

Hunter 671

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.

·c0m 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!”

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.

•c0m 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.

"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.

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.

·c0m *'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 tidbits 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.

“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?

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...I think you should take a look at

“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.

[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.”

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.

[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 Misstress, 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?” I think you should take a look at

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."

"..."

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]

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. I think you should take a look at

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.

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 some--"

"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. I think you should take a look at

"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.

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.

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?”

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...I think you should take a look at

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?”

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?” I think you should take a look at

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.

“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.

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?”

“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. I think you should take a look at

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 Nevermore Escape Talisman (Unique)] – An Escape Talisman. Crush = teleport to the latest rest floor. Can't be brought out of Nevermore. 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.