

Hunter 701

Chapter 701: Nevermore: Minaga's Labyrinth True Ending

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, don't spoil it for the others even if you do!" Minaga argued.

“Pretty sure they figured it out too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Checking out the ring, he nodded.

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

Requirements: Soulbound

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

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

Main objective: Defeat the final boss.

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: Final boss (0/1)

Note: It's the finale!

Current Nevermore Points: 42973

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

[Demon Lord – lvl 275]

"You gotta be kidding me," Jake whispered under his breath as the Demon Lord fully manifested, and a spear appeared in his hand as he pointed it towards them.

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

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

It was naturally Minaga himself.

[Minaga – lvl 275]

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

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

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

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

Event unlocked: True Ending

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ha ha! Naturally, you had no way of seeing such a twist coming! This will be the ultimate challenge of my labyrinth, and should you come out victorious, you will be generously rewarded! Should you fail, you

will have to do another challenge that will still give pretty decent rewards, but way worse than should you defeat me!”

The five of them nodded as they observed the Unique Lifeform. Jake scanned him as well as he could, trying to get a good read... and one thing was indeed sure: Minaga was far more powerful than any opponent he had ever faced before, bar-none. To make matters worse... the Unique Lifeform knew them. He had observed them doing the entire dungeon, and he would not put it past Minaga to use that against them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Bang.”

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

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

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

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

“Advice?” Jake questioned.

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

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

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

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

“Fine. If you won’t attack-“

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

“-then I will.”

Chapter 702: Nevermore: Big Spells!

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

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

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

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

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

“Dina, dodge to the left.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake's eyes opened wide.

"Dina, behi-"

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

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

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

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

“Good response from both of you.”

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

Minaga seemed unbothered, but the old man was intent on being a threat. Water surrounded his blade as he did an upwards slash, and Minaga moved to block again, only to find himself feinted when the sword abruptly shifted direction. The Unique Lifeform was ready and had already moved to block the sword... only for the entire blade to vibrate as it seemed to rewind in time for but a moment. It threw off all timing as the Sword Saint slashed the surprised Minaga across his stomach just as he jumped backward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nice tr-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Batter up!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Five seconds," the Fallen King and Jake sent through the telepathic link at nearly the same time. Jake allowed the Unique Lifeform to elaborate as the King continued. "Every time he does a major spell or combination magic, he cannot use any magic for five seconds afterward. That is our time to strike."

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

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

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

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

"Okay, that actually hurt."

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

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

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

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

Jake's eyes opened wide.

"Defenses, now!"

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

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

"Let's take this spell for a spin!"

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

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

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

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

All except for one.

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

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

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

Using Eternal Hunger, he met the first beam of light with the edge as he reflected it off the weapon, the beam moving so fast he had to use the Blackpoint Blade as a bridge to make the beam flash past him. At

the same time, Jake dove in between two beams and found every small spot he could fit through as he briefly met the eyes of Minaga, who just stared at him.

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

"That is some bullcrap right the--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally was the Fallen King, who – to put it nicely – looked like shit. The constant barrage of lasers had managed to get through his barrier, leaving hundreds of burn marks crisscrossing his entire body. The only untouched parts were the mask and the ivory hands and feet that were too naturally tough to be affected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Momentarily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dina took a far more calculated approach as she communicated her strategy through the Golden Mark, and it was instantly approved. Rather than fight Minaga, she went entirely on the defensive, not even trying to attack unless it was to interrupt something she found too dangerous to block, avoid, or heal through. She was strong, yes, but in a one-versus-one, she was likely the weakest in their party overall. Her offensive prowess was simply not that impressive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Survive."

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

Chapter 704: Nevermore: Solo Battles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave me be,"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, shi-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Fallen King stood on one side, his entire body filled with wounds as several sections had huge swats of his bark-like skin ripped off, and one of his legs looked halfway cut through. On the other side was a

Minaga who had lost both an arm and a leg, with his entire body truly telling of the intense fight. He even lacked two of his four eyes as claw marks bled across his face.

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

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

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

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

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

Soul magic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake threw Dina a glance.

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

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

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

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

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

Jake stared at the old man with wide eyes.

"What the hell happened to you in there?"

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

Yet he smiled to himself.

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

Chapter 705: Nevermore: A Difficult Lesson

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

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

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

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

Alas, the point is that the Sword Saint found it difficult to find opponents who could match his skill level. Fighting people of equal or superior skill was the best way to improve, so he felt like the lack of proper foes held him back. He did firmly believe that once he spent more time in the wider multiverse, he would meet many who matched or surpassed him, but for now, he felt starved.

That is when Minaga appeared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Keep coming."

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

And he only felt euphoria from that sensation.

"You have already progressed somewhat. The concept of the blade is embedded within your water, allowing it to cut and act like an extension of your weapon... but it is only that. An extension. Your concept itself still needs work. Most will come with time, but as much shall be from practice. I noticed

on the prior floors that your focus recently has heavily shifted to improving other aspects of your powers. Rain and time magic are all well and good but don't lose sight of the blade," Minaga explained, blocking dozens of blows as the Sword Saint's robes were getting more and more flayed from the counterattacks.

"Here, let me show you..."

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

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

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

Minaga moved his sword to block it and smiled.

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

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

"I believe I do," the Sword Saint answered as he retreated, Minaga giving him a light reprieve to respond. "I am to truly ponder on the concept of sharpness... no, on all those related to my Path. I am to honestly try and understand them. But I believe I am already doing this. My sword is already central to my Path; all other concepts are only there to assist my blade."

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

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

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

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

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

"The first is experience,"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Sword Saint nodded as Minaga still explained.

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

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

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

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

This kept going as the minutes passed.

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

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

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

I cannot delay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Cue the final theme!"

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

Chapter 706: Nevermore: Third Phase!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now, let us begin!"

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

The Unique Lifeform had finally used his own boosting skill.

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

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

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

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

Using a hand motion, Minaga made the stars above shift. Jake was still staring as what looked like a bull was formed as lines were drawn, and the entire figure began to glow. Sylphie tried to stop Minaga, but

he teleported – meaning space magic was now also on the table – and appeared too far away for any of them to interfere.

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

[Eldenstar Bull Monarch – lvl ???]

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

[Sign of the Bull – lvl 260]

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dodging this one is heavily recommended."

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

"Dina, watch out!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Minaga raised his hands as energy began to gather. Jake instantly recognized the signs of a big spell being cast, and he tried to help with Gaze and a Powershot, but it only delayed Minaga slightly as he simply tanked the arrow, accepting the wound in trade for potentially finishing off one of his opponents.

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

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

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

"Glimpse of Spring: Stormcut."

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

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

"Man, that one was a lot stronger than against the Demon Lord... why did I agree to give you a lesson again?" Minaga asked rhetorically as he teleported away from Jake's attempt to follow up. Something

Jake was totally fine with, as he knew one of the Sword Saint's weaknesses with the Glimpse of Spring was that he could not move immediately after using it. At least not very well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sylphie get ba-“

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

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

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

“It’s labyrinth time!”

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

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

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

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

Spatial labyrinths.

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

This brings us to how Jake reacted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey, not my fault tha-“

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

“Oh no, you won’t get me monologing to buy time!”

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

Chapter 707: Nevermore: An Underhanded Strategy

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

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

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

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

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

"You may be fast... but can you dodge this?"

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

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

Have to risk it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"An illusion? No, that-"

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

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

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

“Summoned? Wait...”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why insane, you might ask? Say, Jake, do you have any idea what it means for him to store his soul within the mask, which is, in turn, bound to you? It means he stored the entire concept behind his existence within you. Within your Records. Yet you weren’t affected negatively in the least, which means your own Records were not only equal but superior to a Unique Lifeform, allowing you to utterly overpower him. Especially considering this bond remains after his resurrection. If I had to gander a guess, you probably even hold influence over his life and death... man, you really are utterly broken. Both of you, but in different ways. Man, I can see why Vilas made you his Chosen; you seem to have been a monster even in the Tutorial... no doubt due to that Bloodline of yours.”

Minaga just kept talking as he looked deep in thought. “What’s more, for a Unique Lifeform to willingly submit in such a fashion... no, is it even submission? Some kind of mutual understanding? Man, this is peculiar.”

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

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

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

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

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

"One-time use?" Minaga questioned curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Minaga stood on the platform, smiling as he looked at Jake. “Guess it’s still just the two of us, eh?”

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

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

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

Beating Minaga with magic? No fucking shot.

One without?

Well... it was time to find out.

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

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

Minaga handled Jake's barrage of arrows extremely well, but he still couldn't block everything. Jake had gotten good at shooting tricky arrows that curved to hit where the Unique Lifeform moved to dodge or curve around the staff raised to block it. His opponent was obviously also aware of this as he stopped chasing and stood still while looking at Jake with raised eyebrows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-->

[Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang (Epic)] – A fang born from darkness, now having embraced the power of curses, kept in control by the Hunter's arcane mana. Infuse your weapon with a mixture of curse energy and arcane energy as you do a thrusting strike, significantly increasing penetrative power and damage done. The curse energy will linger in any created wounds, the effect dependent on the nature of the curse energy applied. Arcane mana creates a powerful coating and extends the edge while keeping the curse energy contained. Significantly more powerful when used with Eternal Hunger. Damage improved further if the weapon is benefitting from Fang of Man. Adds a bonus to the effect of Agility, Strength, and Intelligence when using Piercing Cursed Arcane Fang.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The formation below him on the platform stopped glowing as the entire labyrinth disappeared in an instant. Dina, the Sword Saint, and Sylphie appeared in the middle of nothing as they quickly got their bearings, and their party began regrouping. Dina went straight for Jake as he was hit by a green bolt of lightning, sending a wave of pure life energy through him. It was probably needed... his health pool was not looking good. Fighting Minaga alone for so long was not healthy, not to mention the constant drain on his health from Arcane Awakening.

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

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

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

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

“Hidden final phase: Cosmic Minaga!”

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

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

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

Followed by actual meteors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will do my best,” Dina added.

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

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

Chapter 709: Nevermore: A Grand Achievement

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

Vaulting over a meteor, Jake got closer as he didn't dare use One Step due to how warped space was from the meteors that clearly had some kind of strong gravitational pull. Minaga raised a hand and released a large beam toward Jake, forcing him to dodge as a meteor also went straight for where he was dodging. Before it had a chance to hit, a crescent wave of water cut it apart, allowing Jake to keep going without slowing down too much.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reacting to the signal, Sylphie made her entrance as a light green breeze swept through, speeding up Jake further and making several meteors change trajectory and miss him. In the very next moment, a green bullet descended with unprecedented speed, heading straight for Minaga. Her Green Shield was

active as she barrelled through dozens of meteors while her body burned with energy. Minaga looked up at her as the barrier protecting his body met the diving bird.

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

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

“Glimpse of Spring: Erosion.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, shi-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fortieth floor completed. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

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

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

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

Jake could only agree as he stared at the Grand Achievement – something he didn't even know was a thing. 10000 Nevermore Points was already a shitload, but the 25% bonus was... massive. It also answered why getting to the top of the Leaderboards was so coveted. Doing something like this Grand

Achievement was something only the true top elite could ever accomplish, and with how massive the bonus was, Jake reckoned it was pretty much mandatory if you wanted to aim for the top. Making up for a 25% deficit seemed pretty damn impossible, and it did make him wonder if there were other such multipliers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

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

...

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

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

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

"We won," she smiled.

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

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

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

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

[Minaga – lvl 349]

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

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

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

“Fuck that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

An absolutely shocking revelation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Loot first," Jake insisted.

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

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

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

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

"Because I am a god, and it makes me appear more dignified, yet intimidating,"

he answered. "But seeing as you don't seem to respect the culture of the multiverse, I guess that sentiment is wasted on you."

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

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

"Wait, that isn't fa--"

"Nope, I already decided, so get in the back of the line and watch me shower your party in good stuff before you are allowed to get anything," Minaga said, having grasped victory in their conversation.

“Because that’s right... you all get one reward each! Usually, you can’t give out so many items at once, but that is why I made it so the last five floors didn’t give anything to increase the reward given here. And man, did you hit the jackpot, as I got some real good stuff prepared.”

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

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

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

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

“This item... could only appear if you had truly died... but...” the Fallen King said, as he nevertheless accepted the orb, not caring about the pride he showed earlier where he borderline refused to even talk to Minaga.

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

"Fine..." Jake relented.

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

Only to say something utterly underwhelming.

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

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

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

"Could you elaborate?" the Sword Saint questioned.

Minaga smiled, very satisfied with having piqued their curiosity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Requirements: Soulbound.

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

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

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

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

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

Requirements: Soulbound.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soulflames...