheater? So what if he found a loophole using his Bloodline? Do you think that should be banned? I could totally ban it from here on out because, you know, it's not like there are five more floors of my labyrinth, right? Surely, you would not consider using your bullshit Bloodline on these floors, right? That would be super hypocritical, wouldn't it?"

As much as Jake wanted to punch the four-eyed dungeon master, he could only grit his teeth and curse internally as he swore to make up for the lost time by utterly demolishing the remaining labyrinth. Ell'Hakan had taken far longer doing the prior labyrinth floors, so he hoped to catch up.

When it came to how Ell'Hakan had cheated, Minaga didn't say, but he did drop one hint.

"The Brokers ultimately decide what they buy something for... so if they for some reason think it is a good idea to buy objects for hundreds of thousands of Minaga Coins, then what can you do? Well, I could do something, but if I stop one Bloodline-powered exploit, I would have to stop all of them."

Jake once more did not want to argue that point, as he still felt like his Bloodline was a better cheat than Ell'Hakans. In fact, he refused to acknowledge any other Bloodlines could ever be superior overall. Sure, Dina's was better in a plant-filled environment, and Ell'Hakans was better on a fucking city floor, but Jake would reign supreme in the vast majority of situations.

Besides, Ell'Hakan not sticking around wasn't exactly a bad thing, as it meant Jake didn't have to bother even thinking about the guy. Instead, he could turn his attention to all the other familiar faces who had begun to arrive on the city floor, some of which he had already made contact with.

In fact, considering how long it took on average to gather all the Minaga Coins, Jake had a feeling they had quite a reunion on their hands.

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

Chapter 692: Nevermore: Earthly Reunion

"I already told them to go fuck themselves," the short-haired woman said with a shrug. "Turns out that when the big boss is backing you, everyone else also just backs down. Funny how that works."

"My interpretation is that you just like to create chaos and political uproar," Jake grinned.

"Who gives a shit?" Carmen said, clearly not caring much.

"Well, not me in particular," Jake shrugged as he looked at the pugilist that had come by to visit. This was not her first time coming by, either, as she had barged in – or at least tried to, only to be stopped by a system-made barrier – the day she arrived on the city floor.

Through his sphere, he also saw others slowly making their way over to their chosen meeting spot, with the next to arrive likely being the Sword Saint.

"Davian is still being a bitch complaining about people talking," Carmen sighed, clearly annoyed as she looked at Jake casually mix some stuff into the cauldron. She herself was also fidgeting with some weird stone figurine in her hand.

"Shouldn't the talk have died down by now? What are they even saying at this point?" Jake asked, not caring overly much about what people were saying.

"It's quite romantic, actually," an old man said as he appeared in the doorway. "A real Romeo and Juliet tale. Two souls from opposite sides of a conflict, their love seeking to overcome even the will of the gods. I am sure books of such a forbidden love shall be written."

"Hey, old man, wanna test how strong those bones of yours are? The ones in your face in particular," Carmen shot back as she turned to him.

"No, I am quite confident my feeble old bones are not fit to match the fist of a Runemaiden," the Sword Saint chuckled. "And would it lighten your mood to know this rumor is not exclusive to you two?"

"Oh?" Jake asked, confused. He had to admit he was not up-to-date on the latest gossip, but considering the old man nearly had enough Minaga Coins for his toll, he seemed to have some more time.

"An even more unbelievable and romantic tale," the Sword Saint said as he went over and took a seat. "Imagine the scene. Two lovers even before the initiation, but in the final moments before the universe changes, one of them sadly perishes... only for the system to arrive and allow them to return to life. Both are thrust into their own Tutorials, neither aware of how the other is doing or even that they live... but the moment they arrive back on the same planet, they find themselves part of warring factions, with one now even a Risen."

"Wait," Jake said, but the Sword Saint raised a hand.

"Could you imagine the pain these two poor souls must feel? To finally be reunited, only to discover their love is forbidden. Even so, it refuses to fade, no matter how they try... and when they once more encounter each other within Nevermore, free from the oppression and influence of their factions, love blossoms stronger than ever before," the old man, spinning quite the tale.

"You can't be serious, right?" Jake questioned, knowing who he was talking about.

Smiling, the old man pulled out a painting from his spatial storage. Jake looked at it for one moment as he nearly choked and momentarily lost control of his mana.

The painting depicted two people Jake knew quite well. One was an extremely handsome man with loose robes and deep blue eyes. He had a white rose in his hand as he held it out in a romantic gesture while staring intensely into the eyes of the other person across from him. Opposite stood a pale man with hesitation in his eyes, looking shy as he held a black robe behind his back, his clothes also halfway undressed for some reason.

Who else could the painting depict but Jacob and Casper? Highly stylized versions of them, anyway.

"You seriously painted that?" Carmen asked in disbelief.

"Naturally," the Sword Saint nodded proudly.

"It's pretty good," she nodded.

"Seriously?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

"What? I may be a brute, but I can appreciate good art when I see it," Carmen shrugged.

"It's practically fanart," Jake protested, pointing at the painting as he turned to look at its painter. "And why the hell did you even paint that to begin with? Too much free time?"

"For the Minaga Coins, of course," the old man answered, flashing a large smile.

"Recently, paintings on this topic have been trendy, and the Brokers gladly buy them for high prices, especially as the demand is high while the supply is low. Being a first-mover in the market has already been a big advantage."

"How bloody bored are people?" Jake had a damn hard time understanding. "I would ask if people also wrote fanfiction, but from your smirk, I am just going to assume the answer is yes... how the hell did that rumor even begin?"

"A very good question," the Sword Saint nodded. "It would have had to be someone from Earth to know about their relationship before the system. Additionally, they must have started this rumor and helped perpetuate it for some tangible gain, would they not?"

"Are you for real?" Jake said, his mouth open as Carmen giggled.

"I gotta admit, old man, you are far more entertaining than I first give you credit for," she said, still looking at the painting.

"Pretty sure you even painting that qualifies as blasphemy. Also, isn't the Risen and Holy Church pissed? Oh, and why the hell did none of them mention this is going on?" Jake questioned.

"When did you last talk to either of them?" the old man asked.

"About... two weeks ago, I would say?" Jake said.

"Well, that answers it then. These rumors started only ten or so days ago and have been spreading like wildfire since, with the prices still spiking. They should reach a zenith within the month, and hopefully, I should be able to collect the final coins by then. Or at least get very close," the Sword Saint explained. Original content can be found at *novel•fire•net*

"You think that painting can fetch that much?" Carmen asked.

"Of course not," the old man shook his head. "I have a collection that I happened to coincidentally pre-prepare."

"You know what? We should change the topic, as the two main characters of your head-canon are nearly here," Jake gave up as he didn't wanna discuss the topic more. Casper and Jacob were indeed arriving within the minute. Considering the two were not walking together when they arrived at the hotel, Jake did find it suspicious that they arrived within thirty seconds of each other.

Maybe there was something to those rumors after all... not.

Jake heard them talking in the hallway as they walked over, quite loudly too.

"I swear if I ever find the guy who spread this bullshit..." Casper spoke loudly from outside. "And you said you tried to kill the rumor?"

"That I did, and there was some effect for a while, but not much. At this point, I fear that denial will only strengthen the delusions of those who have chosen to believe the rumor," Jacob said, his voice full of hopelessness.

"Lyra is pissed, just in case you were wondering," Casper kept complaining. Jake looked at the old man as he lifted a finger to his lips and shushed, getting a muted giggle out of Carmen. She enjoyed this far too much.

When Jake saw them enter, he also couldn't help himself.

"The loverboys arrive," Jake announced them loudly as they walked in together. "Coming from a date?"

"Very funny," Casper stared daggers as he also saw Carmen. "Shouldn't throw stones when you live in a greenhouse. Aren't there also rumors about you two?"

"It's stones in a glass house," Jacob sighed. "And at least there is some partial truth to that rumor, right?"

“See, now you make me want to punch both of you in the face,” Carmen smiled as she looked at Jacob. “You especially, Augur of Cons.”

“The Holy Church is not a con,” Jacob shook his head.

“Sure, and the Primordial Church is not a cult of fanatics,” Carmen snorted. “Let’s not beat around the bush; the Holy Church is a fucking meatgrinder of souls to fuel the Holyland, nothing else, nothing more.”

“Now, let’s not get all political here,” the Sword Saint shook his head.

Yeah... Carmen did not like Jacob. Jake couldn’t really blame her, either. Had Jake not known Jacob before the system, he too would be far less inclined to engage with the Augur.

“Besides, more people are coming,” Jake commented as he saw two others approach. Caleb would naturally also participate in their little meeting, and he had even brought along Maria, who Jake hadn’t met up with before. He did know she had arrived on the floor, having gone to the ceremony at the Order and all, but that didn’t mean he expected her to participate.

One could say many things about Minaga’s city floor – not many of them kind – but it was certain that it functioned as a nice gathering spot of geniuses. The record set by Jake’s party had even been broken about eight months back by a group from the United Tribes, led by a beast that reminded Jake of the Great White Stag.

Caleb and Maria soon joined them as they all greeted each other. The two of them had both only done the Demon Lord empowered with one artifact, making them get mocked a bit, while everyone else present had done it with all three on full power. Jake was kind of amazed the Holy Church had done it, considering Jacob was not a fighter, but he had shared that it was perfectly doable with Bertram able to revive. Having a guy who could use ultra-powerful items that would blow him up after use was quite an advantage, and Jake still remembered that Holy Sword during the fight with the Monarch of Blood.

It was good to finally catch up with everyone, despite it not being that long for many of them. Jacob did feel a bit out of place at times, but he took the constant jabs at the Church with grace, recognizing the faction was problematic.

A lot of blasphemy was definitely going on, that was for sure.

On a side note, this get-together was pre-integration Earthlings only. Sylphie and the Fallen King would not join them, partly because they were busy gathering more Minaga Coins to catch up but also because they wouldn’t fit in. Matteo had also rejected the invitation due to not fitting in, with Bertram not going as he wanted to focus on gathering Minaga Coins.

Someone that didn't care about failing to fit in was the last person who was about to arrive.... someone Jake had not at all expected would actually bother. It was the healer that had mysteriously disappeared from Earth only to reappear at Nevermore with the Dao Sect. He had arrived with a party that was not only hailed as real contenders for the top spot but had even broken the record of the group from the United Tribes, making them the current record-holders.

He was naturally talking about Eron, the last person invited. Arnold would also have been, but he had yet to reach the city floor. Jake only heard about that group from scouts placed by the Court of Shadows, and the weird void party apparently stopped on every single city floor for quite a while and engaged with the Challenge Dungeons there before moving on. An odd strategy, but the entire theme of Arnold's party was being weird as fuck, so it tracked.

Jake kept an eye on Eron through his sphere as he walked towards the large hotel room they had booked. He looked the same as before and did not wear much equipment, based on what Jake could see. The moment he entered the hallway leading to the room, Jake felt something he had not felt for a while bubble up from deep inside of him. He frowned as he suddenly began to feel... hungry. Famished.

When Eron appeared in the doorway, Jake had to restrain himself as he nearly instinctively jumped the healer. Jacob went to greet Eron, but Jake remained seated as he clenched his fists, suppressing himself.

Fuck... Jake cursed the curse as he took a deep breath and forced down the feeling. He knew where it was coming from too. As the wielder of a cursed weapon, one he had even tethered to his soul, it was natural to be influenced by it... but this was a first. Because looking at Eron, he felt an overwhelming sense of gluttony.

Eternal Hunger could smell the feast before it, and it wanted to dine.

"Are you okay?" Caleb asked Jake as everyone turned to look at him.

"Yeah..." Jake said with a sigh, returning his senses to reality. Eron stood not far from him and smiled as he stretched out a hand.

Jake controlled himself enough to extend a hand and shake it as Eron raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Your control of the curse is... impressive."

"Curse?" Casper practically jumped. "Oh, fucking hell, you are still walking around with that?"

"It's a great weapon, just a bit hungry at times," Jake defended himself, having properly reined in Eternal Hunger. The curse was still lurking, but Jake was no longer filled with the same sense of starvation. Now it was just a slight buzz telling him to pounce - that a wellspring of vital energy stood before him, reaching levels Jake could not even properly

understand. Jake did wonder... if Eron had addressed his weakness to soul attacks, was he truly invincible unless some utterly overwhelming force appeared? Because as things were now... Jake got the feeling he wouldn't be able to do much to Eron, and he wondered if anyone else at their level could. Shit, he reckoned that the overpowered healer could have potentially soloed the Demon Lord at full power alone. It would have taken a damn long time, but it should be possible. This feeling did make him uncomfortable, but he knew Eron could not truly be invincible.

There must be a poison I can make, Jake told himself as Casper spoke once more.

"It's a fucking Sin curse; the longer you keep it with you, the more it will embed itself in your soul until one day it becomes a part of you so significant you can no longer cut it out without severely hurting your Path permanently," Casper explained, trying to be helpful. "As your resident curse expert, I would bloody know."

"Well..." Jake shrugged as he took out Eternal Hunger. Casper looked at it for one second before face-palming.

"Fucking lunatic."

"I shall take that as a compliment," Jake smiled as he put the weapon away and turned his attention back to Eron. "I did not expect you to show up."

"Why not?" Eron asked with a raised eyebrow and a smile.

"You disappeared from Earth without anyone knowing what happened, only to show up here with the Dao Sect, a notoriously recluse faction. A faction I know is big on cutting out your prior life and dedicating your entire being to your Path," Jake pointed out.

"I must admit I also find it... odd. They are isolationists by default," Jacob commented.

"So does the Holy Church wish to brand itself, yet you, Augur, find yourself in the company of a Runemaiden of Valhal, a Judge from the Court of Shadows, a mercenary in the service of Gwyndyr, the notorious Chosen of the Malefic Viper, a Transcendent blessed by Aeon, and finally a student of the Dao Sect. Why is that, Augur?" Eron asked.

Jacob narrowed his eyes. "We are in Nevermore... and I have been given certain freedoms due to my position and what they expect of me."

"Then, perhaps I find myself in a similar situation," Eron nodded, not sharing further.

"People will still talk," Jacob pointed out.

"If mere words can sway one's Path, then you have far to go," Eron shook his head. "The opinions of others are of no consequence. Missing a meeting with all of my fellow Earthlings would only be a cause for regret."

"Some of us do have to consider the impact our actions have on others," Caleb pointed out. "Not everyone can act carefree."

Jacob nodded to that. "True. The reason I am here is that out of everyone, I have the easiest explaining my actions. I am an Augur, and my Path is to help others find their Paths. For me to talk to anyone and everyone is expected, and many believe I am meeting you all to try and bring you onto a Path aligned with the Holy Church."

"Hey, I have a better reason," Jake protested. "I don't really care."

"Perfect argumentation," the Sword Saint chuckled.

"I'm just a mercenary who was hired to be here if anyone asks," Maria shrugged.

"And I am here because this was simply where my Path took me," Eron finally smiled as he took a seat before turning to look at Jake. "Now, pray tell, how is our dear small planet doing these days, World Leader?"

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Chapter 693: Nevermore: Agree To Disagree

"Earth?" Jake questioned as he responded to Eron. "Pretty sure it's still there. Was the last time I checked. Speaking of, how did you even leave the ninety-third universe? The Dao Sect does not strike me as the kind of faction to have blessed beasts capable of setting up a formation capable of teleporting anyone to another universe."

"It was not beasts, no. I was invited by a temple that had prepared a teleportation circle for them to leave," Eron answered.

"A temple?" Jake questioned as he looked at Jacob and Caleb. "Was there a faction capable of constructing a cross-universe teleportation circle we didn't know about?"

"I never heard of it," Caleb shook his head, Jacob also looking unsure.

"You said it yourself; the Dao Sect likes its isolation. Earth is far bigger than any of us had time to truly comprehend, so is it truly that odd that some would have been hidden

from sight? They never claimed a Pylon or engaged with anything system-related. They simply stayed at the old temple they had always lived in and, with guidance from the Dao Sect, constructed a way for them to join the faction properly,” Eron explained rather forthcomingly.

“I have been wondering, how is this Dao Sect related to those following similar ways of life to their beliefs before the system?” the Sword Saint asked.

“As I am sure you all know, Records bleed through to a new universe even before the integration. It often ends up slightly warped due to the change in natural laws from an integrated and a pre-integration universe, but the influence is still stark. We see this with many religions and the Holy Church, but also with places like Valhal and entities such as Yggdrasil being known names even before the system integrated us. For the Dao Sect to also be present is only to be expected,” Eron gladly continued to explain.

“Huh,” Carmen said.” Not gonna lie; I never even bothered thinking about it. But I guess it does make sense the Holy Church inspired those annoying fucks that go around knocking on people’s doors at all times of the day, wanting you to join some shitty cult.”

“Records of Valhal created ripples that gave birth to pillaging rapists that raided the innocent all across the globe,” Jacob shot back.

“While the Holy Church taught us the goodness of burning women at the stake,” Carmen scoffed.

“Hey, they never changed that mindset,” Casper chimed in, throwing Jacob a glance. “They still want to purge everything that doesn’t fit their mold.”

“That... I can’t argue against,” Jacob sighed.” The attitude towards what the Church calls corrupted enlightened is not something I am a fan of.”

“Also, I never said Valhal were the good guys. Let’s not kid ourselves; all our factions fucking suck. Well, maybe not the Dao Sect, as I don’t know anything about them, but look at the rest of us? Evil snake god cult, assassin cult, death cult, “holy” cult, fighting cult, mercenary cult... actually, I guess the old man is the only one not part of any damn cult. Aeon doesn’t have a cult, right?”

“No cult, as far as I am aware,” the Sword Saint chuckled.

“But they do have fanatic fans of his watches. You know, the kind to buy an expensive watch and then somehow make the fact that they own that watch become their entire personality,” Jake pointed out.

“So, still kind of a cult,” Carmen nodded.

“Touche,” the old man shook his head, taking the joke in strides.

"It is also a bit rude to call the Order of the Malefic Viper an evil snake god cult," Jake protested in jest. "It's an Order, not a cult."

"The least orderly Order I know of," Jacob cut in. "There is little control and support embedded in the organization's structure. Perhaps it is good for the powerful, but the weak see none of this so-called order."

"While the Holy Church only sees control of everyone," Jake shook his head.

"Not entirely. Look at me, I am here right now, and if anyone in this room was part of the Church, you too would have immense freedom. Just not absolute freedom. There would still be consequences, expectations, and responsibilities, but is that really so big of a sacrifice? That you feel slightly inconvenienced at times to bring peace to a trillion living souls who were less fortunate than you? To them, your freedom becomes their fear, while the Church's control becomes their safety," Jacob shot back as he continued.

"Is the Church perfect? No, far from it, but the multiverse is a wholly flawed place. There is no such thing as perfection, just making the best of a given situation, and I believe the Church will bring the most good for the largest number of people. Even if it does mean that sometimes sacrifices have to be made... sacrifices nobody at the Church like to make but still sees the necessity of making. I wish it was not so, but the multiverse does not allow it to be otherwise, partly because of the uncontrolled freedom and selfishness of others."

"Wow, you really are here to try and recruit us, huh?" Carmen raised an eyebrow. "It may just be me, but I would rather struggle for myself than be a comfortable slave."

"They are not slaves, and you have the privilege of being who you are. We all do. You can't expect everyone to be like us or expect them to turn their entire lives into one long struggle," Jacob shook his head. NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON [novel♦fire♦net](#)

"Neither can you expect me to struggle to make them comfortable," Carmen didn't let up.

"We are getting very political again," the Sword Saint cut in once more. "But do let me offer some words from someone who has spent his entire life training and managing a large organization... it is hard. You can't make everyone happy all the time, and in the end, it is rare that anyone can say what the right choice is when a hard decision is made. The same is true for the factions we belong to. They are all flawed in their own ways, and we can argue from now till we get kicked out of Nevermore and never agree. Ultimately we belong to factions or have backers that fit who we are as individuals, and isn't that as close as we can get to finding our perfect personal factions?"

Jacob and Carmen seemed to listen to the old man as they nodded tentatively and let the topic drop as Jake shrugged.

“Or, if it isn’t perfect... just get strong enough to change it for. Make it your own version of perfect. The Holy Church does what the Holy Church does because that is what the Holy Mother and the Holy Pantheon want. Reach a level where you can stand beside them and actually change shit if you want to make things better. It may take a while, but shit, if you’re aiming for godhood, you literally have forever,” Jake said in a relaxed tone.

“You speak of godhood so casually,” Jacob shook his head. “Statistically speaking, the chances of any one of us even reaching S-grade is incredibly low, much less godhood. While it may be your dream and goal, I don’t believe it is healthy to anchor the changes you wish to bring about on the assumption you will ascend to divinity.”

“Sounds like the words of a pussy with no self-confidence,” Carmen scoffed.

“Or a realist with a clear head and no delusions,” Jacob shot back.

“To even reach for godhood is to not only delude yourself into grandeur but truly embrace that delusion... enough to one day make it into reality through your own actions,” Eron finally chimed in after being satisfied just listening in for a while.

“Jacob, I do believe you misunderstand some things,” the Sword Saint shook his head. “To many of us, godhood is not truly a goal, just an inevitable consequence of us walking our Paths. Either we will become gods walking this Path, or we will die with no regrets as we lived true to ourselves. At least, that is how I feel.”

“Then what is your goal?” Jacob asked the old man.

“To live up to the name I have come to embrace. To truly make myself worthy of the title of Sword Saint,” he smiled.

“And what will you do with all the power you accumulate through that pursuit?”

“That... doesn’t matter. Not truly. I do not gain power to use that power for anything in particular. I gain power to overcome my own self. To reach further and beat myself over and over again. I do not dwell on the why; I simply focus on the how. I have an innate desire to improve... to change. Not changing would be denying who I am. Getting stronger is not something you have to question. It simply happens as that is the natural course of things,” the Sword Saint explained.

Jake listened in and nodded to himself. He saw Carmen be the same. This reminded Jake of one of the conversations he had with Villy about how important internal motivation was. To have that innate drive to progress, no matter what. Thinking about why you wanted to get stronger was a waste of time in Jake’s mind.

“I guess we will just have to agree to disagree,” Jacob sighed. “I just don’t see the meaning in having power if you have nothing you want to accomplish with it.”

No one else commented on the matter after that, as the topic once more changed. Eron finally got to ask some questions about Earth, and it became clear he truly had no idea what was going on. He had only heard that Jake had become World Leader and found the notion amusing. The guy was also surprised when the Sword Saint explained the council they had established.

It also became obvious Jacob did know everything that was going on, proving that the Holy Church likely still had a lot of people on Earth yet to be weeded out. Spies left behind to keep an eye on things, or devout individuals who failed to evacuate in time and now hoped to make themselves useful for the Church. Yeah, Jake really didn't like the Church either.

Catching up with everyone was nice, even if some people were a bit withheld when it came to giving information. Jacob and Eron didn't share that much of what they had been up to, only giving snippets here and there. Casper, on the other hand, gladly told them all about how they were growing New Yalsten. The realm was also still attached to that meteor just flying through space towards who-knows-where. Not even Casper was sure exactly where they were going, but it sounded like they had some kind of target destination.

Jake already knew what Maria and Caleb had been up to, but they still told a bit more, especially about their parties and how Nevermore had been so far.

The restrictions on sharing information about Nevermore only applied to people who had not passed a floor yet, so they could all discuss their journey through the mega-dungeon as much as they liked.

Jake found it interesting hearing about how everyone had done the different floors so far. It was also good to hear that they unanimously despised that one horrible water floor, with Maria especially complaining about how shit it was. Being a fire archer... yeah, Jake totally got her.

When they reached the topic of Minaga's Labyrinth, they naturally couldn't avoid the topic of the dungeon master... and this was where Jake learned they truly had different experiences with Minaga.

"I believe he is an element primarily made to cause confusion and add a challenge to this part of Nevermore. I am not entirely sure why it was judged necessary for him to be here... but I am certain there is a good one," Jacob muttered. "Also, he is clearly not just some C-grade Unique Lifeform."

"Minaga is just a dungeon master excited about his dungeon, and he is actively gathering feedback from those doing it. I can't see any problems with that," Casper shrugged. "Being excited about your own creation is not a crime, and the handiwork is honestly mind-boggling. I do also agree he is not a C-grade, and he is definitely a god

or very close to godhood. If not, making what of the dungeon we have seen so far would be impossible. Overall, I would say he is pretty damn great.”

“Minaga is quite the figure indeed,” Eron just nodded, not really saying more, though his subtle smile made it clear he knew more about the Unique Lifeform than he let on.

“Pretty sure the blue bastard has the ability to deal soul damage just by constantly talking,” Maria complained. “To make matters worse, my party leader decided to not engage with him at all, meaning he is just talking to us and not with us. Which results in him mainly throwing jabs and mocking all our failures.”

“For some reason, he kept referring to Matteo and me as the sneaky boys throughout the first three floors while also repeatedly alluding to me at least being better than a certain family member of mine. He even went on a whole rant about how nice it was that being a cheater wasn’t a hereditary trait,” Caleb said, more confused than anything.

“An interesting character that I must admit I do find amusing at times, though I do believe that is primarily because of a certain hunter on our team who has some good banter with the Unique Lifeform,” the Sword Saint shared with a chuckle.

“I think the live fight commentary was pretty good. He even managed to mimic the sound of those echo-y microphones. It reminds me of when I used to do boxing, and it was especially fun versus the Demon Lord. We had a damn good brawl, the two of us,” Carmen smiled.

“I think Minaga just wants to be entertained, not gonna lie,” Jake shrugged. “Trying to find logic in why he does what he does sounds like a waste of time. Also, live fight commentary?”

“Yep, it was pretty funny, and it honestly helped hype me up. Does that count as assistance? Also, only I could hear it, with not even my party members noticing a thing,” Carmen said, thinking a bit. “He definitely did seem willing to slightly bend the rules if it would create a more entertaining scenario.”

Remembering when Minaga began collapsing an entire floor on them to move on, Jake smiled. “Definitely does seem that way. Though there is also a sense of... balance to how he does things. Despite someone “cheating,” he does not directly interfere to stop that person or punish them. Shit, just look at Ell’Hakan cheesing this entire city floor.”

“True, I guess that is slightly commendable if infuriating,” Maria – one of Minaga’s biggest critics – agreed.

“Not sure I can entirely agree,” Jacob said, shaking his head. “The mist in the labyrinth makes sense to not allow groups to easily just blitz through, but I find it downright malicious that divination isn’t just hampered but turned downright detrimental. I had to

actively fight following my skills and instinct during the entire labyrinth, lest I would hurt my teammates.”

”Divination purposefully leading you down the wrong Path is just funny, not gonna lie,” Casper chuckled. ”Let me tell you, dealing with fucking seers and Augurs like you is the most infuriating shit when you are trying to make a dungeon with any kind of exploration or mystery. I can only praise fucking over classes like yours for once. You shouldn’t complain too much, either. The skills were useful on that damn harem floor, right?”

Jacob still didn’t seem to agree but kept his mouth shut as he knew he was outnumbered. No one else there liked divination.

”Speaking of the harem floor, you should really share your stories from there. Quite a few hijinks went on while on that floor,” Minaga chimed in as he stood upside-down on the ceiling.

”What in the actual fuck!” Maria screamed as she saw him, with Jacob also jumping back and Caleb halfway standing. The rest of them stayed seated as Jake looked up at him.

”The same joke of suddenly appearing mid-conversation again? Sooo original.”

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Chapter 694: Nevermore: A Truly Delusional Goal

Jake got quite varied reactions from the different people in the room upon joking with Minaga. Casper smirked slightly, Carmen gave the Unique Lifefrom a friendly wave, Caleb looked a bit worried, Maria was still not entirely over the guy just popping into the room, and Jacob looked more confused than anything. Eron and the Sword Saint both looked relaxed, with Eron bowing his head slightly, making Jake more sure than ever that the guy knew something they didn’t about Minaga.

”A good joke begets repetition,” Minaga answered, still standing on the ceiling. ”Plus, it works every time, so why not keep doing it? Just because you are never surprised doesn’t mean others can’t enjoy the experience.”

Throwing the startled people in the room a glance, Jake smirked. ”They sure look to be enjoying your presence.”

"Who doesn't feel happiness at my presence? Look at me, I am always in my own presence, and that has turned me into a very joyful and positive person," the Unique Lifeform joked as he stopped sticking to the ceiling and did a flip before landing on the floor.

"For the record, Casper and Jake are both correct when it comes to their assessments of me. I monitor how people do my labyrinth to see places I can improve, but also to get a feeling for the general power level of the generation. It's good research and valuable data," Minaga explained. "As for engaging with you while doing it... well, that is purely for entertainment purposes, of course! To add a unique flair of me to the experience, making my part of Nevermore truly stand out."

"Does it not hurt the competitive integrity of Nevermore that you so openly interfere and engage with the individuals doing the dungeon? Especially as you take a subjective disposition toward each party, either becoming a helpful or detrimental force?" Jacob asked, looking to have gathered some courage with all of them present. He still did look pretty damn nervous just asking that question.

"Eh, nothing is ever perfect," Minaga waved him off. "With how varied the multiverse is, creating a truly balanced playing field is utterly impossible, and adding myself and my mostly meaningless commentary is such a small factor it isn't worth mentioning. I have said it before, but if my talking and commenting are enough to throw you off your game and make you fail, then you have bigger problems. In other words, stop being so damn punctilious with how you think a dungeon is supposed to be run. The multiverse isn't fair, and neither is Nevermore. What it does give is mostly equal opportunities, and so do I."

"How is it mostly equal when some Paths are downright handicapped while others are assisted?" Jacob argued.

"How is it mostly equal when someone with a Bloodline or a Transcendent can walk in and ignore ninety percent of the challenges?" Minaga pointed out as he threw Jake a glance.

"How is it fair when some are not only immune but can use the fire energy of the Demon Lord to empower themselves?" he continued as he pointed at Maria.

"When others are borderline invincible, no enemy capable of breaking through their sheer level of durability or seemingly infinite health pool?" Minaga said, referring to both Carmen and Eron.

"Or... when someone is able to continuously resurrect a party member of theirs, allowing that party member to repeatedly burn their very life away to release suicide attacks over and over again?" Minaga finished, looking straight at Jacob.

"My point is that you can cry about equality or fairness from now till the end of the multiverse, and you will sound like an idiot all the way," Minaga smirked. "So embrace the unfairness and overcome it. That is how you become strong. I should know, seeing as I am a Unique Lifeform. I was born only being awesome and managed to overcome that fate to become amazingly awesome."

"I, for one, commend assisting dungeon engineers," Casper raised his hand.

"See, I have the crowd on my side," Minaga smiled confidently at Jacob.

The Augur seemed to consider the Unique Lifeform's words as he just sighed and nodded. "Very well... it is ultimately your creation." The latest_episodes are on the [movel.fire.net](#)

"Exactly. But if you do have any grievances, you can file a written complaint after you have completed Nevermore, and I will be sure to read it. I am not saying I will do anything, but I do read every written complaint we get."

"How many written complaints do you even get a year?" Jake questioned.

"Well, we don't really count them by the year... but at least one every million years or so," Minaga nodded. "People just can't be arsed to go through proper procedures to submit them, you know?"

"Pray tell, what are these totally reasonable procedures," Jake smirked.

"Well, first of all, you need a written letter, right?"

"Right," Jake nodded.

"And you need to go to Nevermore," Minaga continued.

"Reasonable."

"Exactly. Anyway, once at Nevermore, you just have to do the final stop of handing the letter to the Wyrmgod or myself," he finished. "See? Super simple."

"Definitely simple and easy," Jake grinned. "I am sure you two meet with anyone who comes by."

"Of course we do! Sheez, what do you take us for? We meet with all gods that come by within the very reasonable waiting time of a single second to a few eras, based on how much we like the god that showed up," Minaga finished with a resolute nod.

"You just said again you are actually a god," Jake pointed out.

"That I never did," Minaga outright denied.

"No, I am pretty sure you just implied it very heavily," Jake insisted.

"Circumstantial evidence is not solid proof of anything, and I deny all such accusations. It's all hearsay!"

"Not hearsay when you were the one who said it," Casper jumped in.

"Casper, I thought we were on the same team here," Minaga muttered, looking all sad.

"You're right," Casper nodded as he smiled before looking at Jake. "He is clearly not a god, and if you keep making such unfounded accusations, we will file an official complaint with the Order of the Malefic Viper based on your conduct."

"Very well, I shall detract my slander immediately," Jake went along with the joke as he stood up and bowed. "I apologize on account of my client – myself – and wish to settle this matter amicably."

"Apology accepted; I am glad we could reach a settlement," Minaga smiled wide as he clearly had fun. Still smiling, he looked around the room. "Anyway, are there more questions? If not, then we must get to the juicy bits..."

"You mean..." Jake began as the Unique Lifeform grinned.

"Time to discuss the wonderful harem floor!"

"Oh, the thirty-fourth floor?" Jacob began. "That one was quite interesting, and we-"

"-were fucking boring is what you were. You just made friends with everything that wasn't a demon or the Prime Consort, and that was it. I am not saying that wasn't allowed, just that it was thoroughly uninspired," Minaga said with disappointment, making Jacob smirk a bit as he lifted his hands defensively, not offended at all.

"Oh," Caleb sighed. "I guess ours was also pretty uneventful."

"You assassinated everyone and left the floor before anyone even knew you were there. You didn't even exchange a single word with any living being outside of that first demon," Minaga pointed out. "It was pretty damn good to see the sneaky boys strike like daggers from the dark."

"Well then, glad you liked it," Caleb smirked.

"Why the hell did we not do that? That would have been way better than trying to make friends with all those fuckers..." Carmen muttered in annoyance as she began to explain how they had done.

"You punched the first Mistress you met because she tried to flirt with you," Minaga said with a deadpan face.

"I thought she tried to attack me."

"She tried to hug you."

"Which can be constituted as an attack," Carmen smirked. "But, hey, things ended well, didn't they?"

With a light mood, they all shared their various experiences from there, with Carmen naturally going first. They had made the Second Mistress into the new Prime Consort and gained access to all the Secret Scrolls through that. Maria's team turned out to have a demon on it, and through some proper subterfuge and powerful illusion magic from this demon, they managed to convince the Prime Consort that the demon would be a better candidate as the next Demon Lord.

Only for him to end up in the same situation Jake was in: Poisoned with the intent to throw him into a ritual. The difference was that while Jake had resisted the poison, this demon hadn't, and the guy had been damn close to dying. Luckily they managed to save him in time and kill the Prime Summoner. All of the Mistresses and even the Guard Captain had witnessed the Prime Summoner try to sacrifice him, and the group managed to spin a tale where they had taken down the corrupt Prime Consort who wanted to replace the Demon Lord. From there, they were welcomed into the Demon Lord's castle as heroes.

Casper had a pretty normal experience. They had allied with natives from earlier floors and made some allies and enemies on the thirty-fourth, initiated a vote, and started an internal conflict that ended up creating enough chaos for them to get the Secret Scrolls and move on before a new Prime Consort was even elected.

When they finally got to Jake and his party... Minaga had a hard time holding himself back as the Sword Saint gladly narrated their tale. The Unique Lifeform jumped into the conversation to confirm all the stupid stuff that had happened and even praised the Sword Saint for properly understanding the assignment when the floor was called a harem. They also all had a good laugh when Minaga took over and narrated Jake's "flirting" with the Prime Consort. Jake had to threaten Minaga to stop the Unique Lifeform from sharing a recording of the entire scene, much to the disappointment of everyone present, especially Carmen and Caleb.

They continued to share some funny anecdotes before the attention turned to the last person in the room. Eron had been pretty silent, and the Sword Saint finally asked him directly.

"How did you and your party take on that floor?"

Eron just smiled lightly as he looked at Minaga. The Unique Lifeform seemed powerless as he sighed before speaking. "Well... the rules of the floor said you could not kill the innocents there... but... I guess the concept of death can have many interpretations."

"We did not kill a single entity on that floor," Eron smiled.

"Technically not," Minaga shook his head. "But is there truly that big of a difference between what you did and just killing them?"

"Yes, there is," Eron said, not a trace of doubt in his voice. "For they still live. Their sparks still burn... and do not try to convince me that the original dull flames of their souls had any more meaning than what they do now. They were aimless vessels from the beginning."

Minaga didn't really say more but seemed to have lost some of his enthusiasm. "What a bummer. Anyway, my objective here is done, and I guess I should leave you all alone again. See you all soon, and I hope you continue to enjoy your time in my little city!"

With that, he was just gone. Seeing as the Unique Lifeform had left, the others also soon began taking their leave, with Jacob leaving first. The Sword Saint followed soon after, with the others trickling out one by one until two remained.

Only Jake and Eron were left, and he knew that was no coincidence. Jake felt the gaze of Minaga still on them, but he threw a brief look toward the ceiling as he frowned, making the god back off. He seemed to understand Jake was about to say something he did not want to spread anywhere and respected that.

"I take it the gazes of all those curious are now dispelled," Eron said in a relaxed tone.

"Why did you come here?" Jake asked as he nodded to confirm. "You were less than interested in the actual meeting, and I don't believe you came just to learn about Earth."

"I do care about my home planet, and I am glad to see it doing well," Eron spoke as he leaned a bit forward and looked at the floor for a bit. "But you are correct. My primary reason for attending was not to learn of Earth or those we share a home planet with. I came to seek you out, and I would prefer for it to have been done under less suspicious circumstances than a one-on-one meeting."

"Why?" Jake questioned.

"You talked about goals for gaining power earlier... but none asked me," Eron smiled.

"Neither did you volunteer anything," Jake countered.

"True indeed... for my goal would perhaps be seen as more delusional than those of others," the other Bloodline Patriarch said as he changed the topic. "Have you read through the journal I gave you during the Treasure Hunt?"

"A bit of it, yeah," Jake nodded. He had to admit, most of it was just mumbo-jumbo, but some insights had led to significant improvements in his health potions.

"Have you shared it with anyone else?"

"No," Jake shook his head. Eron had given it to Jake, and sharing would have been pretty rude, as it was clearly personal insights.

"I see. Perhaps that is for the best, though I would have been curious what the Malefic One thought of my insights," the healer said, with a bit of regret.

"I can ask him next we speak," Jake shrugged.

"I do believe that would be for the best, but do also take this," Eron nodded as he took out another journal. This one was even bigger than the other one, and after Jake accepted it and flipped through a few pages, he frowned.

"What is this even? This isn't just soul magic... but...." Jake muttered.

"No, no, it is not," Eron nodded.

"What the hell..."

Jake kept flipping through as he tried to get an understanding of what the hell Eron was researching. The more he skimmed, the more perplexed Jake became.

"Every living being has a spark... even the Risen like your friend has one, though it is no longer a true flame. Yet it burns nevertheless. The problem lies in exactly this. My Bloodline allows me to see a spark – a representation of the vessel that holds the vital energy of all entities - but with some practice, I came to see more than just the vital energy. I could get glances at the soul, and only then did I understand why it was a spark. Because for there to be sparks... something has to burn."

Eron looked deep in thought as he continued.

"I saw a god after learning more of my powers, and the sparks of gods are truly different. Not just in intensity and power but on a purely qualitative level. They are far different than any grade evolution could possibly lead to, which made me question: what is this fundamental difference?" Eron began as he went over and flipped to a page in the large journal.

Jake stared at the drawn diagram there for a second as his eyes opened wide. "You're serious?"

"I am... and to do it, I acknowledge I may need all the help I can get, Harbinger of Primeval Origins," Eron said with a deep knowing smile. "Perhaps, this ability of yours will be key. For we will need things not within the purview of the system."

"This is beyond delusional... but..." Jake frowned more and more.

Eron truly did have a goal that was beyond what Jake had expected... what most expected. While Jake and the Sword Saint wanted to reach the apex of power through their Paths, Eron did not. His mind had been far more singular from the beginning, and he had just one goal:

"I want to protect life... to never see that spark extinguish. To see them capable of forever growing. I realized one enemy is more dangerous than any other to all but the gods. That is when I understood the fundamental difference between all other grades and godhood. We are mortals... they are immortal. Their sparks burn eternally, their Truesouls producing an infinite amount of fuel," Eron said as he took a step back and smiled widely with an almost fanatical look.

"I want to conquer the greatest enemy of all life in the multiverse... of all souls. I want to heal and cure the one ailment none but the gods can recover from, no matter how strong."

"Time..." Jake muttered.

Eron's goal was indeed that of a fucking lunatic...

He wanted to create a cure for mortality... or, at the very least, become able to heal away the march of time itself.

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

Chapter 695: Nevermore(not really): Newcomers To Earth

Holstred looked at the blue sky above as he felt the sunlight on his skin. The planet he now found himself on was a bit cooler than the one he had been born on, but not by a large degree. He had feared that the environment would have been unfriendly when he

was informed they had been "gifted" off to the owner of another world, but the climate was nice. Even those still in lower grades were comfortable.

Sighing, he turned to the woman who had just walked up beside him, and despite their situation, he failed to resist displaying a small smile. "How is everyone settling in?"

"Some better than others... the teleportation took a toll on those in lower grades, but the healers said that they just need time to recover," she answered as she took his hand and put it on her slightly bulging stomach. "We will be fine, okay?"

Holstred sighed again as he looked at his pregnant wife. "I know."

He felt her stomach before grasping her hand and squeezing it as they both looked at the sun together, and he couldn't help but remember better times. Times before they became slaves... a time before they had been given away to a powerful religious figure on another planet. At first, Holstred had actually hoped that leaving their home planet and the strained environment there could turn their fates for the better, but... now he doubted that.

Hearing their new owner was someone known as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had not meant anything to Holstred initially, as he did not know of this Malefic Viper they spoke of. Only later did he learn they would be under the rule of what was essentially the divine prophet of a god with a less-than-stellar reputation. That this Chosen was from an Order of poison alchemists. Learning that had sent a shiver down Holstred's spine.

I just hope my people can survive.

The world he and his family had come from hadn't been a paradise either, but... it had been the home. Their homeworld had been filled with strife for hundreds of years before the system even arrived, as war was a constant thing due to the three races being in neverending conflict. The human empire Holstred had been a part of had long been considered the weakest, with the dwarves and the Nirax – a scalekin race - both stronger. However, neither faction dared attack the human lands due to the fear of the other empire taking advantage of the opening. That was how a balance had been reached for centuries... until it was broken by the system initiation.

Holstred had been known as the Knight Commander in the lands of man. A grand title gifted due to Holstred's strength even before the initiation, and with the arrival of the system, he had continued to prove his excellence. He had done well in the Tutorial, gained a lot of levels, and returned to their home ready to fight for his empire... but things went downhill from the very beginning.

Their emperor died in the Tutorial, and nobody had any idea who would take charge. Individuals who had gotten powerful began to cause trouble as dozens of minor factions sprung up, vying for control, and all the old nobles rebelled with the intent to take charge. They all saw the arrival

of the system as their opportunity to become the new rulers of the empire, not even considering how that was only exacerbating the ongoing chaos.

They were fools who had never lived on the frontlines. Never known what a precarious state their empire had long been in. Unaware that should they show the slightest weakness, others sat ready to pounce.

So when the Nirax attacked, the expected happened, and they were not ready. Yet they fought back, Holstred on the frontlines from the very first day as even if the empire was not ready, he had been. War raged for nearly two years, with intermittent system events and World Congresses that only didn't end in bloodshed due to the rules of the system. If not for that rule, that entire event would have been a slaughter, and with the rules, it just turned into a shouting match that further fueled the hatred between the races.

Eventually, the nobles got their internal issues resolved, and a temporary emperor was selected. A fool of a man who had then entered an alliance with the dwarves to fight back against the Nirax. Things finally seemed to be turning for the better, but Holstred knew it was all a mirage. The nobles did not see that the dwarves just used humanity as a meat shield to fight the Nirax for them while sending their own elites into dungeons or to fight monsters. They grew their armies as humans, and Nirax died on the battlefield. By the time they did realize... it was too late.

As expected, the dwarves had turned on the human empire the second the Nirax were no longer a threat. What followed next had not even been a proper fight.

The human armies fell, their top general was slain, and in only a day, Holstred had gone from a war hero to the commanding officer of a broken army. He had made the difficult decision to surrender, hoping they could avoid a massacre. They did... but the cost was high.

Despite being in early C-grade, Holstred was made to sign a slave contract. What he did not know was that in the background, the dwarves had joined a divine faction from the wider multiverse and taken in their teachings while expanding. The dwarves had long been an ambitious race, and they were showing that now by wanting to go beyond their planet.

Now, with the war over, Holstred had hoped things would calm. However, the dwarves faced challenges from within, for despite them being the victors, many still sought the total destruction of the humans and the Nirax. The enmity was simply too deep... their hatred too ingrained.

In the final battle, the entire Nirax army was annihilated, and the majority of the population was wiped out, with the remaining survivors now thrown into ghettos and camps. Humanity had been slightly better off, but their lives were far from good. Yet many internal factions within the dwarven empire still wanted them wiped off the face of the planet.

Many were killed during this period. Dwarves were the superior race, and some enjoyed taking strolls in the slums, acting however they wanted toward the humans and Nirax both. Executions on the street were normal, and people getting dragged off to scout dangerous areas was commonplace. Everyone, even the dwarves, knew that this was not sustainable.

That is when a dwarf offered an alternative to genocide... to sell off the surviving humans and Nirax as slaves to other factions across the ninety-third universe. He quickly got support from the merchant families, and with the help of the divine faction, they began selling off slaves. Humanity and the Nirax were split into segments and sold off, with Holstred being placed "in charge" of this segment. Nearly a million people, ranging from F to D-grade, with only Holstred and a fallen noble – a former duke, now a Viscount according to the system - in C-grade.

"I should head back," his wife said after a while. Holstred still looked worried as she gave him a hug.

"We will survive, alright? I believe in you; we all do," she whispered into his ear as she gave him a peck on the cheek before she pulled back. "See you later, alright?"

Holstred nodded as he stayed there, waiting. He would have joined her, but he had been called here.

Still staring at the warm sun. Holstred felt another woman approach. It was the one with the scarred face... Lillian was her name, he believed. He had only seen her once, and that was when they first arrived on the planet, and she handled their initial welcome.

"Holstred?" she asked, looking down at an odd flat metallic object with glowing glass.

"That is I, Ma'am," he bowed.

After they had been brought to Earth only two days ago, they were put into temporary residences. In all honesty, the accommodations were better than the broken capital he had come from. The fact they hadn't been treated too badly yet was a bit of comfort. That their new owner and many of the people in charge were also humans helped ease his worry slightly too. Though, to be fair, every segment of slaves that had been brought to this planet were treated well, regardless of race.

Even so, he did not hold much hope. They had no incentive to treat their new slaves badly right now, but neither did they have any incentive to treat them overly well. Initially, treating your slaves well was also a common strategy for many noble families back in the old empire, as that ensured they worked well for longer, as they hoped that through hard work, the good days could return. Back then, Holstred had seen them as naive... now, he questioned if they simply never had a better choice.

"Follow me, please. Miranda is ready to see you," the woman called Lillian said, only briefly looking up from her odd magical device.

Holstred bowed and followed. Miranda... the one the Chosen had put in charge of his planet. At least, that is what he was informed before even arriving on this planet and by the woman walking ahead of him during the welcome. Outside of her identity as the current leader of the planet, she was also a direct disciple of the Verdant Witches, gods that made the divine beings the dwarven empire served pale in comparison.

It is time to learn of our fate, Holstred told himself, trying to stay stoic. He knew what this Order of the Malefic Viper often did with slaves, and he hoped his people could avoid that. All he could hope to do was try and appeal to the woman's humanity, though he doubted it would work. She was a witch, after all, a Path not known for mercy or kindness.

"Just inside," Lillian said after showing him the way to a large tent with several magical formations around it. Holstred once more bowed, knowing not to speak out of turn lest he offend her.

Entering the tent, he saw the woman in question sitting at a table with several stacks of paper in front of her. She seemed busy but instantly noticed when he entered and looked up.

"Ah, there you are. Holstred of the Silver Knights, was it?" the witch asked.

"I was once known as such, yes. How may I serve my new Mistress?" he answered after kneeling. In a situation like this, he did feel lucky that his father had made him learn etiquette and he had practiced meeting the imperial family of old. He also knew that showing full subservency would do him best... at least, he hoped so.

"No need for the courtesy. Please get up and take a seat," his new Mistress said, looking like she was already tired of his way of acting.

"I apologize if I caused any offense," Holstred tried again, but she once more waved dismissively.

"Please sit, then we can talk properly, alright?" she insisted.

"Yes," Holstred said, biting his tongue just as he was about to call her Mistress again. He went and sat in the chair directly opposite her, something he did find slightly inappropriate. It appeared he had much to learn about this planet's culture, and he truly feared he had offended her.

"So, I have read some basic information about where you came from, but my understanding is that you and the people with you are remnants of a fallen empire that lost a war. Is that correct?" the witch asked.

"It is as you say," he confirmed.

"Alright. We already sent some healers to talk to people and make sure they are handling everything okay, especially the children. While we are all far more resilient both physically and mentally than before the system, it is still better to find and treat cases of trauma early on rather than delay," she nodded. "We also interviewed a few people from the same planet as you, and they all spoke highly of you, Knight Commander. You at least seem to have earned their respect and led them well during this time of strife, and I hope you will continue to do that as the coming time may continue to be tumultuous."

"I shall do my utmost in whatever task we are given..." Holstred said, not sure what he should say. The first part about the children was also... was it to make sure they would be more productive? Did they need them to be clear-minded for some specific purpose?

"You aren't given any tasks per-se. But you are given choice," their Mistress said as she cleared away some of the papers and looked him in the eye. "What do you want to happen next here on Earth? What kind of future do you hope for? Answer honestly, and don't just say something to placate me. I have heard plenty try to do that already today."

Holstred was taken aback for a moment, not sure what to say. But he did detect honesty in her voice, and he believed it unwise to lie. So he took a gamble. Gritting his teeth, he answered truthfully.

"I wish to ensure our survival. And... perhaps one day... freedom."

It was truly a gamble to say to your new Mistress you wanted to get out of serving her.

"Be a bit more ambitious," the witch smiled, leaning back.

"I... I am unsure. I do not think I can speak for everyone, only my own selfish desires," Holstred shook his head.

"What are these selfish desires?"

"To rebuild some of what was lost... and find a new home for myself, my family, and all I hold dear," Holstred managed to say. Check latest chapters at novel•fire•net

"And do you believe those who follow you want that too?" the witch questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," he nodded.

"All very doable," the woman nodded with a smile. "All I will ask of you is to draw up a plan for how you want to make this happen and ensure you have enough personnel to act autonomously. Considering the size of your group, I hope you have enough

internally. If not, we may have to discuss bringing in others to make sure everything runs smoothly. If there are any competent people you recommend to help facilitate the transition, please bring them to our next meeting. We have people on our side handling surveying and finding a proper spot you can settle in."

Holstred was confused as he looked at his Mistress as she went over some papers.

She noticed his confusion and looked back at him as she seemed to reach a realization. "Ah, I totally forgot to mention it. Lord Thayne - the Chosen of the Malefic Viper - is not a fan of slavery, so we will be nullifying all of your slave contracts once we are done organizing everything. Ah, but let me fix yours right away. Where was yours again... are here it is."

His Mistress took out a black book he had signed the slave contract in... and a second later, she was no longer his Mistress.

Holstred stared in utter confusion as she smiled. "Congratulations, as of this moment, you are free. But do take this and remember to read it over. Not being a slave doesn't mean you are free from the law, after all."

His former Mistress handed him a small folder reading "Welcome to Earth: Starter Guide," and he had barely gotten it in his hand when the woman called Lillian entered again.

"Take Holstred here back to his group and go find me... what was her name again... that elven lady we talked about earlier," the woman called Miranda said as she looked once more at Holstred. "It was a pleasure meeting you, and I hope things work out well for everyone. Please spread the word to those under your influence. In a week, we will fetch you again, so have the plans ready for then, alright? We have high expectations of you and don't worry, once things calm down, we will look into expanding to the political structure of the planet to involve you all."

"I..." Holstred said, trying to control himself. He questioned so many things. Was this all a bad joke played on them? He did not understand... but if it was real...

"Tha... Thank you," he bowed, this one with true sincerity.

"You have nothing to thank me for. I am just doing what I should," she smiled radiantly as Holstred was led out of the tent, and he began walking back toward the small city of tents and temporary housing his old empire now occupied.

On the way, it finally hit him as he stopped mid-walk. The slave mark on his soul left by the contract... he felt for it... and it was truly gone. Looking down at his hands, he saw they shook. Taking a deep breath, he clenched them... but it didn't help, and for the first time, his stoic demeanor broke.

I'm... we're free?

Holstred had spent the last many months of his life fighting to accept his status as a slave... fighting for his family and all he cared about. Hoping that even if he lived as a slave, perhaps his unborn child would one day be free.

Only to be freed the moment his life as a slave was meant to truly begin. He just stared ahead of him as tears slowly welled up in his eyes, the realization finally sinking in fully.

We're free...

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Chapter 696: Nevermore: Fun Times Ahead

Jake was left alone in the meeting room, pondering his conversation with that absolute madman, Eron.

Some rules of the system were known to be absolute... and the line between mortality and immortality was one of them. It was a fundamental law for a reason and one that had never been broken in the history of the multiverse, as far as Jake knew. At least... as far as he knew before his meeting with Eron. Because the other Bloodline Patriarch had shared that a long time ago, one individual had broken this rule.

One immortal mortal, if you may.

Jake had wanted to ask more, but Eron had refused and asked Jake to question the Malefic Viper instead. No matter how much he pressed, the healer had been utterly unwilling to share more.

Shortly after that, Eron had left, just leaving Jake. After a bit of reflection, It got him questioning... was it truly a good goal? Was giving immortality to everyone even a good thing?

People dying was, as cruel as it sounded, necessary. Most enlightened never even reached D-grade during their lives, but even so, a single human could live hundreds of years. In that time, it was pretty common to have dozens of children. If all these children also grew up to have dozens, even a planet like Earth would be utterly overpopulated in just a few centuries.

Even now, wars and such were customary on low-level planets to cull populations. Yet even with these measures, age was likely the primary killer for most beings in the multiverse. Many individuals in high grades reached points in their lives where they believed that further evolution was not an option, and they chose to settle down and create families or nurture their factions. This is not even mentioning the many people who never cared about battle to begin with, but only focused on their professions. If these people who never fought lived forever... Jake wasn't even sure the system would allow it.

There was also the problem that Eron – to put it nicely – didn't give a flying fuck about other people or who they were as individuals, nor what was good for the multiverse as a whole. All he cared about was them not dying. Not once did he consider the "gift" he wanted to give the multiverse a curse to some.

Immortality was not necessarily a good thing. It took a certain mindset to handle, and Villy had mentioned before this mentality was rare but a fundamental requirement for attaining godhood. What would happen to someone becoming immortal that did not have the mindset for it? Insanity? Would they ultimately end their own lives?

There were many thoughts in his head, but Jake did recognize they were likely useless for two reasons:

The first was that the chances of Eron achieving this goal were minuscule. He wanted to do something countless others had tried before, and while he did have his Bloodline, would that truly be enough? Even if he got help from others with Bloodlines and Transcendents, Jake refused to believe others hadn't tried that before in the trillions of years the multiverse had existed. Even if Eron succeeded, Jake doubted it would be anytime soon, in which case it would be a future-Jake problem.

Secondly was that Jake knew the system still did have some restrictions that not even Bloodlines or Transcendents could overcome. The most obvious one was the rule that everything took something to use – a law of exchange, if one may. Not necessarily an equivalent exchange, but few things were free. That was why the Sword Saint could not just instantly have created a Transcendent that turned him into a god then and there. He had to instead pay with levels for the power he gained. Jake's own infusion of Records related to Primeval Origins was similar, as the system had restricted him in how often he could do it without fundamentally harming himself. It likely knew that a Jake capable of mass-producing pinnacle-level creatures would be too imbalanced.

So, what would the price of granting someone else immortality be? Sacrificing other lives? No, it could not be that simple. Jake thought for a good while and concluded that it was likely the system would never even allow Eron to create a method to make everyone immortal... but if it was just healing the impact of time? To – using his metaphor – refuel the Truesouls of others, giving them more years of lifespan?

That... could be possible. With help, of course. Eron would need assistance from many people, but there would be just as many opposing it, Jake reckoned. As with Sanguine, anyone breaking the power balance established by the gods would find themselves facing much opposition. Jake had faced this with his special ability, too. One could just look at the Automata Legion, which was less than keen on him at the moment.

Ultimately, Jake didn't want to rule out the mad healer's goal. Even if Eron's goal was utterly delusional, he was not the only one Jake knew who had such far-fetched dreams. The healer actually reminded Jake a bit of Arnold and his goal of fully comprehending the entire multiverse and the system through the power of math. It was so utterly outrageous Jake could only respect it. They both had goals that weren't just "get strong," but both goals still required them to reach such high levels of power before they would become feasible that by the time they succeeded, they would be approaching the pinnacle either way. To them, power was just the means to an end – the end just being so far out of sight it wasn't a demerit whatsoever. New novel chapters are published on **novel**•

Shaking his head, Jake tried to dispel the thought as much as he could. Worrying right now was useless when the possibility of Eron's dream even becoming a reality was so low. For now, he would shelve even thinking about it and instead discuss it with Villy after he was done with Nevermore. That sounded like what Eron hoped he would do anyway.

Jake smiled a bit to himself, reflecting on all the people from Earth he had just met up with. They all had their own goals and aspirations, some grander than others. The person he was most worried about was Caleb... he was his little brother, after all. He had not shared it with the group, but Jake did know that his goal was quite simple: He wanted to protect his family. That itself was a good goal to have, but it was rarely – if ever – a Path that led one to the pinnacle.

Umbra had likely known this too, which was part of the reason he got the Legacy of Tenlucis. The Path of Tenlucis was essentially about forcing someone to keep progressing or die from the pressure of the dark heavens crushing you to death. It would force Caleb to keep going even when he wanted to sit still, and while it was selfish of him, that gave Jake some relief.

Jacob was even worse off than Caleb, Jake did recognize that, but he didn't feel the same sense of worry. One was his little brother, and the other was just his old boss and friend from work. It was his own problem if he didn't have the right mentality to go all the way. If he wanted to get on a Path to godhood, he had to find it himself.

Feeling done with reflecting on the group, Jake left the hotel room towards one of the many alchemy labs provided to get some proper crafting done and rake in those final Minaga Coins to finally move on and explore the rest of Minaga's Labyrinth.

Time passed as Jake continued grinding out alchemical creations to finally get enough Minaga Coins to pay his toll. He ended up being a lot slower than the Sword Saint, who finished only a week after their meeting by dumping his entire "art" collection on the Brokers.

It still took Jake nearly three months to get done, as his speed had slowed down a bit. He did not rush as much while even mixing in a bit of experimentation here and there. They would have to wait a bit for Sylphie and the Fallen King no matter what, with Dina also done collecting all her Coins shortly. It also didn't help with motivation that his leveling speed felt significantly slower, though he did manage to rake in two more levels.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 225 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 226 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 222 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points****

And, as mentioned, he was good on Minaga Coins.

Current Minaga Coins: 214,390/214,000

Now Jake just had to figure out what the hell his plans were as the others also got ready. As things were, he saw a few options.

The first one was to continue grinding alchemy while focusing more on experimentation. This one was slightly problematic in the sense that Jake would still feel some diminishing return due to him having just churned out stuff for over one and a half years. He also didn't know what kind of foes he would face on later floors, so even if he wanted to research a new kind of poison, he had no idea what he should focus on.

A second option was to try some of the Challenge Dungeons. The Sword Saint had considered this, but Dina had discouraged them both. According to Nature's Attendant, it was best to focus on all the Challenge Dungeons as late as possible to get as powerful as one could. At least for some of them. The problem was you didn't know what kind of Challenge Dungeon you would find yourself in before entering, and as with Nevermore's general rule of information-limiting, people couldn't share what they knew of the Challenge Dungeons either. Dina had also mentioned that often these Challenge Dungeons had a very set "theme" and was about progressively getting more difficult, making one go further on average if they were attempted as late as possible. The final nail in the coffin was that some of them had limited attempts, and entering and leaving again counted as one attempt. Jake had chosen to take this advice and wait.

The third option of things to do was to use the charge of Path of the Heretic-Chosen he had gained when he reached level 220 in his profession. When he had initially gained the charge, Jake had considered using it, but in the end, he had delayed. His problem with the skill right now wasn't that he didn't know what to use it on... it was that he had too many things to use it on. One had to remember that it had gone from only working on his "of the Malefic Viper" skills to now working on a shitload of things.

"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."

What was it called again? Decision paralysis? Choice overload? Jake wasn't sure, but whatever the hell it was called, Jake felt like he had so many choices it was difficult to make one. The problem was even worse by the fact that he felt he could now choose *any* of the nine Legacy skills if he wanted, as the requirement of adequate understanding was also gone.

But... he could also focus on the First Sage, as Jake was incredibly curious about that guy. Shit, Jake even considered checking out the other Primordials if he could. He had already seen Valdemar in one vision and gained a lot from it, so should he see a vision with him again? Maybe someone else? Eversmile, perhaps?

There were also events, though that one was a bit harder, as Jake was not clear on that many interesting events, as not much was known about the first era before the different Primordials rose to godhood. Jake also felt that there were some things he could not see. As an example, he poked the skill to see if it would show him the moment the Malefic Viper gained his Transcendence or when he ascended to godhood, but both of those were no good. If it was because they were not "related to the Malefic Viper's Legacy" or because the system had restricted the skill in some way, Jake didn't know.

Ultimately, Jake just couldn't choose. He kind of wanted to focus on a skill to try and upgrade it, but without the requirement for him to understand it, how would he even know it could help him? No, he wanted to wait and use it when he felt like he truly needed it, and that time just wasn't right now.

That left Jake with the fourth option. This was his original idea for what he would do when he was done collecting Minaga Coins, and it still seemed like the most attractive one:

He was gonna play with his Puzzle Box.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (1/10000).

This was probably Jake's favorite gift from the entire Chosen ceremony. Sure, all the other items had been nice, and Jake had used quite a few of them during this crafting session – such as the items gifted by the Risen – but this one still stood out.

He had loved the practice cauldron Villy had given him back during the intermittent period between the Tutorial ending and his arrival on Earth, and this one gave off similar vibes. This was not quite the same as it didn't focus on just alchemy but was more about general mana control.

Mana control was very much like practicing with any weapon or tool, and from the very first time Jake had interacted with Villy, the god had emphasized the importance of improving his control. Getting better at mana control improved your alchemy skills, abilities as a mage, ritualist... anything that required mana. Usually, one just practiced using mana for practical things or while using all skills, but puzzles like this weren't that rare either. Jake even did one during the Treasure Hunt when he first met Reika.

This Puzzle Box was, needless to say, on an entirely different level than anything he had ever done before. The first level had been incredibly easy as it was just a method to Soulbind the item, but when he took out the box and infused energy into it this time, he found his consciousness sink into the box, and he instantly realized things would not continue to be that easy.

Jake also had his mind transported to this place when he initially bound it to himself, and back then, he had just seen a few squiggly lines that didn't properly align with each other and were easily fixed.

However, this time he found himself surrounded by broken lines of pure mana, tangled messes, and mana just in pure disarray. Jake looked at the absolute mess in front of him and couldn't help but smile. If this was still only level two... man, did he have a lot of fun ahead of him.

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

Chapter 697: Nevermore: Finally Done

Jake analyzed the structure as he noticed several errors in it. This structure in question looked like a large square building, at least twenty stories tall and made of pure mana. It was hardened and reminiscent of Jake's stable arcane mana, but it was indeed just pure mana formed into a shape and then compressed and strengthened through formations.

His job was to bring the structural integrity up to a certain level but to do that, he had to address flaws embedded within the structure. Not just on the outside either. This meant he had to "drill" holes and infuse mana to fix what was wrong before he could cover everything up again – all while making sure none of what he did would make the entire thing collapse.

As several formations also covered the building, he had to avoid those too. How long it took him, Jake didn't know, but he quickly found flaw after flaw, and in many cases, he had to make up new methods on the spot to fix a particular problem. His preferred method was to strengthen the mana using hardened braided mana strings, almost functioning as rebar.

Due to its nature as a mana puzzle, Jake couldn't use his arcane affinity, but he could infuse some concepts from it. It reached a level where the normal mana was nearly identical to his arcane mana, though there were still some stark differences, such as the sheer gap in durability between the two and the far more physical nature of his stable arcane mana. While a powerful enough disruptive mana wave could make the entire "solid" structure in front of him collapse, it wouldn't be able to do the same to his arcane mana.

After an undetermined amount of time, Jake nodded. Everything seemed good. With a thought, a prompt appeared before him.

Submit Completion? Chapters first released on *novel*•

This was something else Jake had learned. The Puzzle Box was programmed to respond to things he did and worked a lot like a computer program, even able to summon system prompts while he immersed his consciousness within it. In some ways, entering a box was a lot like entering his Soulspace.

Jake confirmed his submitted completion. Suddenly, pressure washed over the entire mental scape, as it felt like gravity increased dozens of times over. Jake himself was utterly unaffected as he had been turned completely intangible, also making him unable to interfere with the test.

The building held strong, but then a powerful wind of pure mana came in from the side... which was when Jake saw he had slightly damaged one of the formations around the ninth floor. A part of the wall crumbled, and the wind invaded the structure, ravaging through it. Within seconds, the entire mana structure collapsed and dispersed into nothingness.

Level failed. Retry?

I'll get it this time!

Yeah, this wasn't his first attempt...

Retrying, the building reappeared, but it was not exactly identical. The difficulty level was the same, but the test itself itself was different. The formations were similar but placed in different locations, the flaws were never the same, and the entire building had slightly changed and was even twenty-one stories this time.

This was naturally done so one couldn't just try the same level over and over again until they completed it. It was a test of skill, after all, not pure trial and error.

More time passed as Jake fixed everything he could find and made sure to strengthen certain sections of the building he feared weren't strong enough to handle the stress. After double-checking everything looked right, he once more got the system prompt.

Submit Completion?

Like last time, he approved, and the pressure reappeared. This time the building held, and even when the disruptive mana wind swept through, none of the formations were dismantled. The entire stress test went on for about two minutes before everything stopped, and he got another prompt.

Level 54 completed. Proceed to level 55?

Jake said yes, as he appeared on the next level. This one was a massive hanging bridge of mana, and Jake instantly began to analyze it as he became aware the task this time was to make sure the bridge could bear a certain weight while staying stable for at least one year in a sped-up stress test. However, he did not get far, for within his Sphere of Perception, he saw something he hadn't hoped would happen...

The Sword Saint was walking towards his room... which could only mean one thing: Sylphie and the Fallen King were done collecting their damn coins. The Golden Mark left by the King tended to expire after a few weeks, which was why the old man had to go get him in person.

It was with mixed feelings he emerged from the box. He looked down at the precious object for a moment and smiled.

[Puzzle Box of the Seeker (Divine)] – A puzzle box created by the god known as the Seeker. This box is filled with a total of 10000 levels of mana puzzles of ever-increasing difficulty. Fully unlocking the box will reveal an item sealed within. Soulbinds to anyone who beats the first level. Levels completed: (54/10000).

After giving the best Puzzle Box in the world a hug, he put it away as he stood up. Checking the time, he saw he hadn't moved from the floor in about a month, so he stretched a bit and went towards the door, ready to open it the second the old man knocked.

The bastard never knocked but just stood outside for a moment before speaking.

"Jake, I know you know I am here."

"Can you knock anyway?" Jake asked.

"No."

"Please?"

The old man sighed as he reached out, but just before he could knock, Jake opened the door while grinning.

"You were totally surprised, right?" Jake joked.

"Truly," he shook his head. "I assume you know why I am here?"

"Sylphie finally got enough Minaga Coins?"

"Precisely," the Sword Saint nodded as Jake walked out and began following the old man as they headed out of the hotel. "And she is not happy about being the last one to complete her coin-gathering. She has not complained as much as the Fallen King, though."

"Not gonna lie... it's about bloody time," Jake said. "Did Carmen and her party manage to get ahead of us?"

"She did. They left just a week ago," the old man confirmed.

"Fuck me," Jake grumbled.

"Disappointed she did not say goodbye?" the Sword Saint teased.

"Nah, we already talked about limiting our interactions in this period leading up to her leaving, and with Jacob and Casper leaving, we had fewer excuses to meet. Her going to say goodbye would have been weird from an outsider's perspective," Jake shrugged. "It wasn't like she hadn't come by quite a few times during their shared time on the floor. Just hoped we would at least beat them."

Jake did also regret not having a proper bout with Carmen in the arena. Both of them had wanted a duel, but sadly there was no way to have private fights. With how durable Carmen was, Jake would likely have been forced to go all-out, and he wanted to hide some of his abilities if he could. Especially skills like Eternal Shadow, which were incredibly effective when used without the opponent being aware of them. Jake not using his full power would also be disrespectful to Carmen. So, in the end, they agreed to postpone their duel.

"The scientist from Haven also reached the floor. Are you going to go greet him before we leave?"

"Arnold? Nah, he is a big boy; he can handle himself," Jake shrugged. "Besides, I reckon he would have reached out to me if he wanted anything. He isn't the type to just wait around."

"How about your brother or Maria?" the Sword Saint also asked.

"Already did before my last practice session, as I quite frankly expected us to have already moved on by now," Jake said, shaking his head.

"I see," the old man nodded, not saying more as they kept walking.

It was a bit annoying, but Jake and company had ended up taking just over two years doing Minaga's City Floor. Sylphie had ended up being the big limiter in how fast they could pass the floor, as the deck was honestly stacked against her.

She was the highest-leveled of them all, which meant she had the biggest toll to pay, but she also had the problem that her marketable skills were limited. She couldn't craft anything, and when it came to tasks she could assist with, she was equally limited as many of these tasks required knowledge or skill in certain disciplines.

Sylphie was simply too young to have ever learned anything complex, and all her powers came from instinct and her powerful innate knowledge as a beast. Sadly for her, none of this innate knowledge helped her anywhere outside of the arena.

Jake and the others did help her as much as possible. She sold items they had obtained within Nevermore and reached the cap for how many coins she could earn every single month, but that only did so much.

The two of them quickly walked together to the toll booth, where they met up with the three others. Sylphie was indeed a grumpy bird, with the Fallen King looking more than a little impatient to finally get a move on. Dina looked fine and gave them a small wave as she saw them approach.

"About time you arrived," the Fallen King said when they made it over.

"Well, excuse me for adding another five minutes to this city floor. When was it you got done collecting your coins again?" Jake smiled teasingly.

"Let's just proceed," the Unique Lifeform said, really seeming in a hurry.

Jake proceed to activate the toll booth together with the Sword Saint, allowing them to walk through the gate leading to the next floor. The moment he paid, Jake got a system prompt that he had honestly forgotten was even a thing.

Bonus Objective Completed: Pay the Toll to leave the city floor without ever leaving Nevermore. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

“Five hundred points, huh?” Jake said with a small smirk.

“Yeah, not a lot... but it is something, isn’t it?” Dina answered, trying to be positive.

“An amount so low it is almost insulting. This entire floor has just been a useless waste of time,” the Fallen King scoffed.

“Could have been more productive for sure, but I won’t call it a total waste of time,” Jake shook his head. True, it had been pretty damn inefficient when it came to gathering Nevermore Points, but that didn’t mean it had been a waste of time. They had all stayed in contact during this time, and based on how the number of opponents the Fallen King and Sylphie killed in the arena every day slowly increased, the two of them had clearly improved. The many tasks Brokers gave were also all ones that required the person to slowly get better.

Jake and the Sword Saint had also naturally progressed their professions quite a bit, with Jake even improving his mana control with his Puzzle Box. The Sword Saint hadn’t sat still either but had chosen to continue painting even when he didn’t need it for Minaga Coins, as the old man wanted to rake up some more profession levels. In his words, then it was rare he had calm periods like this to just relax and paint, and he seemed hit less hard by the diminishing returns than Jake for some reason.

“Perhaps not a total waste, but can you truthfully say you wouldn’t have preferred to do without?” the Fallen King countered.

“Well, if you put it like that...”

“Ree!” Sylphie joined in on the complaining.

“Who is delaying our progress now?” the Sword Saint butted in as he motioned for them all to proceed. “The thirty-sixth floor awaits.”

The old man was right, and they stopped dragging things out as they moved through the barrier blocking the entrance to the next floor. Through this barrier was just another gateway, and without further ado, they all activated it as they were teleported away.

They appeared within a vaguely familiar room. It gave Jake the same vibes as the usual “welcome” room they had first seen on the thirty-first floor, but it all seemed a bit more... high-brow? The old-ish-looking temple walls were replaced with pristine marble, and overall it just looked more well-kept.

"About time you arrived here. That took quite a while, huh?" a voice echoed through the hall as their dear dungeon master appeared on the central platform, though there were no fireworks or big display.

"And whose fault is that?" Jake instantly countered.

"Not mine if that is what you are insinuating," Minaga denied. "You can't blame me for you being slow."

"You designed the rules of the city floor," Jake pointed out.

"That I did, but doesn't that just mean you are even more at fault? Because me being wrong couldn't be the case, hence why it must be entirely on you. Definitely," Minaga nodded confidently.

"Fine, we suck, happy?" Jake sighed. "Now, what's the plan from here?"

"Five more floors of my labyrinth," the Unique Lifeform answered.

"Huh... don't you think it is kind of beginning to overstay its welcome?"

"Hey, I tried to mix it up!" Minaga seemed offended. "These next four floors – with a special surprise on floor forty – are all of an identical design with only slight changes, but they offer something interesting nearly no other dungeon floor does: true choice!"

"But it is still a labyrinth?" Jake asked.

"Yes, there are still labyrinthian features."

"So..."

"Yes, you will be able to utterly cheat and ruin all sense of exploration, ruining much of the fun of the floor... but not as much as on some of the others," Minaga answered, looking like he had entirely given up on trying to stop Jake from cheating.

"Nice, just wanted to make sure," Jake smiled.

"Now, as with prior floors, I will once more need you to make a difficult choice – better known as a difficulty choice," Minaga said, very proud of his wordplay.

"Do we have the same options as on prior floors?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Yep... and can I just assume you will choose the Archmage difficulty? Anything else wouldn't really make any sense," Minaga asked.

"Naturally," the King answered.

"Great, great," the dungeon master nodded. "Now, I do know you suffered a bit during my wonderful city floor and aren't all that happy, so let me give you a tiny little tip to cheer you all up. This is not the only time on this floor that you will have the choice of taking an easier or a harder path... and if you want the best ending, don't ever take the easy route. Always strive for the highest difficulty."

"Duly noted," Jake smiled.

"Now, with all that over, I hope you enjoy this floor and those to come! I will add one more thing... I kind of learned that characterization is not my strong suit, so that is very limited in these next few floors," Minaga said, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Probably for the best," Jake nodded as he teased the totally-not-a-god. "Not only because the "people" were bloody horrible imitations of real sapient creatures, but because it makes life harder for assholes who are good at manipulating them. A pleasant surprise to see you can learn from your mistakes."

"I will just choose to interpret those very hurtful words as you venting the last of your anger towards the city floor," Minaga smiled unbothered.

"Totally was," Jake nodded.

Minaga smiled lightly as he did an exaggerated bow. "In either case, I believe I have taken up enough of your time... without further ado, let us continue Minaga's Labyrinth!"

With those words, the Unique Lifeform disappeared, and the giant glowing gate at the far end of the room began opening. Out came the mist that restricted all senses and movement, and Jake did not hesitate to close his eyes and send out a Pulse of Perception just as the system message for the floor also popped up.

Welcome to the Thirty-sixth floor of Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth (Part 6)

Main objective: Reach the end of the Labyrinth.

Bonus objectives: Complete the floor while selecting and completing the room with the highest difficulty rating at least three times (0/3).

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (0/3). End reached (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 28973

Jake read over the description, and coupled with his mental map from Pulse of Perception, Jake did have to admit... this part of the labyrinth was kind of different.

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

Chapter 698: Nevermore: Predictable Choice

A labyrinth was a labyrinth, no big way to really change that. Minaga hadn't tried either, as they once more found themselves walking through winding hallways of mist, following after Jake, who had a nice mental map in his head. The difference this time around was that there was a "correct" way right off the bat, with no rooms or anything to look for.

Instead, they just had to pass through a pretty big labyrinth to reach a gate at the end, but based on how long it would take to reach the gate, this could not be the entire floor. They also had at least three rooms to clear with difficulty ratings attached. The only challenge on this floor so far was the occasional trap, which they could have some fun with. Some of these traps were placed even on the fastest path to the finish and were quite varied.

Some were good-old spike traps, some released mana bolts from the walls, and a few even summoned enemies they had to fight. The fights and traps were all made quite a lot harder to deal with due to the mist, but they still easily managed and moved forward quickly – or as quickly as one could with the mist limiting their movement speed.

"This is quite familiar to what we have done before," the Sword Saint voiced his thoughts.

"Ree!" Sylphie complained as she flew alongside them.

"Yeah, pretty damn similar, but we will reach the gate in just a bit, so maybe something will change then," Jake shrugged as they did indeed soon reach the first gate. It had taken them nearly two-and-a-half hours to get there due to the traps while taking the fastest route, so he guessed this floor would be quite a pain for parties without what was essentially maphack.

A few minutes later, they turned the final corner and saw the gate before them. This gate was quite a bit different from those prior, and on the other side of it, Jake just saw an empty void of nothingness. On both sides of the gate itself were two large runes for four total that all lit up. Jake scanned them and quickly got the gist of it.

1. Puzzle (Easy)

2. Combat (Medium)

3. Crafting (Easy)

4. Random (Easy)

"We get to choose the challenge room type and the difficulty," Jake noted as he looked over the four options.

"Not much choice when one considers the bonus objective," the Fallen King said.

"True," Jake nodded. "Now, how do we pick..."

It took minimal figuring out before they discovered that three of them just had to infuse energy or touch one of the marks at once. They naturally activated the second option to do a little combat.

Once they activated it, the entire gate began to glow, and as Jake released another pulse, he saw a massive room appear on the other side. It extended even beyond his Pulse of Perception, meaning it had to be at least three-hundred kilometers long. He could see that it had a width of around two hundred kilometers, though.

When the gate opened, they walked through the usual fog gate, and Jake felt the pleasant wind hit him. They were in a mountainous environment, and when Jake looked ahead, he saw a pterodactyl-looking creature flying through the air. He naturally used Identify, and it had a quite disappointing level.

[Windborne Shrieker – lvl 239]

Moreover, he did not feel like it was a strong variant at all. Jake also quickly saw a whole lot of dinosaurs wandering around in the deep valleys below, and as he was still trying to figure out where all the enemies were, they got a system message.

Room Objective: Clear the room to unlock the teleporter.

841/841 enemies remaining.

"That seems simple," Dina nodded.

"Yeah, I am surprised there is not some twist... I just think we have to kill everything here," Jake nodded.

"It does seem as such... thus, we should get started immediately," the Fallen King said as he reached out his hand towards the Shrieker Jake had Identified earlier. It abruptly stopped in mid-air many kilometers away as the King squeezed his clawed hand. The Shrieker struggled as the King lifted his other hand and made a tearing motion. In the distance, a wing was ripped off the creature as it continued to struggle, with the Fallen

King's hands finally glowing golden as he crushed them together; the Shrieker in the distance also getting crushed as it fell broken to the ground.

840/841 enemies remaining.

"City floor wasn't entirely a waste of time, now was it?" Jake smirked as he also pulled out his bow.

"Meager improvements do not make up for time wasted," the Fallen King shot back as he began looking for his next target.

Jake smiled a bit and nodded as he looked toward the sky. "Considering we have to kill everything here... I guess finding all of the opponents is meant to be part of the challenge too."

"Probably," the Sword Saint agreed.

"In that case," Jake grinned as he released another pulse, and as it released, he focused. Whenever it passed a creature, Jake made sure to note it as he activated Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter, hundreds of marks placed within less than a second. With his high Perception, marking this many was no problem at all.

Using the Golden Mark, Jake shared the location of every single marked target with the party as Dina looked at him. "Are you sure about all these locations?"

"Yep," Jake smiled.

"Okay," she nodded as she took out her staff and slammed it into the ground as a pulse of nature mana was released. Jake just shook his head and took to the air as the Sword Saint, Fallen King, and Sylphie also took off.

Jake was flying towards the far end of the room to mark all of the opponents, with the Sword Saint taking the left side of the room. Behind him, a giant tornado emerged on the left, with rain clouds gathering on the right. Yet before any of these had time to do much, death arrived from below as dinosaurs in the valleys down in the valleys felt the environment itself turn against them as Dina's attack arrived and did quite a number on the local wildlife, as many died in mere seconds.

814/841 enemies remaining.

Seeing the others have fun, Jake also began to release death from above. Being inside the room, Jake could see the end and estimated the entire place was around four-hundred kilometers in length. That meant his Pulse soon allowed him to scan it all. Once he had marked all the dinosaurs present, Jake set up shop as he summoned a platform of arcane mana beneath himself. It was as sturdy as arcane mana could be after his mana practice, and with a proper foothold that could handle the explosions he

was about to release, Jake began to act out his dream of being a living Arcane Powershot turret.

He started with all the flyers before moving toward those on the ground. Towards the entrance, a scar of destruction made its way towards him, wind, rain, vines, and explosions of force magic tearing up the land. Within long, they were done slaughtering the far too-easy room, with Jake finishing off the last few dinosaurs while the rest of the party made it over to where Jake was.

Room completed. Teleporter activated.

As they had all flown to Jake, they quickly got the teleporter that had been towards the far end of the room inside of a cave filled with what looked like temple ruins. Entering it and teleporting onwards, Jake saw the bonus objective update just as they disappeared from the room.

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (1/3)

They once more appeared at the start of a labyrinth with three paths to pick from.

"That was too easy... do we need to make our way through another labyrinth before the next challenge room?" the King asked, slightly impatient.

"Seems like it," Jake answered after sending out a Pulse of Perception. "But this one does have a shorter path. More traps, though, but it will still be faster."

"Lead the way," the Sword Saint smiled, unbothered.

Jake and company made their way through this labyrinth within only two hours. It was a bit annoying, but the one positive thing Jake could say was that at least it gave them time to properly regenerate their resources before the next challenge room. Not that they were in trouble when it came to enduring long battles – they always had potions if things went south.

Arriving at the next gate, they were once more met with four options.

1. Puzzle (Medium)

2. Collection (Medium)

3. Combat (Easy) NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON *novel*•

4. Random (Easy)

And this one was actually a choice. Both the Puzzle and the Collection one were of equal difficulty based on what Jake could see, though he did want to make sure that was indeed the case.

"Say, Minaga, when several options have the same difficulty rating, can we just pick ourselves?" Jake decided to ask the designer of the dungeon.

"Right on! I did tell you there would be actual decision-making on these floors, didn't I? You can select whichever one you believe fits your party the best as long as they are all of the highest difficulty rating available. I do want to also add that I am not actually deciding which ones get the high difficulties here. I made it all pseudo-random to make every experience slightly different. Ah, for reference, you will be able to find this kind of floor with the same design even in other grades. It is quite popular if I say so myself," Minaga gladly answered, even deciding to overshare a bit about the dungeon.

"Several grades, huh?" Jake said, nodding. "Man, that must have been hard. Almost like it takes a godly level of power to design something like that."

"I did say they were pseudo-random, but that doesn't mean I don't have a backdoor where I can decide to make every single room the worst... say, how about we decide to make every single challenge room from here on out take place underwater?"

"You wouldn't," Jake said with not a shred of fear. "I do not believe your integrity and professionalism will allow you to have water levels within your labyrinth."

"I... you're right," Minaga surrendered. **"There are lines that simply shouldn't be crossed, and that threat was in poor taste. From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. Though I will add that I can still change the rooms to something else that you will also hate."**

"And I am forever grateful that you will not do that," Jake smiled. "Thanks for answering, and I hope you continue to have a great day."

"Good to know we reached an understanding. Enjoy the floor!"

"We will," he smiled before turning to the party. "We should pick the Collection one. My gut is telling me that will be incredibly easy and cheeseable."

"Oh, come on!"

Alas, his complaint was too late. They had all activated the Collection room, and the door opened to reveal another large, albeit slightly smaller room than the last. This environment looked like a large underground cave, but luckily there were no

mushrooms anywhere. There was plenty of moss, though, and it grew in odd patterns, leaving natural formations all over the place and the air full of mana.

Room Objective: Collect all the Hidden Tokens.

32/32 Hidden Tokens remaining.

Their objective was to find all the hidden tokens throughout the large cave. These tokens were all hidden inside natural formations, below the ground or inside walls, with some even floating inside odd green clouds that permeated the air.

Anyway, a few Pulse of Perceptions and a Dina who kindly asked the moss to lend a hand later, and they teleported to the next labyrinth.

Current progress: Highest difficulty room completed (2/3)

"I do hope the difficulty increases," the Sword Saint said as they began walking through yet another labyrinth. "After the Demon Lord, this seems far too straightforward and easy."

"Ree!" Sylphie also complained, saying that the later opponents in the arena on the city floor had been harder and a lot more fun.

"Variance is welcome when it comes to the rooms, but in order for the variance to hold meaning, there has to be an element of challenge to the variance. If not, it is simply going through the motions," the Fallen King joined in.

"Well..." Dina said as she fidgeted with one of the flowers growing from her hair. "I think it's okay. The Demon Lord was a big outlier in difficulty, and if this floor didn't start easy, it wouldn't have space to get harder later on. We are pretty good at these rooms too, and I do think there is fun to be found in seeing how fast we can go."

"See, that is a good mentality to have!" Minaga swooped in to agree.

"Oh, so you do like it when we speedrun the floors and cheese them?" Jake shot back with a grin.

"Anyway, please continue," he backed off as fast as he had come.

Jake shook his head as the party kept up their high speed through yet another labyrinth before they arrived at their third gate and choice of the day.

1. Traps (Medium)

2. Crafting (Medium)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Easy)

This one had the most interesting choice so far. They didn't want to waste too much time discussing, though, and ended up just going with the combat option as the Fallen King and Sylphie both heavily advocated for it. Jake had a strong feeling they just really wanted to kill stuff and blow off steam after the city floor. Hopefully, they would calm down shortly.

This combat room also proved itself easy, though it was slightly harder than the first one they had done, despite both being medium difficulty. After clearing it, Jake had to confess he had kind of expected the floor to be over. They even completed the bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Complete three rooms of the highest difficulty. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

However, despite the objective getting completed, they found themselves facing yet another labyrinth. Jake frowned, wondering how many they had to do, the others thinking the same thing.

"Is it possible this is part of the labyrinth?" the Sword Saint theorized. "That we can't just pick the fastest path every time? Also, is it possible there was more than one exit in any of the prior labyrinths?"

Jake considered for a bit and used another pulse. Ultimately, he went with his gut and shook his head. "No... no, I think we just have to keep going, and that were are just more than three."

"How many do you think there are?" Dina questioned.

"Hm," Jake thought. Then a light bulb went off in his head, and he spoke with certainty. "There are six rooms total we need to clear."

"Okay, how in the cursed name of evil Demon Lord Gubrothas did you cheat yourself into figuring that out? Seriously, how utterly overpowered is that Bloodline of yours to-"

"It's the thirty-sixth floor," Jake interrupted him. "Thirty and six. Hence six rooms as having thirty-six total would honestly be too much. Shit, there are probably seven rooms on the next floor."

Silence followed for several seconds as the Sword Saint just smiled, and Dina did all she could to suppress a giggle.

"Am I... am I that predictable?" Minaga questioned his entire existence.

"A better question is if I am indeed just incredibly smart," Jake joked back.

"Considering that is an impossibility..." Minaga roasted him. **"I... Did the rest of you also figure it out?"**

"I hadn't really thought about it," Dina answered.

"Ree," Sylphie said, also not really caring.

The King stayed silent as expected, with the Sword Saint smiling. "Such an idea never even crossed my mind. I had considered there was some hint in prior words you spoke, a clue in the number of difficulties and how all the options got harder with time. Alas, all in vain, as it seems I merely do not have a mind comparable to you two."

"I am pretty sure he just insulted us both," Minaga said.

"Same, man," Jake nodded.

The old man just kept smiling as he motioned forward. "Should we not get going? We have three more rooms next, do we not?"

He spoke the last part while looking up toward the ceiling of the labyrinth.

"You know, I am beginning to hate your party more and more..."

"Nah, he loves us," Jake joked with the Sword Saint.

"You know, I am definitely filing a complaint with Vilas and Aeon both after this."

Jake kept smiling as they walked, holding himself back from pointing out how referring to two Primordials using their names was definitely the behavior of someone who wasn't a god. Definitely.

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

Chapter 699: Nevermore: Cruel Trap Room

After the fun bantering with Minaga, they arrived at room number four, and finally, the difficulty seemed to have increased. At least it said this would be hard.

1. Traps (Hard)

2. Collection (Medium)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Hard)

As they were still following Minaga's advice of never picking anything that wasn't of the highest difficulty, the only choice was between Random and Traps. Jake considered for a second, but his gut didn't really tell him one was better than the other. Maybe because both would be easy for him.

"Let us just pick Traps. The hunter will likely be able to trivialize any challenge and allow us to pass through quickly," the Fallen King said as he scanned the options.

"I guess," Jake shrugged as he turned to the others. He did kind of want to pick the Random one just to see if there was some fun category they had yet to even see, but alas, the other three agreed to just go with Traps. Well, Sylphie didn't particularly care, but she did seem like she wanted to get through these floors fast after the city floor delay, so she just went with whatever she thought was fastest... which often was just to agree with everyone else.

"Let's do that then," Jake nodded as he infused energy into the particular rune, with the four others joining in. The rune lit up as the door in front of them began opening, revealing the room that had just been generated. Jake released a Pulse of Perception and saw the entire place was only around ten kilometers long and less than five meters in height and width, which made the place incredibly small for a challenge room. However, he also soon realized why it was so small.

The entire place was utterly packed with stuff. What appeared before them was a massive obstacle course with a web of challenges. The walls looked to be made of some kind of metal, and large panels were placed here and there, forcing whoever tried to go through into small openings reminiscent of doorways.

Jake looked around for a while and quickly noticed one more thing of note. The mist was not entirely gone in this trap room. A small amount of it remained, but its properties seemed slightly different. It did not obstruct sight anymore, but Jake did feel that the movement-restricting effect mostly remained, meaning things like teleporting through were out of the question.

"Odd," Jake also said. "I don't feel any real danger..."

Dina looked at the room a bit before taking out a seed. She tossed it in the air, and before it landed, a vine soldier had grown from it. The one-meter-tall creature began

walking into the area with the traps, and the moment it walked just five meters ahead of them, a barrier sprung up, separating the vine soldier from Jake and the others.

It paused slightly, but Dina urged it to keep walking. It did so, and just a few meters later, it activated a formerly invisible formation on the floor, resulting in an explosion of mana spears shooting up from the ground. The vine soldier was hit, but the spears only left small tears in its body... and then it disappeared.

Only to reappear back right beside Dina, the barrier in front of them also fading in the process.

"I believe we may have underestimated these trap rooms," the Sword Saint voiced his thoughts.

"Ree!" Sylphie said, wanting to give it a go. Jake saw no reason to deny her, and the hawk shot forward as she turned into wind. She got several hundred meters into the room while successfully avoiding all the traps until suddenly, a section of the wall shot out like a piston, hitting the living gust of wind that was Sylphie. The glowing formation at the end of the piston glowed with some kind of energy, and in the very next second, living wind joined them back behind the barrier.

Sylphie turned back into her physical form and screeched in annoyance. But she did learn something.

The piston had managed to do a very small amount of damage to Sylphie, and that had triggered her to teleport away. The prior traps she avoided had failed to do any damage even if they had partly hit her, making Sylphie – the smart bird she was – conclude that only if someone took damage would they be teleported back.

"So, who wants to go next?" the Sword Saint asked.

Jake was about to volunteer when Dina stepped up. "I can test if it is indeed about taking damage."

"That sounds like a good idea," the old man smiled as he motioned her to give it a shot. As she walked forward and passed that invisible threshold, the barrier popped up again, confirming that only one person could do the room at a time.

Dina walked forward while taking out her staff and touching her chest with her one free hand as it glowed with dense life energy. Bobo, her living armor, began to grow as her body was covered, and tapping herself with the staff infused Bobo with even more energy as vines sprung from all over, creating a cocoon of defensive plants.

Then, she jumped forward as she pointed her staff, shooting forward a vine. The vine gripped one of the panels meant to block one's progress as she dragged herself further into the room, the vines below her functioning as dozens of small legs.

Nearly instantly, she triggered a bunch of traps. Spears shot out from the walls and hit the amalgamation of vines, but they failed to do much. Even as a few vines were cut off or exploded, Dina remained untouched behind all her defenses.

When she reached the piston, her vines took most of the blow, and she ended up using the vines almost as springs as she allowed herself to pounce. She launched herself forward with help from the momentum, and within only a few minutes, she reached the midway point. So far, the only true challenge for her seemed to be the small openings she sometimes had to get through, forcing her to shrink her form momentarily before expanding it again.

"Does not seem hard," the Fallen King said as he walked over and poked the barrier blocking them in, making sure it was indeed utterly impenetrable.

"Let's see," the Sword Saint said patiently.

Dina kept going as the traps got harder in the second part. At one point, the walls to both sides grew spikes as they slammed together, but Dina managed to not get crushed as she raised her staff to stop both walls at once. The damn staff didn't even bend from the impact, and after she infused some energy, it grew in length and pushed back both walls, allowing her to pass safely.

More traps followed. Explosions of mana, spears shooting out, pitfalls, acid getting blasted from the walls, crescent energy waves, and of course, the trap room itself moving physically while trying to stop her. However, against the Dryad druid, nothing managed to penetrate her defenses. Even when the Fallen King pointed out a blast of soul energy, Bobo somehow managed to absorb it instead of Dina, which did look a bit funny as, for a fraction of a second, Jake felt like Bobo had been teleported away but was somehow instantly brought back to Dina again.

In the end, Dina managed to make it to the other side without suffering any injuries. The second she stepped on a small platform at the far end of the room, the barrier in front of Jake and the others faded away.

"Okay, yeah, it is about taking damage. When Bobo took some damage, the room tried to teleport him, but because he is bound to me, he was instantly brought back again. So good defenses do work here," Dina explained through their telepathic link.

"I believe the real way it was meant to be done was memorizing the safe path... there were places you could go without activating anything," the Sword Saint sent through the Golden Mark.

"That appears to be like an unnecessary waste of time," the Fallen King scoffed. Without waiting further, he floated forwards straight into the trap room. His passive barrier was already active, and with a wave of his hand, it turned golden as he casually flew at a relaxed pace.

Traps activated all around, nothing managing to do anything to the barrier, and in a time only slightly slower than Dina – only because he clearly didn't rush - the Fallen King made it to the other side safely. His defenses were simply too overpowered.

"Now, who is next?" the Fallen King questioned cockily.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched as she flew up in the air, gladly taking on the challenge as a glowing green branch appeared behind her feet that she perched herself on. Jake felt her confidence and cheered her on as he observed her.

She seemed to levitate on the branch as Jake saw her wiggle in a cute-looking way, like a cat ready to pounce. What was less cute was how her body began to glow with green energy, and the wind picked up around Jake and the Sword Saint. Power accumulated in their surroundings as Sylphie lowered herself a bit and opened her wings. Jake barely saw the familiar Green Shield appear around her body as the entire entrance area of the trap room exploded.

Like a bullet from a railgun, Sylphie blasted through hundreds of traps, narrowly navigating into all the small gaps to make it through the room. Even with the mist limiting her movements, she flew with insane speed. All the spears, pistons, moving walls, and any trap that took even a moment to activate were simply too slow and only fired off in her wake. What did hit her, the Green Shield managed to stop. This resulted in Sylphie safely making it to the other side in record speed.

"Ree! Ree!" she bragged over the Golden Mark as she sounded incredibly proud.

Jake sent a mental thumbs-up as he had honestly expected Sylphie to have trouble with this room after seeing her trying to get through after transforming her body into wind. Luckily that wasn't an issue. That just left Jake and the Sword Saint.

"You can go first," Jake motioned to the old man.

The Sword Saint hesitated for a moment before nodding. On guard, he entered the room, and with light steps, he began making his way through. A water barrier surrounded him as he slowly went through, trying not to activate traps as he went. Sometimes he did activate one, but before the attacks could hit him, he either dodged or released a counterattack.

However, less than a kilometer in, he failed to dodge an attack as a mana spear penetrated the water barrier and left a small cut around his ankle. Instantly, the Sword Saint found himself teleported back right next to Jake.

"I shall wait patiently," Jake smiled teasingly.

The old man just sighed as he went again.

This happened fourteen more times as he got further with every try. In the last two attempts, he used his boosting skill to make his defenses better and speed faster, resulting in him finally passing the room and getting to the other side, a bit worse for wear. It had ended up taking the Sword Saint a bit over an hour to get the room done, which in retrospect, wasn't that bad. It just felt like a long time due to how fast the others did it.

"Now we only wait for the hunter," the Fallen King spoke through the Golden Mark. *"I hope you do not disappoint us."*

"That would certainly be embarrassing after being after me so much," the Sword Saint concurred.

"I am sure he has a plan," Dina tried to be diplomatic.

"Ree!" Sylphie encouraged him to just smack every trap with his cauldron.

Jake didn't really think that was necessary as he walked into the trap room and smiled. *"Be there in a jiffy."*

What followed was a nice and casual stroll. Whenever he got close to one of the traps, Jake saw the formation and quickly stepped around the lines that would activate it. Occasionally he did activate one and easily dodged whatever was shot at him. Towards the end, he purposefully just walked in a nearly straight line as he evaded everything the trap room could throw at him. All in all, it was a nice experience, and Jake soon rejoined the others.

"Showoff," the Sword Saint chuckled as Jake walked through the final barrier. He hadn't used a single skill during his little stroll and only summoned a couple of stable arcane barriers here and there to block stuff he felt too lazy to dodge. Oh, and he did catch one mana spear mid-air after infusing his gauntlet with energy. That one was indeed only to show off.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked why he didn't use the cauldron.

"A meager trap room like this isn't worthy of facing my ultimate weapon," Jake answered in a haughty voice.

"Ree," Sylphie answered in full understanding.

"You know... I... no, I can't say that. Sharing information like that is against the rules," Minaga said as his voice echoed.

Jake and company were already mid-teleport as he spoke, and they appeared before yet another labyrinth.

He saw Dina was about to ask, but he nudged her slightly, and she seemed to understand as she didn't say anything.

"Truly... truly can I say it?"

All five of them continued to ignore him as they followed Jake and entered the labyrinth.

"Alas... it seems no one can hear me, so perhaps it is safe to disclose..."

Their team cohesion was truly on point, as none of them reacted to a single word the Unique Lifeform said.

"Well, if no one is listening, I guess I can just talk out loud a bit. That trap room was quite well designed if I say so myself. It was made so people who are just incredibly durable can't just walk through, allowing it to counter certain individuals, forcing them to actually think for a second. It is also interesting to think about how that trap room was partly based on one of the Challenge Dungeons available here in Nevermore, albeit that one is quite a bit different. Thinking about it further, that Challenge Dungeon would surely be easy for someone who can just casually walk through and easily dodge every single thing here. Ah, it is truly good that no one is listening because I am definitely not allowed to disclose that. Also, while I am here talking to myself, I can't help but meander about one of the funniest things going on right now in one of the other instances of floor thirty-seven right now. I couldn't possibly have predicted that a trap room made not to damage but teleport people back would completely and utterly screw over some of the people who manage to find methods that make them borderline invincible in their current grades by seemingly giving them infinite health points. Yeah, definitely couldn't have predicted that."

Jake and the others casually walked as they listened to the Unique Lifeform sharing information that Jake was pretty sure you couldn't share according to the rules of Nevermore. Not that he complained. He also instantly put together who Minaga was talking about towards the end of his talk to himself.

"Could you guys imagine if Eron had to do that trap room that we just did?" Jake joked with the others.

"Odd, I just had this weird thought that some trap rooms are harder than others..."

"Or maybe one even harder," Jake grinned.

"The schadenfreude is palpable," the Sword Saint chuckled as he shook his head.

"Hey, that's what he gets for being faster than us on that damn city floor," Jake shot back.

"Ree..." Sylphie whined softly.

Jake plucked the bird out of the air and patted her head as he walked, holding her in a hug. "It isn't your fault the evil creature who designed the city doesn't like awesome hawks like you."

"None of my design decisions are ever targeted individuals."

"He is just jealous," Jake comforted her more.

"I am definitely never jealous."

"Yeah, a super jealous guy for sure," Jake kept comforting Sylphie as she cheered up a bit. Still, Jake couldn't help but imagine Eron in one of those trap rooms.

Man, do I wish I could see that. He is definitely not having a good time. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT `novel`.](#)

Eron was not having a good time as he appeared back at the beginning of the trap room. He did not know how many times he had tried so far. Frustration was obvious on his face as he simply had to try again. He memorized the route he took the last time and managed to get five meters further on the next attempt, taking him to a bit over the twelve-kilometer mark. Only three more to go.

His party members were all meditating at the end of the trap room, having all completed it. All they were waiting for was him.

He kept going, again and again. All methods had been tried. Even if he purposefully did damage to himself during the trap room, the teleportation would activate, making him unable to use his original plan of just blowing up his body and slowly making it to the end.

More days passed as he inched ever closer. Every attempt was identical until the end, adding on just a few more meters every time as he had to make sure he didn't trigger a single trap. His stats were simply not high enough to allow him to dodge anything. Finally, after who knows how long, he passed through the final barrier and completed the room as his party members all awakened.

They all looked at him and nodded as they prepared to move on. A tacit agreement was reached of never picking trap rooms ever again. At least they would gladly pick the Random option over one.

Eron truly hoped to forever put the experience behind him. To never think about it again, and for no one else to ever-

"Man, that's a great new record! Ninety-seven days to pass one trap room? Okay, not actually sure it's a record, but damn, am I saving the recording anyway! Gonna be fun to rewatch. Maybe I should invite some friends over for a watch party?"

Alas, fate could be cruel.

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

Chapter 700: Nevermore: Progress Is Nice

The rest of the thirty-sixth floor proved relatively trivial as Jake and company soon completed the entire thing and entered the in-between room. There had indeed only been six rooms and their accompanying labyrinths, but when they arrived at the break room, he was a bit disappointed at seeing they had only managed to get three achievements along with the usual completion bonus.

At least he was disappointed until he saw the achievements in question.

Thirty-sixth floor completed. 360 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor within one day (24 hours). 750 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor while selecting the highest difficulty at every room. 600 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-sixth floor without straying from the shortest possible path by any more than 10% of the total distance. 900 Nevermore Points earned.

That was a whopping 2250 Nevermore Points from achievements alone. Counting in the Bonus Objective and the floor completion, they had earned 3110 points from this floor alone. Sure, it wasn't incredible compared to the Demon Lord, but it was pretty damn solid.

"These are all sliding-scale achievements, right?" Jake asked as he went over to the usual bar in Minaga's in-between room and poured himself a drink.

"They are indeed," Minaga answered instantly, ready to jump into the conversation.

“Nice. So...”

“Yeah, you got the best ones. Won’t say if you missed any other achievements, though. Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t.”

“Eh, it’ll be fine,” Jake shrugged as he chugged the beer-like liquid he had poured. It was okay, but not as good as what Villy usually brought.

“Do we need a recovery period?” the Fallen King questioned.

“I do not believe we do,” the Sword Saint answered.

Dina and Sylphie both seemed fine with just getting a move on immediately, so without further ado, they continued and moved onto the thirty-seventh floor, Jake quickly rushing after them while finishing his drink. As Minaga had already mentioned, the next floor was practically identical to the one on the thirty-sixth, though there were a few extra things added here and there.

The traps differed, and one especially nasty trap they ran into would teleport whoever stepped on it to a random place elsewhere in the labyrinth. At least Jake called it nasty until he got an idea. They sent Dina’s vine soldiers through a particular trap, and after seeing it actually put them closer to the exit, they all activated it together and skipped a good forty-five minutes of walking. Sadly not all of the traps could be repeatedly activated like this, with most only working on individuals before dispersing.

Room-wise, it was also much of the same, and Jake would say they got kind of lucky with what rooms had the highest difficulties. Of the seven rooms on the thirty-seventh floor – because yes, there were seven on the floor – they had combat in three of them, collection in two, and another had traps before they got the most interesting option of them all on the final room. It even had a never-before-seen new highest difficulty.

1. Crafting (Hard)

2. Boss (Harder)

3. Combat (Medium)

4. Random (Hard)

Jake just had one note when he saw the difficulty:

“Really? You named the difficulty after hard, harder?” Jake made fun of the dungeon master.

“Well, what else would you have me call it? Super hard? Mega hard? Or do you want me to use an entirely different word, like insane or impossible? Seriously,

what is wrong with using harder? It perfectly communicates it is harder than hard,” Minaga quickly came to his own defense.

“Still,” Jake said, shaking his head. “It looks kind of lame. You could have made up your own word or something, too. It is ultimately your choice. Just... at least don’t tell me there is a difficulty even higher than harder that you decided to call hardest.”

“... as the professional dungeon master here, I see no reason to listen to your ridiculous critique. You try and make your own dungeon and then come at me with that kind of “feedback.” Forever the critic, never the creator. How would you feel if I made fun of you whenever you failed to concoct a poison or something? Wouldn’t be fun, now would it?”

“So you actually named it hardest?” Jake wanted to clarify.

“Do I have to threaten you again?” Minaga said as he made the entire labyrinth shake slightly.

“No need. I just wanted to make sure,” Jake smiled as he waved the Unique Lifeform off and infused energy into the rune to select the boss room.

“I think naming it harder and hardest is perfectly fine,” the Sword Saint said as he joined Jake. “Prioritizing practicality and making the options easier to understand is more important than aesthetics in instances like this.”

“I will revise my complaint letter to Aeon.”

The old man chuckled as they passed a fog wall, revealing a room with mountainous terrain. Rather than the usual rock color, the entire place looked orange, primarily filled with sand and mudstone based on what Jake could see. It was not an overly large room, only about fifty kilometers across and with a circular design.

Through a Pulse of Perception, Jake saw the boss inside a crater in the middle of the entire arena. This crater was over thirty kilometers in diameter, and with the large boss in the middle, it did look like the creature in question was the source of the impact.

The group sneaked forward over a hill of loose rocks before properly seeing the boss in the distance. It looked like a large fusion between an elemental, lizard, and scorpion. It had eight legs and a stinger like a scorpion, but its entire body was covered in dense sandstone, with its head and body reminiscent of a lizard.

Using Identify, Jake saw its level was at least decent.

[Meteorborn Beast – lvl 285]

"Huh, so the beast *is* the source of the impact?" Jake muttered, a bit surprised. Seeing the beast was above even the Demon Lord in level was also really nice.

"It's a Meteorborn Beast," Dina said, clearly already aware of what kind of monster it was. "It is part of the Lineage known as Cosmic Beasts and considered a middle of the pack variant. This particular kind comes to be by their parents laying a single egg within a meteor and then directing it towards a cluster of planets where it will then land on one. Upon impact, the egg will shatter, and the newborn Meteorborn Beast will absorb a lot of the energy released from the impact and even some of the matter kicked up from the resulting blast. This makes them take on the properties of whatever planet they land on. Upon reaching B-grade, the beast will then usually take to the cosmos again and create a few eggs they send into the universe, continuing the cycle."

Jake nodded. *Damn, having someone with actual education about the multiverse and stuff is nice.*

"Any particular weaknesses or things we should be wary of?" the Sword Saint asked

"Gravity magic. All Meteorborne Beasts have powerful gravity magic, and based on this environment, I reckon this version is also good at earth magic," Dina answered. "But its overall power level should not be overly impressive, so I think we will be fine. They are also incredibly dumb and not truly sapient."

"Very well," the old man nodded. "So, no need to strategize?"

"I don't believe we will need to," Dina shook her head. "Unless the dungeon did something special to this particular Meteorborn Beast, that is."

"Let's assume Minaga didn't," Jake smiled as he took out his bow. The Fallen King had also floated forward as he began to gather power, and Sylphie let out a low screech as she ascended into the sky, ready to strike from above.

Seeing them all move, the Sword Saint also began to stride into the crater. Dina followed behind him with her staff in hand. The Meteorborn Beast soon took notice of the two people approaching as it awoke. After seeing them, it also noticed Sylphie above. As for Jake and the Fallen King... well, it would be hard not to notice the two attacks that hit it less than a second after it woke up.

Jake bombarded the beast from long range while the Fallen King went into medium range and blasted it with repeated waves of force. The Sword Saint dove into melee range as he began to fight the beast directly, with Dina supporting him.

Sylphie descended with attacks from above as the Meteorborn Beast was instantly put on the back foot. It responded by using the exact two types of magic Dina had mentioned. Spheres of condensed space were summoned all around it, making Jake's

next arrows miss as it was thrown off-course, with the Fallen King's waves of force exploding randomly in mid-air.

Dense orange stones were also condensed from the environment itself as the beast lifted up thousands of tons of soil and sand at once. It pressed all of this together, making incredibly durable weapons it could then control with its gravity magic. Getting hit by those would definitely hurt. This content belongs to *novel* ♦

Sadly for the beast, it had met Jake and company at quite an unfortunate time in their lives. See, they had finally been given a good fight after so long on that damn city floor, making them all quite eager to let off some steam. Even Dina seemed excited as she activated her boosting skill along with the four others.

The result was as expected. The beast's eyes were blinded by arrows within thirty seconds of the battle starting, and despite its durable natural armor, the Meteorborn Beast had its defenses ripped and cut apart within mere minutes. It released its trump cards at that point, and Jake did have to admit that dodging a meteor shower that covered the entire room was quite an interesting experience.

Despite the beast's valiant struggles, Dina was proved entirely correct when she said they had no need for strategizing. With Sylphie landing the finishing blow by creating another smaller impact crater within the existing crater, the three remaining legs of the Meteorbeast gave out as it collapsed, dead.

****You have slain [Meteorborn Beast – lvl 285] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 219 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points****

Jake was pleasantly surprised to see a level gained, but the fight itself had pleasantly surprised him even more. It had been straightforward, more so than he would have expected. Jake did also notice why. They had all grown in levels during the time on the city floor – Jake and the Sword Saint more than anyone else – but more importantly, they had all just gotten... better. The only one without any big improvements was Dina, though even she had improved a little bit.

The Fallen King and Sylphie both complained a lot, but Jake saw how they had both gotten more refined at using all their magic. The Brokers who asked for assistance with tasks had all required them to push themselves over and over again, leading to subtle improvements that not even constant combat could teach them.

Jake himself had seen his improvements in prowess primarily from that brief period he had spent with the Puzzle Box he hadn't even solved a single percent of yet. But for him, the power naturally primarily came from all the levels and stats.

Speaking of stats, Jake had made some difficult decisions when it came to his Free Points. This was partly spurred on by actually talking to Dina while on the city floor, as she had some more experience with the multiverse and stuff. She had said heretical things, like how just sinking all your Free Points into Perception could become a problem for him later on, and despite Jake obviously knowing that couldn't be the case, he decided to listen to her out of courtesy.

That is why he put 500 Free Points into Strength and Agility, respectively. That was 1000 points right there, which Jake thought was pretty responsible of him. As for all the other stat points... well... Perception was still the best stat.

He had naturally also remembered to lick the weird void-lolipop that Oras had given him. This meant that Jake's stats had undergone quite the growth. That meant that after entering the next in-between room and licking his orb while placing the Free Points Jake just got, he took status as the others took a small break until they moved on.

Jake focused a bit on the system window and had it show all the changes since he entered Nevermore to get an idea of how much he had gained so far... and it was honestly a lot more than he had initially expected.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (C) – lvl 204 --> 222]

Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge – lvl 203 --> 219]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 206 --> 226]

Stats

Strength: 8536 --> 11022

Agility: 12496 --> 15391

Endurance: 8911 --> 10476

Vitality: 8834 --> 11053

Toughness: 7389 --> 8986

Wisdom: 11181 --> 14357

Intelligence: 9276 --> 11698

Perception: 23246 --> 30882

Willpower: 9385 --> 12336

Free points: 0

--

This was a total stat growth of 26906 in less than twenty race levels. Even if Jake didn't truly feel like he was getting a lot stronger fast, it was undeniable that his current self was far, far stronger than the Jake who had initially entered Nevermore.

Every single level was just so much more valuable in this grade than those prior, and Jake honestly found it a miracle how he and the others bested monsters so many levels above themselves. Jake did have Big Game Hunter to make up for some of the difference, but still.

Levels also got harder as one progressed, but Jake still thought his Nevermore progress was okay so far. Of course, he hoped it would be even better moving forward and that they wouldn't encounter another city floor.

One more thing they also got plenty of was Nevermore Points, as upon entering the in-between room, he also took stock of how many he gained on floor thirty-seven.

Bonus Objective Completed: Complete three rooms of the highest difficulty. 600 Nevermore Points earned.

Thirty-seventh floor completed. 370 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor within one day (24 hours). 800 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor while selecting the highest difficulty at every room. 700 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Complete the thirty-seventh floor without straying from the shortest possible path by any more than 10% of the total distance. 900 Nevermore Points earned.

Every achievement besides the final one had grown in points they gave, but not by a lot. He also did get why the last one still just gave nine hundred, as the labyrinth part had not really gotten harder.

Dispelling thoughts of points and stats, Jake checked in with his party. Everyone had time to quickly rest up, and it was time to move on, Minaga actively cheering them on.

On a side note, Jake and the others had noted how no loot was rewarded in any of the in-between rooms, but Minaga assured them that it was by design. No, they would get their rewards once they had beaten floor forty. According to Minaga, this was done to offer even better rewards than was normally possible, which did make Jake a bit excited.

He was confident they would make it there quickly too. Jake saw nothing stopping them for long as they continued onto floor thirty-eight. They would keep going as planned and pick the hardest room they could every time while also prioritizing combat whenever possible. Especially bosses were at the top of their priority list as those were the fastest by far for their group and also the most enjoyable opponents.

On the topic of enjoyable opponents... Jake did hope that floor forty would be a pleasant surprise. And if his suspicions were correct, he was confident it would be quite awesome.

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